Australians at War Film Archive

John Fraser (JJ) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 31st March 2004

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1607

Some parts of this interview have been embargoed.

The embargoed portions are noted in the transcript and video.

Tape 1

00:37 **OK, we'll start with the five minute version of your life.**

The five minute version, OK. I was born on the 6th of June 1964, at the Children's Hospital, I think. I was very young at the time so I'm not quite sure. I was actually raised in this neighbourhood in Bardon. In fact, the house I lived in is actually 600 metres up the road there, but it's no longer a house, it's a duplex,

01:00 which I was very disappointed in. I went to St Joseph's School just over to the left there, which is 200 metres away, my primary school, and then I went to Marist Brothers Ashgrove private school. Once I left school I pretty much knew I wanted to be in the army from the age of 12. So once I left school I had to wait until I turned 17, so I became a horse strapper for my brother-in-law. Then when I turned 17 I went in, did the

01:30 examinations and the aptitude tests at the recruiting centre in Brisbane and then joined the army on the 4th of August, 1981. From there I went to Kapooka, did the basic training down in the New South Wales. I was then selected to go to the Royal Australian Army Corps to do the initial employment training down at Puckapunyal, which is a great place to visit; you just don't want to live there. I did all my training. The training went over a period of seven

02:00 months. Not that the training was seven months long but just basically waiting for availability of courses and so forth. From there I was then posted back to Brisbane to the 4th Cavalry Regiment based at Enoggera Barracks, and it was a bit of a weird change because you actually had three postings within the regiment. I stayed in the same place but the regiment changed names three times. I think it was just due to budget cuts but it went from the 4th Cavalry Regiment to the 3rd Cavalry, 3/4th Cavalry Regiment A Squadron Brisbane, and it went to the 3/4th Cavalry Regiment B Squadron

02:30 Townsville, and then later on it changed to 2/14th Light Horse A Squadron, and the reason being for that was that they were amalgamating an army reserve unit from Wacol over to Enoggera, basically to build up numbers and to boost defence and basically help up the army reserve. I transferred to army aviation in 1990 where I did my aircrew,

03:00 sorry, did my ground crewman's course for an aircraft handler. Basically refuelling and organising command posts and running runways and stuff like that. I was in the unit for about a year. I was then asked to go to Cambodia in 1992, where I did a year with the UN [United Nations] Peacekeeping Forces in Cambodia which is the best time of my life.

03:30 I was sent over on June the 10th 1992, which is sort of good because it was four days before my birthday, so I got to celebrate my birthday before I left, and then returned on June the 10th, 1993. Once I returned I spent six months back in my unit but I was basically just doing education courses to build up to my courses to become an aircrewman

04:00 loadmaster on the Blackhawk helicopters. Basically, I attended some ground schooling courses and updated my education through the military and then attended the courses to become a loadmaster and in May '94 I became an aircrewman loadmaster and was posted to the 5th Aviation Regiment on 20th of

June 1994,

04:30 and basically I served out my time from there. While I was within the regiment, basically we did operations all over Australia, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, the Gold Coast, Tindal, Darwin, all over the place, and in September of 1999 we were deployed to East Timor for operational service over there. I completed two two month tours. I did

05:00 two months, came home for a month and went back for another two months and then on returning from my last tour I decided it was time to call it a day due to injuries I sustained in a Blackhawk accident in 1996, and now I reside in Brisbane. Wasn't too sure what to do with myself at first. Sort of just sort of finding my feet, but I've actually found, I started doing some basic IT [information technology]

05:30 teaching with senior citizens and getting into the Brisbane City Council's Brisbane Seniors Online program and helping them out, doing some volunteer teaching there, and now I run a program with the Bardon Community Association within the neighbourhood and teach senior citizens there, and also I'm the manager for leasing the hall. We have a hall we rent out for functions, birthdays, tap dancing, whatever, and I sort of manage that and we make pretty good funds to basically maintain the hall and what funds

06:00 we have left over at the end of the year we give to charity, and also now I've started my dog obedience instructor's course and with my dog, Ben, my faithful little hound, he's a Delta dog, so we go to the Royal Children's Hospital and the Rosalie Nursing Home and we visit the elderly and visit the kids who are sick and bring a bit of joy to their lives and have a really good time. So that's pretty much about it.

OK, so let's go back and find out what is your earliest memory from childhood?

06:30 Probably playing football in my front yard with my father and my brother. We had a fairly large front yard and we actually used to look after the lawn really well and we even set up like a bit of a tennis court and we'd play quoits and every Christmas was, like, the whole family would get together and we'd have football or just kick a soccer ball around. We had an unusually large front yard. Probably about three times the standard, and because

07:00 it was fairly wide and long we could play soccer, football, things like that. Going to school, having my Mum make my lunches. She'd always like freezing my lunches for me so by the time I got to lunchtime they'd defrosted and they were nice and fresh. She was way ahead of her time. Roast dinners with the family, that sort of thing. I remember I thought my father was pretty cool one night when they were cooking up some chips and that and they had some friends over and it all caught on fire, and everyone's going,

07:30 "Oh, oh." Everyone's just freaking out, and Dad said, "I can fix it." and he put on his cape and whipped out the salt and put it out, and when you're sort of like 10, it's very impressive and he just didn't lose his cool, and I thought that was pretty good. My older brother, being a hoon and coming around in his big V8 Kingswood and having his SLR 5000 [Holden Torana] and chasing after many women and basically being a galah, but you sort of look at him, you look up to him and go, "Gee, I never wanna be like that." but still, it's a good influence.

08:00 Playing backyard cricket with your mates across the road, just things like that. Going down to the local creek and fishing for eels and fish and swimming, and things like that. The 1974 floods. My brother lived over at St Lucia and he thought he'd be quite clever and stick everything on top of his wardrobe and he'd be safe, but his whole house went under, so apparently it wasn't that safe.

Did you get affected by the floods here?

08:30 No, not at all. I mean, where the creek is just down the road there, it rose up quite large and the bridge was a bit of a concern but other than that no, not a problem whatsoever, really. Yeah, it was a really good neighbourhood, really, really quiet and no, it was just good, typical Australian sort of things, backyard cricket and footy and soccer and just being a young Aussie guy and listen to my brother and his very strange weird stories about

09:00 being a hoon and so he did all the weird strange things and I didn't have to worry about doing because I thought, "I can't emulate that, so what's the point."

So there was yourself, your brother, mother, dad?

I've got two older sisters, Jill and Jane, my older brother, Michael, and myself, and then I have, now I have a younger brother and sister through my Dad's got married again. My mother passed away when I was 12 and he married later on down the track and I have a

09:30 younger brother and sister.

What was your mum like?

Very strict, very organised. I think that's where I get a lot of my traits. Yeah, she ruled the roost and I didn't mind that at all. I look back and it seemed to me like from a very early age she was preparing me for life. She was like, even from 10 she would write up lists of things for me to do and she was sort of putting her own schooling in. She'd give me like a whole list of mathematics to do

10:00 and then she'd say, "Here's a list of words. Go in the dictionary. I want you to find out what they mean and then put them in a sentence." So she was just fabulous and very big in the community. Like my sister, Jill was a world class gymnast and was heading off to the Olympics, but unfortunately during one of the competitions had a double ankle blow out. Yeah, it wasn't much fun, but I just remember the house always being full of international athletes. We had, like, the Japanese and the

10:30 Americans and the Russians were here and the Czechs were here. There was just always people at the house because of Mum's organisation within the gymnastic community, and we used to go to competitions at the hall in the city. I can't remember the name of it now, the one they're actually pulling apart, Brisbane City Hall?

Festival Hall?

Festival Hall, that's the one. Yeah, we used to go to meetings to that all the time, and I remember just being, I wasn't actually up in the stands. I was actually down

11:00 on the floor with the other athletes, 'cause my sister was amongst them too, so I got to sort of see those sort of things and it was great. It was really good. She used to come back from the States and bring presents and stuff and it was like, wow, you know, sort of a world renowned sister, so it was really good.

It must've been pretty exciting to have people of all those nationalities coming through the house?

Yeah, it was. I didn't sort of say much. I used to just sit there and listen to them talk and the stories and it was really good, especially the Japanese. They were really nice people. We had, like, a lot of the coaches would

11:30 come along and stay at the house and it was a great time. It was a really great time. So when she'd go overseas I'd really miss her and I used to sleep in her bed and when she'd come home it was really great because in my home there was my Mum and my Dad, myself and my sister and my older sister, Jane, was living with her husband and Michael was off in the racing

12:00 industry.

What happened to your mum?

She died of a heart attack. I came home from school one day and was told the news.

Must've had a fairly big impact?

Yeah. It was, I don't know, it was just, it was really hard to describe. Yeah, it just does. A big chunk's taken out

12:30 of your life, but she was preparing me for things so you've got to move on. But you think about them all the time.

And what was your dad like?

He was, he's a real people person. I mean it's sort of funny. I've come back to a neighbourhood I haven't been in since I was 12 and when I

13:00 meet people through, just sort of in passing or just with, like, teaching the senior citizens, they say, "You're not Basil Fraser's son are you? Oh my God." So, he's still well known. In fact the lady across the road, her husband had a bit of a drinking problem and Dad helped him get through that. So he was the local copper around here. In fact when he was in the police force they had sidecars.

13:30 So in fact I remember him telling me a story. He'd go out on patrol with his mate in this sidecar and every day they'd come down the road, there was this dog that would come racing out and bark and carry on and chase him up the street. So one day they took down a large piece of fibro and the dog came running out and they clocked [hit] the dog and never saw him again. But he told me some very interesting stories, how there was a robbery at a sugar mill and they came in and

14:00 they used explosives to blow up the safe, but to muffle the sound they put bags of sugar around the safe and they committed the crime and got away with it, or so they thought. They had a few suspects and Dad said, "When you go around to the house check the bottom of their trousers, the cuff of their trousers for sugar." and sure enough there was sugar in their trousers and that's what gave them away, and they did more investigations and caught the guys. So I thought that was pretty clever. But he was just a very friendly, very outgoing guy and

14:30 he still is, and he's a great cook. I think that's where I get a lot of my people skills from, from both sides of Mum and Dad, just being able to talk, to communicate and be friendly, and I find I get on with a lot of people. But it's sort of funny meeting people from 30 or 40 years ago and you mention your name and they go, "So you're Basil Fraser's son, are you?" It's like, oh my God, or actually guys who knew the guy personally.

15:00 **Did you have any family that served?**

My father did, but only in training. He never actually got to see overseas service. He got to travel

around Australia a lot and did some basic flight training but never actually got to see overseas service. So pretty much I was the only one.

Do you think he was an influence on you

15:30 **joining?**

A little bit. I'm not too sure. I think I was just, I think I was about 11. I just always thought that looks like a really good job. I remember seeing a recruiting pamphlet, I looked at it and went, "Wow, that's looks like a lot of fun." and it was just an infantry patrol going along through the scrub and I thought, "That looks like a lot of fun." and you know, typical young guy, I used to go off and play war games and such and shoot 'em ups

16:00 and so yeah, in some ways I sort of followed in his footsteps. Sort of thought, "Well, Dad did it. It looks like a pretty good job, so yeah, I would want to do that myself." Although I'm glad I never went into infantry. That's just too much hard work.

So you went to primary school up here at St Joseph's?

Yep, it's about 300 metres that way.

What was that like?

Oh great, a lot of fun, really really good. The nuns were

16:30 fabulous people and it was just a really great time in my life and because I was so close to home it was easy just to go backwards and forwards and you, do all the school kid things. Well, we seem to be a little more innocent than the kids nowadays sniffing drugs and chroming [inhaling chemicals to induce a 'high'] and the drinking, and the stuff they do nowadays just wasn't even thought of and our days were very innocent. It was all just football and soccer and playing chasings in the playgrounds and I think the most mischievous thing was,

17:00 we had some 44 gallon drums in the playground area and we actually rolled a couple under a fence and down the street and into the traffic, but there wasn't much traffic in those days. So that was the most mischievous thing we did, but graffiti and the things that go on nowadays were just unheard of. I got in trouble once or twice, which I think every kid does, got the cane, but hey, everyone gets through that. Although nowadays I think the cane has been outlawed because it's some form of abuse or whatever, or assault, whatever.

Do you recall what sort of things you would've done to

17:30 **get the cane?**

Oh, God knows. Probably just being a stupid kid and saying too much in class, whatever. I think my most painful memory is when I was actually in class and a young kid by the name of Ben Griffin, who is ironically now a doctor, I went to sit down and he put a pencil there and I sat on his pencil. So it was pretty painful but the nuns were really good. They took me to the infirmary and I had to drop my

18:00 trousers and bend over while she pulled the lead out of my bum and sort of patch it all up and sent me back to thingo, and he got in trouble but I was fine and I got a needle for lead poisoning just in case. But, you know, you sort of look back and you go, "Oh yeah, whatever." and even at the time it was just typical schoolboy pranks, but I don't think his parents were too thrilled about it when they found out.

So around that time, being from such a sporting family, what sort of sports were you into?

I was actually behind the curve a little

18:30 bit, because Jill was a world class gymnast, my sister, Jane, was very good at swimming as, Jill was also into diving and swimming as well and I think that's what led into the gymnastics, the ability of the diving. My older brother, Michael, was a jockey. I mean I'm six two and weigh 100 kilos and he's four foot nothing and weighs 65 kilos. So in fact my whole family are short. They're lucky to reach my shoulders. So

19:00 I don't know where I came from. The old phrase the milkman's son sort of doesn't really play, because I've got photos of my father when he joined the military and people sort of say, "Is that when you were in the army?" I go, "No, that's my Dad." So it's obvious that we're father and son, and even I do look like my brother a bit, although I'm tall and blond. He's short, dark and bald, so I don't know. But as an athlete I didn't really take off with that sort of stuff until I hit the military. So where I sort

19:30 of found swimming and water polo to be my prowess.

Who were your heroes then, as a kid?

The greats. Lillee, the Chappell brothers, Geoff Marsh, all the cricketing greats in those days. You know, that's when I think cricket was really cricket. Nowadays it seems to have just gone down the gurgler with all the drugs and the sex scandals and all the betting and carrying on and everything. It just seems to have lost its edge and, like, with certain players, like,

20:00 getting none for having bad gambling habits. In those days the role models, you know, they were role

models, and even like with the other teams like the West Indians, Joel Garner and Clive Richards, Clive Lloyd and Vic Richards, they were just great to watch, even though they were whooping your arse, it's still great to watch. In fact, I remember a game in Sydney and Joel Garner was batting and they were just tearing us to shreds and Lillee's come down and bowled and he galloped

20:30 to the pitch and just absolutely killed this ball, and he hit it so hard it needed a passport and it's gone on and hit the members roof, bounced into the crowd and this hand's just come up and caught the ball and it was my brother and I was going, "That was really cool." and I rang up my sister and said, "He's at the cricket, he's just caught Joel Garner, Joel Garner." So that was good. I think more so the cricketing greats. They were great to watch, and the football too. Wally Lewis when he was at his best. In fact he was always at his best.

21:00 I actually remember when the Brisbane teams went into the Sydney competition, because I remember we used to have our own Brisbane competition and it was considered pretty big, and I went to a grand final when our local team, our Wests club, which is just over the way, the competed in the grand final and they won and it was actually sort of a funny thing because you're half watching the football and half watching the entertainment and they had these guys dressed up in

21:30 peanut outfits giving away these free plastic balls and we were allowed on the pitch in those days. It was half time and anyway, there was this guy in his peanut outfit and he's got the balls and that and I was with these three other young kids and they raced up and spear tackled him and took his balls off him and he's going, "You little bastards, bring back the balls." and we're going, "Hey, we've got our balls." and ran away and the crowd were laughing and it was quite funny. So, but yeah, I

22:00 think mainly the cricket guys. In fact I remember seeing Dennis Lillee and Geoff Marsh in Queen Street Mall and that was just like, wow, just demigods, and even in those days like when you sort of see them have the psychological battles with the West Indians and sort of have the push and shove it was all just part of the game really, and off the pitch and at the dinner table they were the best of mates, but on the pitch it was all out war. That's fair enough.

So apart from

22:30 **playing games of backyard cricket what other things were you getting up to as a young kid to entertain yourself?**

Just used to go with a couple of mates of mine and cruise around on bikes and just go around and have adventures, or my brother had a dog, a Labrador dog, and we used to go for walks with him up at the Mt Cootha area.

23:00 That was pretty much it. Just go for adventures, just go up the creek, just go for hikes around Mt Cootha or around Bardon or lots of fishing down in the creek. We used to catch quite a few eels down there. I was a member of the local soccer club so we used to go off and play soccer. That was really about it. Just a normal sort of quiet childhood, nothing really exciting.

And so then from St Joseph's it was on to the Marist Brothers?

23:30 Yes.

And what were your experiences like there?

It's a sporting school. They're very big on sport. In fact if you don't play sport they send you off to therapy to try to figure what's wrong with you. Swimming, basketball, football, soccer, it's just all the rage. I was in the swimming team, the basketball team and I played football. They really want to encourage that team spirit. It was a really good school, really good school. I enjoyed every minute of it. The brothers were hard,

24:00 but I don't think there was any problem with discipline and I think that's what lacks in society nowadays. There's too much touchy-feely, namby-pamby stuff. There's nothing wrong with getting the cane and getting put in your place. I think it's a very, very good school. In fact, I went back there the other day to watch a football match played and it was just great. It was interesting to see the difference in the guys nowadays, in the kids, but it's sort of funny to see them that they're quite large. Like, in my days

24:30 we had a couple of guys who were big and they were considered, "Wow, what's wrong with you?" But nowadays you see teenagers who are, like, you know, six feet tall easy. In fact my nephews, who are 19 and 21 respectively, are quite big boys. They're almost my height as well. Not my size, but my height, but it's just, "What's in the water around here?" It was a very good school, very big on sports. Even though I lived in Bardon I actually was a

25:00 boarder in boarding school. That was good because you got to be with 30 other guys and they enforced studying, they enforced your routine and I really think that routine is important in life. You don't have to follow it to a strict rule but I think it's good for you to have guidelines, otherwise if you're all over the place you get behind in cleaning the toilet and paying the bills and stuff, but at school there was sort of, you'd get up at a certain hour, you've got a certain amount of time to go to the bathroom and have a

25:30 shower. Then you go to breakfast and then you're off to school, have your play time and then you go in.

Hit the school and then you come back and you have time in the afternoon to kick a football around and that, and then it's study for three hours, but you get, like, breaks in between. But I just think that routine is good, otherwise you've got zero control over 500 boarders. I think the influence of the senior students is good as well because they come and they have a lot to do with you. They come along and they coach the football teams that you play in, being the seniors.

26:00 They would help you out with your studies and you get invited along to some of the drama groups and drama plays they would do. So it's good to sort of be more interactive with the whole school. I'm not too sure how they do it nowadays. Movie nights was always good. Saturday was movie night and it was always really cool. Censorship was involved. In fact I remember they had the movie Saturday Night Fever and there was a particular sex scene in there or whatever and all of a sudden the screen went blurred. It was like, "Well, that's

26:30 good timing." and then as soon as the sex scene was over it came back to focus again. But it's like, I think the brothers were just sort of protecting us and we didn't really need to see it. It didn't make me feel any less whatever, so who really cares. But all the boarders went there and watched the movies, and prior to the movies we'd have a report of what happened in the sports one day. Who won the swimming and who won the cricket and the scores and who scored so many tries at the football and it was sort of a good sort of bonding session for all the guys.

27:00 But yeah, it was a really good school, really good school.

So you said, you mentioned before that from about age 12 you knew you wanted to go into the army?

Mmm.

So through school, is that, was that where you knew you were headed?

Oh yeah, I had no doubts. I didn't want to be a doctor or lawyer or think of anything else. I just knew I wanted to be in the military. In fact I'd always go down and read up about World War I, World War II, look at weapons, just go through all the magazines.

27:30 In fact, I was always going through the same books over and over again. It's funny, like, at 12 years old I was reading about weapons that I later on used, so I just always knew I wanted to be there.

At school were you learning a lot about the history?

Yeah, our history teacher was a Vietnam veteran, Mr Brian Lindsay, yes. He was a good guy. It was there I sort of started to gain respect for Vietnam veterans. I think they got a very poor rap.

28:00 They've been poorly treated by our society, but I think in some ways maybe society in those days misled by the media. The media is a powerful tool. It's a double-edged sword and it can go both ways and I think they need to be more responsible for the way they report the news. In fact, it even still lingers around nowadays because I heard there's an advertisement at one of the universities, they've got a picture of a soldier dressed up in uniform. He's got the latest weapon. He's got the night vision equipment, and they're

28:30 saying, "Why pay for your education, when you can join the army and go off and kill thousands of babies?" I'm going, "Yeah, that's a bit of a Vietnam mentality." and the whole baby killing thing is the biggest load of crap I've ever heard. I mean when I heard about this, in fact a friend told me, I just couldn't believe it. I thought. like, "Oh, yeah?" because I was in East Timor just killing so many babies. It's just like, if anything we're risking our lives to save them. So it was very, very sad, but Mr Lindsay was,

29:00 he'd always touch on Vietnam and what happened over there and he was a very good history teacher, very passionate about what he taught, and then even in geography we discussed the difference in the landscapes between Australia and Vietnam. Our geography teacher, she was really good too.

Your history teacher, was he telling you stories from Vietnam aside from what was in the textbook?

Yes. In fact, we used to sort of have a bit of

29:30 a funny thing, we'd ask him questions and try and get him away from teaching lessons because we wanted to hear stories. We didn't want to hear about history. We wanted to know about Vietnam, we wanted to hear stories. So we'd get him on a roll and he just wouldn't shut up and that was great. It's like we were, technically we were still learning about history but he was telling us stories and we just really enjoyed hearing about the stories. You can teach about history but when you're actually there and you can tell a story and tell what actually happened and how it was, I feel

30:00 it's more informative and more educational.

Do you recall what some of the stories were?

No. No, I don't unfortunately. It was like such a long time ago now. I think it was just what it was like in the villages. He kept it fairly clean. He didn't get into too much detail. I don't think he'd be terrorising

the students.

30:30 But just sort of what it was like, the lifestyle over there. You didn't get too much of the blood and guts, which I don't think you need to do.

Did you discuss with him your sort of yearning for joining the army?

I used to hang around after class or two and say, "What was it like? I'm sort of thinking about doing it later on." He said, "It's a good career and good mateship." It's true, you do develop some good friendships. I'm still in contact with quite a few

31:00 good mates and that's the beauty of technology nowadays, like e-mails and the internet. It's so easy to track people down. In fact I was talking to a friend of mine who is in the police. We served in Cambodia together, and I said, "I wish we could get in contact with an old mate of mine from armour, I know he's in the police force." She said, "Hang on, I'll find him for you." A quick search in the computer, "Here he is, here's his address and phone number." I went, "That was pretty easy." So I sent him an e-mail, we've been catching up and having a chat and yeah,

31:30 it's just so easy to catch up nowadays.

What did your dad think of you wanting to join the army?

He thought it was great. He was behind me 100 per cent. He came along to the interviews because I was 17, I wasn't able to sign for myself. I think you've got to be 18 to sign yourself over, but he would come along to the interviews, and 100 per cent support. He thought it was just a fabulous job, and I remember when I first came home, my first time on leave and I was in uniform

32:00 and everything, and he was just so proud. We had to go around and visit all the rellies and friends. "Look at my son, look, he's in uniform." and stuff and it was great when I was posted in Brisbane so I was close to the family. I somehow think it would've been better if I'd been posted away but I was happy to be in Brisbane amongst friends and family.

And just before we get onto some of the actual recruiting process, what was some of the music that you were listening to when you were growing up?

Oh God, do I have to answer that?

32:30 Well, obviously CDs [compact discs] weren't even heard of. It was just all tape.

Do you remember the first tape that you got?

It was something like Greatest Hits 1981 or something, and I'm sure if I look around the boxes I've actually still got it somewhere, but the songs are in my head, but I don't know the name of the artists or the songs, or the title of the songs, but it sort of, the stuff you listen to, one hit wonders or I think, like,

33:00 "What were they thinking in those days?" But you listen to some of the music nowadays and you go like, "Yeah, what are they thinking?" So it's very, very odd. But yeah, I remember I had this little cassette player and that and I thought, "This is pretty high tech." You had volume and bass and wow, that was all the rage and I used to play the tapes and stuff. Actually, I even had a Sony Walkman, the little phone headsets and everything and that was pretty cool to cruise around with,

33:30 and then when I left school and became a horse strapper I actually had some money, so I bought myself a little stereo set up and some tapes, but for the life of me I can't remember the name of the songs.

At what point did you leave school?

I left after Grade 10 and obviously I had time to wait until I turned 17, so I just went off and became a horse strapper to Bob Tyman and get a bit of cash behind me too and get a bit of work. It was actually good.

34:00 Sort of funny how being a horse strapper prepares you for the army, because you start at three o'clock in the morning and you work through to nine and then you start again at three o'clock in the afternoon and work until six. So when I went into the army, the army is renowned for starting early and when I first got there this big sergeant says, "Yeah, there'll be no sleeping in here, you bunch of poofters, you bloody, you'll be getting up at 5.30 in the morning." I'm going, "Whoo, sleep in." So it's, like, I woke up bright and I was good to go, and everyone's going, "Er, more sleep." and I was powering. So I found Kapooka

34:30 to be a blast. I had the best time of my life. In fact it was the most organised time in my life. Down there, routine is just the biggest word. You know what you're doing 24/7.

Did many of the other boys leave school; was that after year 10 that you left?

Yeah, in those days leaving in Year 10 was a big thing. Nowadays I think it's a very stupid move, but at the time I wasn't really enjoying school anyway. I was doing OK but I thought, "I'm just wasting my time here."

35:00 and I thought joining the army just a better way to go. I think nowadays you're quite foolish to leave in

Year 10, and in fact it just amazes me how kids blow their education. Things nowadays are just so expensive. You've got to buy a house, you've got to be a rocket scientist and doctor to boot to sort of afford something, but I'm lucky with my place. I bought at the bottom end of the market, but nowadays you need $500,000, $600,000. You've both got to be working and it seems to be a regular trade of

35:30 people who are like 25, 26, 30, 35 still living with their parents. So it's sort of funny how things change.

So where were you, I know you were working for your brother-in-law as a strapper. Where was that?

Down at Deagon near Sandgate and basically I was just biding my time until I joined up, until I was of the appropriate age but it was good. I mean I really enjoyed it. I was working with horses

36:00 and we used to do a bit of travelling like to Sandgate around Brisbane, down the Gold Coast, and we were well looked after. We had like the stable hands' hut and that was nice, and so it was just a good lifestyle. It was good work. It wasn't back-breaking work but it was just good steady solid work and yeah, it's sort of funny that it got me ready for the military. There was routine set in there. So I think my whole life has been routine after routine, and especially after I joined the military it was

36:30 just routine galore, which is a good thing.

So what's a routine day for a strapper?

You get up at three. You go along and take all the feed trays out of the stables, take all the water out, give the stables a quick clean up with the manure and then basically take the horses off to the track. The track was so close we could actually walk the horses backwards and forwards. It was like

37:00 400 metres from the track. When the horses came back we'd hose them down, dry them down, put on their coats and then just walk them up and down the street a few times to sort of loosen them up. Put them in the stables, give them their morning feed, tidy up and by that time, sort of nine o'clock would come and it was time for breakfast so you'd sort of stop and have breaky.

And then in the afternoon session?

Pretty much the same sort of thing. Give them the afternoon feed, tidy up their stalls, just clean out the manure. Once a week you had to actually

37:30 change all the sawdust which was a pain in the arse because you had to actually like clean out the entire stall, and with the horse urine they were all soaked through and would become quite heavy, was just like blankets of lead, but it had to be cleaned out. It wasn't the smell that bothered me, it's no big deal. Horse manure is only straw, but it's just the fact that it was all caked in and we had something like, I think we had 20 stalls and having to do that once a week became quite time consuming, but

38:00 it was just part of the job. But in the afternoons, yeah, just pretty much a tidy up, fresh water, more feed, clean a few things up, give out the vitamins to the horses, take a few horses for a walk and that was about it.

So when you then went to enlist you were 17?

Mmm hmmm.

Did you have your licence yet?

I didn't get my licence until I was 21. In fact I had my licence for an armoured personnel carrier before I had my licence for

38:30 a car. So I was driving on the streets in 13 tons of armoured vehicle instead of an FJ Holden, so it was quite funny.

So tell me about that whole enlistment process?

You go in for a couple of interviews and the first interview is to have a chat with a nice recruit. He sits down and says, "Well, this is the army. These are the different jobs and these are the processes." He makes it all sort of sound nice, all nice and airy fairy and sort of, "This is the life you want to lead, the good food

39:00 and the good tucker." and blah blah blah and companionship and it's all sort of true in a way, and then you go away and think about it and you say, "OK, I'd like to do this." and send in some more paperwork saying, "I'm interested, I'd like to sort of join up." They bring you back in for a second interview to discuss just some basic paperwork, get your father to sign a few things. Now that you've had a chance to think about it, you sort of say, "OK, yes, I do want to join." so you start signing, "Yes, I want to enlist." and then they say, "OK, we'll give

39:30 you a date to come in and do your aptitude tests and then the third time you come in you do your aptitude tests, your preferences of the sort of work you think you'd like to do, and then you wait a while and they say, "OK, yes, you've been accepted and we'd like you to come in with your bags packed on this date." and then you come in on the fourth time with your bags packed

40:00 and get your photo taken and you're sworn in to the military and you sign the dotted line and then off you go. From there they put you in a bus, take you to the airport and you're put onto, you're chaperoned usually by an NCO [non-commissioned officer], by a corporal, and he'll basically take you all the way down to Kapooka. So we flew down, I think we flew Brisbane to Melbourne and we spent something like eight hours at Melbourne airport waiting around which was actually good, your

40:30 first taste of hurry up and wait within the military, and from there we went to Kapooka. Drove in the front gate and were met by a big burly MP [military police] sergeant and said, "Has anybody got weapons and stuff like that, knives?" and this and that and blah blah blah and then we went off to our quarters and then we were just indoctrinated and they…

Actually, before we get too far in…

Tape 2

00:33 **Before we get onto Kapooka I just have one question about the enlistment, so in between those four times that you went in, how long would that process have been?**

I turned 17 on the 6th of June and I was at Kapooka on the 4th of August, so June, July,

01:00 August, a couple of months.

So what happened then, you're on the bus, you head in through the front gates at Kapooka and do you want to take us through that one?

Yeah, you basically pull up at one of the battalion headquarters and the MP sergeant hops off and he says, drugs weren't thought of in those days. It just wasn't a considered thing, but he said, "Have you got any knives or weapons or stuff?" and I think because we were joining the army, BYO [bring your own] weapons and stuff like that. I actually had a knife

01:30 but it wasn't concealed, it was just, joining the army you've got to have a knife. Some guy thing, I think. I handed it in, it was no big, he said, "You'll get it back when you leave." I said, "OK."

Did anyone else have anything?

No, not that I'm aware of, no. It's ironic, because you go off and they give you a weapon with a bayonet. Yeah, it's really strange. From there we were basically, hopped out of the bus, grabbed our bags. They read us the riot act, how to behave ourselves and don't do this

02:00 and don't do that.

Was there anything in that that surprised you?

No, I think it was just like the house rules of the battalion. No, nothing really.

02:30 Just, I think they did mention drugs, just touched on it, didn't get into it too much. I think it was just nothing out of the ordinary, no, nothing really. From there we were taken to the barracks. We were up on the third storey. We met our platoon sergeant, a big burly chap. We met our section commanders, who'd be our instructors and we had a hot box meal 'cause we got

03:00 in fairly late. So we had a hot box meal and then the next morning we woke up and it was culture shock city, but it was actually good. I didn't mind it. I thrived on it. I really did enjoy it. We were very lucky too, because our platoon sergeant was with us for a couple of weeks and then we had a British platoon sergeant come over from the Royal Green Jackets and he was fabulous, and it was an exchange program, so our platoon sergeant went to Britain and we had this British soldier come over.

03:30 I can't remember his name though. I've got a picture of him and I'm sure I could find his name somewhere, but he was fabulous, he was really, really good and I remember once we were cleaning out the toilets which is a daily, in fact it's a twice daily occurrence, and I didn't know that he was in the toilet and I knocked on the door and said, "Come on, get out of there, come on, cleaning the toilet. Here you go, here's a brush, clean the toilet yourself." and this British accented voice says, "Who the fuck are you?" Rah rah. I went, "Brrpt." and quickly escaped. He knew who I was,

04:00 so he caught me later and gave me a serving. Anyhow, but yeah, and from there it was like uniforms, haircuts, the old crewcut, hair straight off. They're trying to just basically say, "You're in the army now, this is the way you're going to be, this is the way we want you, and it's a good way to be." They don't let you waltz on in and take your time. It's like shock treatment, but you get your uniforms, they want you dressed as fast as possible. They want you with a haircut as fast as possible and they've got you doing drill as fast as

04:30 possible.

What were you issued with?

They give you a rather large trunk. You get a pair of GP [general purpose] boots, then you get a pair of

what they call ABs [ankle boots] and gaiters boots which are the worst boots in the world. They're just total crap. They never get comfortable in them.

What's the difference between the two?

GP boots basically come up about half way up your leg there. The ABs are a lower cut boot and you've got gaiters which wrap around so they're basically a two piece boot.

05:00 So, you're issued all your uniforms. In those days it was greens. We didn't have the DPCUs [disruptive camouflage pattern uniform] we have nowadays with the camouflage. Howard Greens, battledress jackets, slouch hats, giggle hats.

Sorry, what was the second one?

Slouch hats, giggle hats, which is the little green hats we used to wear.

05:30 Your PT [physical training] gear, PT shirts and stuff like that. Just everything you need to survive, and you put it in the trunk. So you cart it up to your rooms, and I've actually unpacked my bag and put everything in the locker, not realising that you won't be needing civilian attire for the next 12 weeks, "Put that back in your bag." And then you're taught how to pack your locker, and your locker is a work of art. You just don't fold it and put it in. Everything's folded and measured with a ruler, and your handkerchiefs are ironed in a certain way, and your socks have got to be folded so you've got the smiley face, and yeah,

06:00 it's, I think I've got a picture of it somewhere, but it's just a work of art. Your bed is made in a strict manner. You use your bayonet and ruler to measure it out and you've got to do the old coin flip thing and if it's not good enough it's trashed and you have to do it again, and if your locker's not up to standard it's trashed and you do it again, and they're just teaching you discipline. They're teaching you you've got to do things precise, and I can totally understand why, because when you join your units certain things, there is no room for error, so they're teaching you from day one to basically

06:30 sort of be precise with everything. It was sort of fun, I was having a good time, and you had to have your weapon clean, and every morning was a room inspection and you had to be standing out the hallway with both sheets over your shoulders. You couldn't cheat and sort of make your bed before you got up. You had to rip your bed apart and stand there with both sheets and they'd call, "Hallway 11." because we were 11 Platoon, so you'd race out and go "Hallway 11." and race out there and

07:00 they'd come down and then you'd make your beds and they'd have a room inspection. So they built up from there.

How do you make a bed with a bayonet and a ruler?

You use it to measure. There are certain folds you make in the bed, distance from the pillow to the edges, and you fold the sheet over the doona cover or the blanket cover, it's got to be measured a certain way. So basically when you fold the sheet back over the blanket cover the ruler measures the distance from the top of the bed to where the blanket should turn and

07:30 the bayonet's used for where, how much sheet should be on top of the blanket. So then you tuck it in nice and neat. Some guys would get in there with big safety clips and pin it underneath and stuff, and it was just, but you kept the rooms to a basic level. The less you had the better, which meant the less you had to worry about being tidy and everything, or the less you had to tidy up. And then when they gave you a weapon, that was with you all the time. It was always in your locker or you were always carrying it around and that had to be immaculate the whole time.

08:00 So, in fact I remember the sister company across from us. We used to see their beds out the window quite a fair bit. Used to see sheets and pillows go flying out the window because they weren't good enough. I was lucky that my bed never went out the window. It was trashed once or twice but you quickly learned, OK, this is the way they want it. Let's make it this way and keep them off your back.

I'm curious to know, has that stayed with you? Do you still make your bed the army way?

Ask my girlfriend, it bugs the hell out of her. I mean I just, in our relationship when my girlfriend comes over to stay I make the bed. She tries

08:30 and, "Leave it honey, I'll do it. Don't worry about it." It's just a waste of time, so I still keep my, I was about to say my locker, I still keep my wardrobe the same way. I think if you go to that much effort to iron your clothes, why scrunch it up? So everything's three fingers apart and I've had people come over and they walk in and look at my wardrobes and go, "Wow, that's beautiful." All my shoes are polished and stuff, because I just want to be able to come home and say, "I'm going out." just pick up the clothes I want. I'm not sort of, oh, I've got to polish my shoes and

09:00 iron my trousers and stuff and when I go visit friends, like I've stayed at friends' places and every morning they get up and they iron their clothes and they clean their shoes and this and that. I say, "Why didn't you do that the night before?" They go, "I'm not too sure what I want to wear." "Well, how about you iron a few things and it gives you a choice prior." "Oh, it's just too hard." But me, I just, it's just the way I've always been. In fact, I remember a couple of friends of mine who were, they were both in the army and they were married and their wardrobes were just beautiful. In fact they used to show them off, "Look at this. Isn't this is just wonderful?" And it's not just the uniforms but their

09:30 clothes as well. So I'm not the only one.

What weapons were you issued with?

We were given the L101 SLR, self loading rifle, quite a heavy calibre weapon, 7.62 millimetre, and when you're 17 and you're handed this cannon it was like, "Wow, it's a lot of firepower here." That's the only weapon you were issued at Kapooka, but while you were at Kapooka you were also taught how to use hand grenades

10:00 and you were given a demonstration of weapons that were in the military at the time. So we got to see the Bren gun [light machine gun], the M60 machine gun. We got to use the F1 submachine gun as well, which is a 9 millimetre short barrelled weapon. The difference is, with the SLR it was semi automatic. With the F1 it was automatic, and obviously the F1 is fairly compact where the SLR was quite long. In fact

10:30 it's the same weapon that the British use, or the British were using at the particular time, and it's a Belgian made weapon. Yeah, the SLR, the F1, the grenade, that's what we were taught with. But the majority, in fact 99 per cent of it was with the SLR, all drill and weapons training, and on the range was with the SLR because that was basically what we were going to use for our career. So, and then after, once I left, I got to use a whole more range of weapons after that.

So what did

11:00 **the actual training involve at Kapooka?**

A lot of drill. They're very big on teamwork, enforcing teamwork. If one guy in your section screwed up, he wasn't punished, everyone else was, and it brought into play, like, don't make a mistake because everyone's going to cop it but you, and then of course we wreak revenge on the guy who makes the mistake. So it's a good sort of, it's a good practice. Lots of drill,

11:30 theory lessons, navigation, first aid, infantry minor tactics, a lot of history lessons about the military, like parts of a flagpole, why is the flag the way it is, why the flagpole has three points to raise flags, history about Vietnam. We met the commanding officer of the base and one of the guys was dumb enough not to call him 'Sir' when he asked a question and

12:00 there was an arse kicking of monumental proportions after that, not just for him but for all of us, and it was just like, I was sitting there and he's asked the question and I'm going, "Say 'Sir', say 'Sir', say 'Sir'!" And he didn't, and I'm going like, "Oh, this is going to bite us." and the platoon sergeant just went off his rocker and I totally understand why.

And what was the punishment that you all got?

We got yelled out but he got to clean the toilets by himself for a week, and when there's

12:30 40 odd guys using the same toilet, yeah, when there's 40 odd guys using a toilet that's a problem.

So when was the time you actually first got to fire a weapon in training?

I think it's about week five. We did a lot of

13:00 weapons drill prior, especially considering I didn't really handle a weapon before, and then they give you this big cannon. When you're 17 and everything and it's like, here you go. Okey doke, yeah, it was probably about week five or so, but we did endless weapons drill. We did a lot of drill on the parade ground, which is the standard, but the instructors just ran us and drilled us again and that involves tabulated data on the weapon,

13:30 multiple velocities, weights, magazine capacity, radar fire, that sort of thing, stripping the weapon again and again and again and again. And from there we were put on the range and we got a lot of theory lessons and a lot of practical lessons on how to shoot too, 'cause we just don't like there and just blast away. There's a proper technique of how to shoot and that was really good, and you got to be at sort of both ends. Like, we also had

14:00 guys who were in the rifle butt, so they were controlling the targets and you got to hear the rounds fly over your head. So that was good experience, actually, to sort of get used to that sort of thing and in case you had to go overseas. And then, basically you had guys who were on the mound shooting and then guys behind who were doing a bit more weapons drill or just sitting there watching what was going on. There were always photographers floating around the base too and they were taking photos of you doing things like drill or

14:30 events or whatever, when you did things like the obstacle course, things like that, so they were always gliding around, which was really good 'cause, like, taking a camera wasn't even thought of, but these guys were there, and, like, in the evenings you could go up to where they had their little stall which is next to the boozer and the canteen and you could choose your photos that you wanted to get copies of and stuff. It was a really good thing to do. I'm pretty sure they still do it nowadays actually. Sort of like your own sort of little archive of your training at Kapooka. Everyone does it, everyone gets

15:00 photos and I've got truckloads of them. It was just a great time.

How did you find the instructors?

Great, Corporal Cowell was my instructor and he was fabulous. I thought the guy was great. He was infantry, very professional, very strict, very firm, but he was a good guy, and you found, like, week five or six you started to get a bond with him and you relax a little bit but you still had to keep that instructor-recruit sort

15:30 of relationship going, but you could have a bit of a joke and relax a bit. Yeah, he always used to say, his favourite saying was, "For fuck's sake, you know, get it right." and 'for fuck's sake' this, and I remember once we were doing contact drills and we were doing fire movement up and down hills and we can't do it on the flat, we've got to do it up and down hills, and we were at the very top, we had like 20 feet to go and we thought, "We'll stop now." and he goes, "One more time, go." I said, "For fuck's sake." and one of the other instructors

16:00 heard me, and it was just a joke. But he was good value. His lessons were very professional, very informative and he knew his stuff and he looked after us and there was always that rivalry between the other sections and with that sort of battle, but no, he was really good. I

16:30 just thought he was great. In fact I'd love to meet him nowadays. Unfortunately when you get sent away you don't really see instructors again, which is a pity, and I mean, if we'd had the internet in those days it would be easy to track him down, yeah. So there was also another guy there, he was an engineer, Corporal Brown. He was an Asian chap but he was a funny bastard, always making sexual jokes, very weird, but no, he was a really good guy.

17:00 In fact the whole platoon staff were really, really good.

Was everyone kind of around the same age, all of the recruits?

Yeah, we had a few, all young guys, 17, 20, 21, 22. Yeah, that's pretty much about it. I think we actually had a guy who'd been in the infantry before. He

17:30 was 30 and he was considered an old man 'cause he looked like an old man, but other than that pretty much all young guys.

Was there a whole new language that you had to learn?

Oh yes, goffers and gunge bars.

Can you talk me through some of those?

OK. Well, a goffer is a cannon rank. Gunge bar is a chockie [chocolate] bar. Then we have this wonderful word called leaps, and leaps is basically if you muck up big time then you're put through

18:00 uniform changing, as in, like, you're sent to your room and you're said, "OK, the dress is GP boots, pyjamas, webbing rifle and slouch hat." You look pretty ridiculous, and basically someone screwed up, so you're going to cop the punishment and it was sort of, I look back now and it was quite funny, or that it came out, "AB and gaiters, polyester shirt with Howard Green jumper, boxer shorts and webbing and ironing board." you know, and you had to be nice and neatly dressed.

18:30 It had to be all correct regardless of your having pyjamas and a polyester shirt; it had to be in the correct attire. PT, physical training, God, there's so many words that you sort of don't even sort of think of that become second nature. Got the normal military acronyms, basic fitness assessment, or BFA, and battle efficiency tests and all sorts of

19:00 things like that. So God, I'm just trying to think of a few now. Yeah, no one's ever asked me that question, so yeah, it's sort of funny, but everything's got a name. Nothing's really called what it really is and if you get a nickname then no one knows who you are. They just know you are Bluey or Johnno or JJ or whatever. In fact it was always funny

19:30 that when you got posted to your unit some people would call up for you, "I'd like to speak to John Fraser please." "Who?" "John Fraser." "Oh, you mean Mal, yeah, I'll go get him for you." In fact I remember one of my squadrons, I said to my platoon sergeant, troop sergeant, I said, "I'm just going to the bank with Roger." He goes, "Who?" I said, "Roger." "Who?" "Tommo." "OK." He was the troop sergeant, he should know everybody. So yeah,

20:00 the army is very big on nicknames and changing the names of things, what they are and what they really are.

We'll just stop there. Sorry, what was your nickname?

I got Mal, because at the time the prime minister was Malcolm Fraser, so I thought, "Oh yeah, just let it run." but I was sort of glad to get rid of it. I didn't mind it at the time but when I joined aviation I got JJ and I sort of preferred JJ to Mal, so that was pretty much it.

20:30 But everyone, if you name was Thompson or Thomson you were Tommo. If you had red hair you were Bluey. If your name was MacDonald or McKenzie you were Macca. So yeah, they shortened everything, so you just sort of almost lost your identity, just about.

In those times, if one person screwed up, everyone else got the punishment and then they sort of sorted that our amongst themselves, how were those things sorted out?

Contact counselling wasn't a done thing. It was usually like we'd take the guy down and give him

21:00 a brillo pad bath. Throw him in the shower and scrub him down with scrubbing brushes and some Omo and stuff and basically say, "Listen here, dipshit, get your act together. You're dicking us all around." Especially like, even on a drill lesson, if some guy was continuously screwing up, he'd just stand there and we'd all get push-ups on the parade ground. I'm just trying to think what else we'd do. I sometimes just think that the fear of, like,

21:30 punishment from 11 guys was just enough, but the bathroom one was a favourite. I think occasionally guys got flushed in the toilets but that was about it, or a wedgie, things like that, fear of getting the living shit beaten out of them, that sort of thing.

On the flip side of that, a lot of guys have spoken to us about the mateship and the bonding that sort of takes off really early on in basic training. How did that sort of become evident?

You suddenly realise you're dependent on each other,

22:00 and that's a good thing to install because when you go overseas the guy to your left and the guy to your right, they're the guys who have got your back. So if you found that one of the guys was getting a bit behind, you'd sort of back him up and cover for him, or if he was, say, off doing some cleaning and you knew he wasn't going to make his time line you'd go off and give him a hand or you'd make his bed for him and if there were guys who were having troubles with certain things, like they weren't catching onto the drill

22:30 properly or they were behind in weapons lessons, we would actually run around weapons lessons within the section without the section commander because we found that some guys would pick it up and some guys wouldn't. So the bonding was taking off very fast. In fact, I think it was after about week three there was a bit of a reshuffle within the section and some of the guys who weren't sort of conning on, one of those guys was put in my room and another guy was put in another room.

23:00 So basically they were taking the weaker guys and putting them with the stronger guys who were picking up things. It's just one of those things, like not everyone picks it up straight away and some do. I just took to it like a duck to water. I just loved it. I found I was good at drill, I was good at weapons. I just enjoyed everything else. I just loved it. So it was just, I knew it was where I wanted to be.

Were there guys that didn't cope as well?

Surprisingly there was a guy there, he was six four, he was a man mountain, full of confidence,

23:30 a really strong guy, and he went AWOL [absent without leave]. He missed his girlfriend, so he broke into the box room where we keep our personal belongings, took his bags and said, "Catch you later." but the thing is he actually didn't need to do that, because while you're at Kapooka, they don't tell you this until you actually leave, any time you want to leave you can leave. You can put your discharge in and they can just take it, see you later. But he decided, no, this was too much, "I miss my girlfriend too much." and he was gone.

24:00 So yeah, it was really odd that he did that, and I thought, "Of all guys he'll be like the platoon dux. He'll sort of top the course and everything." but yeah, he was out of there.

What was it that you enjoyed the most about your time at Kapooka?

I think the PT. I really enjoyed the

24:30 PT. It got you really fit really fast. I think it was like within, it was just out to get you fit as soon as possible. I remember like our first introduction to PT was like, "Wow, we're really unfit and we've got a long way to go." and they focus on your weak points, where you need to strengthen up, and just the running and just the PT and also there was a lot of inter-platoon sports. Like you played basketball with 60 guys. So there's a basketball court and you've got one platoon and another platoon and you're sort of taking on each other and stuff.

25:00 So the sport was good, especially like when you've got your running fitness up. They used to take us for a 10 kilometre run. We'd go, "Oh yeah, give us something harder to do." because you just build up that fitness and endurance, and I was 17 so it was no big deal. So I really enjoyed it. And funnily enough the obstacle course. I enjoyed the obstacle course because it was, you got to wear all your kit and everything

25:30 and it was a rather long obstacle course so you got to push yourself to the limit and go through the water and the cargo nets and up and down over logs and everything like that. So I think just the physical aspect I really enjoyed, and when we got to do the field phase which is basically just four days out in the field just teaching us cooking, tactics, camouflage, that sort of thing. It's amazing what you can make out of a ration pack with a bit of spices and a bit of imagination. So yeah, it was good. I enjoyed the physical aspects, sort of.

What was the

26:00 **toughest thing for you at Kapooka?**

The ropes. I had a lot of trouble climbing the ropes. The test was, you had to go up and down and up and down again, and in fact on the day that I actually had to do it for the test, I went up, down, up, and I was like two feet short and I just couldn't get up for some unknown reason, and it wasn't so much I wasn't strong enough, it was just the technique I was using just didn't suit my body, and one of the

26:30 physical training instructors pulled me aside and he said, "Look, try this method." and I went up, down, up, down, up, down, it was like, that was easy. So when it actually came time for the test it was like a walk in the park. So I think it was just the ropes really plagued me 'cause I had a couple of attempts at it and I just couldn't get it until this PTI [physical training instructor] stepped in and said, "Try this method, you'll probably find it a lot easier." and I did. It was just a piece of cake, and then I realised,

27:00 and then actually that I really loved the ropes, even when I was posted to different units. I used to always go up and do the ropes by myself, because it was something that I really enjoyed. So it's a bit strange, but just one of those things.

Was there a point in basic training when you got to put in your preferences for corps allocation?

Yes, I don't recall when. I think it was getting close, probably week six, week seven, you did a series of aptitude tests and you put in what you wanted and when I got my results back they'd actually, they crossed off armoured but then they'd

27:30 put it back in again, so obviously it was just a mistake, which I was glad because that's where I wanted to go, and the reason I wanted to go over there, 'cause in the mess hall, which was the size of a football field, there was a big picture of Australia and it had all the different units around it and it had a picture of Brisbane, or obviously an armoured personnel carrier pointing towards Brisbane and saying the 4th Cavalry Regiment. I went, like, "That looks like a lot of fun." so that's where I went.

So when did you actually get your corps allocation?

Probably about two

28:00 weeks prior, before you marched out. Because when you march out, when you do your formal marching out parade you actually march out in uniform with your corps colours, so you've got the lanyard on and you've got the badges and you've got your embellishments so you know where you're going. You're not just in the basic uniform.

So what was that marching out parade like for you?

Great, it was really good. Best drill I've ever done, because you practise again and again and it's your first formal marching out parade

28:30 and your family's there and your parents are there and everything and it's not, you just don't march on and do a few bits and pieces. You're marching on, you're sort of presenting arms, controlling arms, marching around in slow and quick time and doing all sorts of things, so it's quite a formal parade, and yeah, it was just a really great day. And the band is spectacular. I don't know the name of the tune but I've got the tune in my head. I just can't remember what it was. Yeah, and you get to

29:00 practice with the band a couple of times. When you practice with the band the first time you think, "Wow, this is pretty cool." That was a really big day because this is the day like, I'm now a soldier, well, a basic soldier, and you get sent off to your units. So yeah, that was a good day.

And what did you know about the unit you were posted to, anything?

Nothing. Nothing whatsoever. I just knew that they had armoured personnel carriers and that was about it. So very little about it.

And was anyone else from your

29:30 **basic training posted to the same unit?**

Yeah, there were a couple of guys who were posted. I actually think that at the time my sister knew the squadron commander of A Squadron who was of the 4th Cavalry Regiment and they were really good friends and they were sort of raising their kids at the same time and everything, and I sometimes think, like, our names were drawn out of a hat. When I went to Puckapunyal once we did our, finished our training on armoured personnel carriers, our names were drawn

30:00 out a hat and it just seemed like there were quite a lot of names in the hat, that I got Brisbane. Only a few of us got Brisbane and I was one of them. So it was like, I somehow think he had something to do with it.

So from Kapooka was there any lag time before you went to Pucka [Puckapunyal]?

Just a couple of nights, that was really about it. Once you finished your, once you do your march up parade it's like, maybe two or three days just sort of tidying things up and guys were going here and there and we got to wear our uniforms

30:30 around the base. That was good. You see the other recruits looking at you thinking, wow, you're special but really you're just a schmuck recruit going to training and you're going to be at the bottom of the barrel when you go to the next place anyway.

Did you get leave to come home and see your family?

No. We went straight to the new training.

And so then, tell us about that, arriving at Pucka?

Yeah, we arrived at Puckapunyal and once again we were the new kids on the block,

31:00 but there was a lot more freedom, a lot more freedom. There's still, the discipline's there but it's a lot more lax. We were given barracks and they sort of had to be kept nice and neat but that wasn't the standard of Kapooka. The weekends were free and your nights were free and you could go to the boozer and watch TV and relax but Puckapunyal's very isolated. Melbourne's 90 kilometres away, so unless you had a car you're pretty much base bound, but also it was like

31:30 I spent something like seven or eight months there but the course only ran for three months, but it was just trying to time the courses and get the courses up and running. So while you were there, you got to, you got exposed to the museum. They had an army museum there which was really good. You would spend time down there or they'd put you in different areas or you'd go and actually do work with the 1st Armoured Regiment and go off to the range and do certain things. You sort of got exposed to different

32:00 parts of armoured life until you started your courses, and I was lucky that my instructor was a Vietnam veteran. He was a really great guy. But the food wasn't that good. The food at Kapooka was a lot better, but yeah, it was just a very isolated place.

So what sort of training were you doing for armoured?

Started off with basic training on radios, [UNCLEAR] new radio

32:30 telephone procedures and basically learning up the radios and the different sets up that you would use within the vehicle itself and using the phonetic alphabet, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, blah, blah, blah, and you just go through your books there and you just learn how to do radio telephone procedure, setting up antennas, things like that. But we didn't really get too much into that. It was more so, because vehicles are established with the radios, it was more so just getting the cabling right within the radios.

33:00 From there you did, sorry, I'll go back one. We did the indoctrination course, the radio course and then your driver's course. Your indoc course was navigation, was first aid, was using fire fighting equipment, that sort of thing, and then weapons, where you're introduced to the 30 calibre and the 50 calibre machine gun, which was great. I mean, you've just been given this mass weapon of death and you trained on it and I'm 17 years old. I'm using this thing that can take out an aircraft, and

33:30 you put it on the range and the budgets were pretty big so we had like a lot of ammunition to use, so we'd go through 500, 600 rounds easy and that was just great. You'd sit there and you're using a weapon that shoots 7.4 kilometres and you get to engage target at two or three kilometres, and in between courses they were running other courses, so I actually got out to go out a few times because I was qualified, so I could go out and help and I got to do some more shooting, so that was good. Then you did your radio course, which was radio telephone procedure, and then you did

34:00 your driver's course where they taught you the mechanics of the vehicle, how to change tracks, how to service the vehicle. They teach you servicing to a certain level. When you join the units they take it up. You do a lot more servicing and then they teach you a lot of driving skills. I think you spend, like, a week of learning how to use the vehicle, mechanics, servicing, that sort of thing and then the rest of it is all driving and you're pretty much on the range on the day every day driving, driving and driving. So my first licence and first driving experience was in an armoured personnel carrier, which I don't think my instructor

34:30 knew, which was probably a good thing, so it was great. I loved it.

For people that don't know, can you describe an APC [armoured personnel carrier] for us?

An APC is a tracked vehicle. It has 64 tracks on the right and 63 on the left and, like, when you've got in a car, you've got a steering wheel, you've got your accelerator and a brake, in an armoured personnel carrier you've got your accelerator but you've got what they call laterals or sticks. So if you want to go right you pull the right stick. If you want to go left you

35:00 pull the left stick. If you want to stop you pull them both back at the same time. In front of them were two big black levers for, they were called pivot sticks, so if you wanted to, like, pivot to the right, you'd just pull the right lever and the vehicle would stay in place and turn on the spot, and obviously vice versa. You had a crew of two, you had a driver signaller and you were called a driver signaller because you drove the vehicle but you were also qualified to answer the radios, and then you had your crew commander and he sat in a T50 turret right

35:30 behind you. You were basically, behind you and to the right, and he operated the 30 calibre machine

gun, the 50 cal, he did all the navigation and he did 99 per cent of the talking on the radio. You've usually got three radios on board, so two to three radios, and you've got two or three antennas. In the back you carry between six to ten infantry. Top speed is about 60 kilometres an hour. You can

36:00 actually swim them. They actually float quite well. In fact I've got some great photos of them where you do, like, a running start into the water, and when the vehicle hits the water it's just, this massive bow wave comes up. They're an all terrain vehicle, they're pretty hard to stop, ditches, tank ditches, that sort of thing, logs, mud, sand, anything pretty much, they'll go anywhere. The armour itself is compressed aluminium

36:30 and they've been around since Vietnam. In fact my first vehicle was actually older than I was, and recently I've just seen the upgrade for them. They've actually made the vehicles longer, they've given an additional road wheel, so, like, on the running gear you had your sprocket, which actually had large spikes which went through the tracks, and that was connected to the transmission, which was at the front of the vehicle, and then that turned the tracks and then you had your five road wheels and they were basically the ones that were between,

37:00 you had the road wheels, your track and then the road itself, and then at the very end you had the spindle and the spindle actually tensioned the track, so you'd have, like, an adjustable shock absorber, so to speak, and you'd pump grease into that and that would move the spindle back and then tension the track and you had to have the track tensioned at a certain distance between the second road wheel and the track itself. If you had it too loose you'd actually throw a track because you get dirt and everything turning in amongst that. So as long you kept

37:30 the track tensioned you really didn't have problems. In fact, whenever you stopped you'd always be checking your tension to make sure that you're honky dory. A couple of quick pumps and then you were fine. But it had a ramp at the back so you could deploy the infantry, and it had a cargo over the top so the infantry could basically stand up and park outside and that was a heavy armoured top. Had air conditioning vents which never worked. In fact, a lot of the guys would actually take out the air conditioning vents and filters and lay it with rubber and put like cans of beer

38:00 or coke, and the ramp itself actually had a door, so even though the ramp was up you could actually hop in and out of the vehicle via the back door.

How big is it?

Oh God. It's probably, from the ground to the basic level is six feet plus and the turret above that, the turret's about two and a half feet in height and

38:30 probably, say, three and a half feet in diameter. The width is probably two and a half metres wide and is probably, if I say, five metres long. I'm sort of estimating here. I'm just, yeah, I don't know the tech specs [technical specifications]. When I went to Aviation I knew the helicopters back to front, you had to, but in those days they weren't really big on knowing those sort of things, but yeah, it was a tight fit. The turret was a tight fit too, and I'm

39:00 quite a large guy and there were guys who were bigger than me and I don't know how they fitted in there, but that's about the size, and fully combat loaded it weighed about 13 ton.

During that training what understanding were you given of what sort of situations the APCs are used in?

Once you're posted to your unit you hit the ground running. They like you to go to field a lot. In fact, I think I spent something like, I arrived in my unit in May and I think I spent something like four months away. Straight away

39:30 you're taught weapons drill, you're taught contact drill because it's totally different in armoured vehicles. You're taught mine drills, medevacs [medical evacuation], fire movement is totally different, navigation is totally, movement, because you're going so fast, you've got to be thinking 500 or 600 metres, you've got to be thinking a kilometre ahead while you're navigating, and of course along the way while you're looking at your map you've got to be scanning ahead for the enemy. You've got to be watching where you're going to make your next movement, and I think, like, with a driver

40:00 and a crew commander you get like a good bond, and you get it so that the driver's actually reading the crew commander's mind. He knows where he's supposed to go, and I think with my first line crew commander we bonded really well and I picked up exactly where he wanted to go all the time. We sort of knew the general direction, but it was basically finding that right tree for cover or making the appropriate distance for a bound or knowing when to go without him telling you when to go, that sort of thing.

40:30 You do a lot of the stuff in section work, like three, four vehicle sections, and then you do it within the troop, which is 16 vehicles and then you do it within the squadron. When you do squadron stuff it just takes all day to move anywhere because you're just moving 50, 60 vehicles in formation through the scrub and you're trying to navigate and especially if you're doing contact drills and stuff, it takes forever and a day to get anywhere, but when you went to the sections it was a lot faster and a lot easier, but they warm you up for that area.

Tape 3

00:30 **So at that stage did you have any idea where you'd be going from Puckapunyal?**

Actually, we're already in the regiment.

Oh, you're already in the regiment?

That's what we were doing, doing the tactics in the regiment.

So how did that training change once you got to the regiment?

When you're doing your initial training you're just taught the basics. You're just to drive from point A to point B. You're taught how to do some water crossings and basically how to do knife edges, basic obstacles, cross country sort of stuff, but really it's all

01:00 very sedate and it's all done during the day and it's all single vehicle stuff. When you go to, when you join the regiment, the vehicles that come off last, it's a lot more go go go, and especially amongst the sections, it's very fast. So everything just picks up dramatically and you've got to be basically wary of all your surroundings. It's not like you've just dropped from point A to point B, just another Sunday afternoon drive. You've got to think, "OK, everyone, enemy in front of

01:30 me, what's my crew commander want me to do? When he fires his guns am I stopping, am I backing up? If I back up I'm going to hit a tree behind me when I reverse." things like that. So you've got to think, sort of, in all directions of the level playing field, so it's a lot different.

Having been on the ground and having to cam up your APCs and then having seen that from the air later on, did it seem like a reasonable thing to do?

Oh yeah. When you camouflage the vehicles,

02:00 we're taught very well, and there's certain things you can do, like the camouflaging basically involves, like, just chopping off some trees and basically putting them on points just around the outside of the vehicle, but then you can do, like, the sides of the vehicle as well, and the trick they taught us is actually just to grab a rag and do, like, patterns up and down the side of the vehicle with oil, and then that's what you do. The dust then hits the oil so it gives you that natural camouflage of the dust, so you blend in with the roads and the

02:30 dusty environments depending where you were, and with the trees and that, yeah, it actually works really well because you find, I've got pictures of APCs sort of, and all you can really see is just the crew commander because of the camouflage around the vehicle. It works quite well. We did an exercise once with the Americans, and they had one of their amphibious landing ships and they had marines and they had their vehicles and they had helicopters and everything and we were 300 meters from

03:00 the runway where they were going to land and we had 11 vehicles lined up in a row and we camouflaged them up and they were flying over the top of us and they couldn't see us, and these were in their Cobra attack gunships. So thought, "Well, if they can't see us then obviously it's working fairly well."

And where would most of your exercises be?

Shoalwater Bay training area, or 'Swabatar' as we called it, outside Rockhampton. It was pretty much all done there. We did do an exercise up in the Northern Territory. That was just a once off one, a couple of exercises in the Puckapunyal, but the majority of the time it was Shoalwater Bay.

03:30 **And how do they get the APCs to and from exercises?**

Occasionally they truck it up. They drove them up once, never again, and the majority of the time was by train.

What was the problem with driving them up?

It's not a road vehicle, and these vehicles are only really good for short distances like, it's basically, it's 600 kilometres an armoured vehicle on a road. It's pretty mind numbing and it doesn't do the vehicle the world of good either. They're just not used to long distance driving.

04:00 We found, I think it was Kangaroo '89, or the Diamond Dollar '89, one of the big exercises, we drove 1400 kilometres in the vehicles and they just started to fall apart. They're just not used to that sort of thing, so they're only good for short distances over a period of time. We actually found we had an 11 vehicle troop and we lost four vehicles over a period of time, so it ended up being

04:30 just two vehicles per section and the troop commander and that was it, and the troop sergeant and the section commander's vehicles all broke down. Not that they weren't doing proper maintenance, but just the distances took its toll, the terrain, the hours we worked, things like that, so that's why they do them all by, in fact train's the best way to go. We even did it, once we did it by truck and even the vibrations from the road through the truck to the vehicle affected the vehicles. It just shook the crap out of them.

05:00 So, and we got there, there were nuts and bolts had come loose and shock absorbers have come off, and not that the vehicles were bad, it was just that the vibration had really wrecked the vehicle, so they didn't do that one again either.

What sort of maintenance, when you go field with a vehicle like that and you're putting it through its paces, what sort of maintenance do you have to do on a daily basis?

OK. You've got your morning and evening services, you've got a daily service, you've got your weekly service, monthly, three-monthly, six-monthly, yearly services, but a daily service is just get up, do your morning routine, check your

05:30 fluid levels, oil transmission, check your tracks, make sure they're clean, as in, not immaculately polished, just make sure they're free of debris, check the track tension, go through from inside the vehicle and pull off your fire wall panels, check the tension of your belts, just a basic sort of once over, check your radiator, make sure you're good to go there. But the tracks were the most important thing. You really had to look after them, plus also you had to check the distances between each track link because they've

06:00 actually got nylon bushes inside which are held with a track pin and when they got a certain distance apart you had to replace them. So by maintaining your running gear and by maintaining the tension of the tracks that always got your best wear and tear out of your tracks, although I was actually lucky in one of my vehicles. I had American track made in America and it lasted me an entire year. I never changed a track link. Sorry, no, I changed two, where we've had the Australian stuff, sometimes you go through an

06:30 entire set and you've got to change all 50 links. So you've got to maintain your radios, which is not too hard. You've got to keep them dust free, and maintain your weapons and the batteries. There's two big batteries in the back, and sort of just keeping them clean, basically.

Have you ever thrown a track while you've been driving?

Yeah.

What's that like?

It's no big deal. You've known you've thrown it because the vehicle suddenly lurches to a very slow pace and you

07:00 can feel it. The vehicle vibrates violently and you realise, "Whoop, got to stop here." So sometimes you can cheat and throw it back on, but sometimes you've actually got to break the link and reset it. You've actually got to take the nut off the track pin, break the track pin, break your track and roll it back on and connect it back up again. So drove into a couple of ditches. Sometimes you go in and the dirt just gives way and you tilt to the side, and that's a good thing about the vehicles, is that they're

07:30 extremely resilient. They're just amazing. You can drive into a ditch and you can be like that, and basically one of your sister vehicles can come up, hook up with some tow cables and pull you out and off you go. So, but I think I've only thrown one or two tracks. It's not a common sort of thing really. The vehicles are well maintained by the crews.

How do you go doing sort of night manoeuvres and that with those?

Very slowly. I'm lucky, I've

08:00 got very good night vision and that's without using goggles. It's just a human thing, like some guys have better night vision that others, but I found my night vision was very very good. Everything slows down at night for obvious reasons. You sort of lose your depth perception even without night vision goggles, and you're trying to keep track of where the other vehicles are. We found we didn't really get into too many night manoeuvres because in the early days night vision goggles were just really unheard of.

08:30 We had the Pass 5s and we had the periscope night vision systems where you actually take out one of your periscopes in the driver's position and you put a little, put the NVG [night vision goggles] periscope in there, but they'll be useless. You have no depth perception, you couldn't really see anything, and I actually found my vision was better than that so I gave it away as a bad joke, but a lot of the times we basically just harboured up or ran defence and it was, we didn't do, compared to sort of day work we didn't do a lot of night work.

Would you

09:00 **sleep in the vehicles at night time?**

Yeah, always sleep in the vehicles. We found we had a hammock system. When you look at the back of the vehicle you've got seats on the left and right hand side, you've got a clear space in the floor and you've got the turret which sits in the centre there and we found a lot of guys actually roll hammocks up and have it basically either side of the turret against the fire walls, and then at night you unroll it or some guys would just sleep on the floor like a little mattress or sleep on the floor. Sleeping outside was a silly thing, because if you came under attack at night you simply

09:30 just jumped in your positions and went off. You just drove away. So that was a good thing. I'm aware

that 5/7 RAR [Royal Australian Regiment], which is the infantry mechanised battalion, they actually dismount their weapons. I have no idea why, because dismounting the 30 cal and the 50 cal in the turret is a pain in the arse and if you're in contact you've got to throw them back in. What's the point? You know, you're in a turret; you're in the best firing position ever. Why would you dismount them? I think it's an infantry thing. So yeah,

10:00 we'd also sleep in summer flight suits, which were a Vietnam thing, basically identical to the flight suits that are worn by the aircrews nowadays, but they were lightweight. So instead of us sleeping in our uniforms, which could be quite heavy and dirty and sweaty at night, you just sort of wore these to be a bit more comfortable and a bit more relaxed, but if you had to go at least you were still in a uniform and you could jump the seats and drive off, and later on when the time came you could get dressed again.

So at

10:30 **night time when you're in a harbour position, you still have like your machine gun picquet and that sort of thing?**

Yes.

And that would be the weapon that's on the APC or....?

Yeah, yeah, depending on what you were doing. If you were in a section, it was a three vehicle section, you'd back up arse to arse so you'd actually step from vehicle to vehicle. So you'd basically be that tight in a fishtail or a Y shape and so you were just that tight, so when you sort of opened up the back cargo door on the ramp

11:00 you could actually step out. You could all have a bit of a huddle up, or you could step from vehicle to vehicle. When you're in the troop you're still fairly tight but you're just a little bit more spread out.

So obviously section work was a lot more enjoyable?

Section work was a lot more fun, yeah. You're with your mates, the troop sergeant is not there, the troop commander's not there, and I always had good bosses. But yeah, you had a lot more fun, a lot more flexibility and you're right about the radio picquets, like you'd have a radio picquet, and the good thing about section work is because you get that close it's easy to

11:30 maintain your all around defence because you'll only have one guy on picquet and then you go downstairs and wake the next guy, you don't have to sort of trudge off to the ooloos to the next vehicle because the next vehicle is right there. When you're in troop defence each section runs its own picquet, so you've got one at twelve, four and eight o'clock. I should say twelve, eight and four o'clock. So you've got all around defence. You've got basically three points of protection.

And can you talk about, obviously overseas your main job is in support of infantry, so can

12:00 **you tell us a bit about that sort of work that you do?**

We basically supported the 6th Battalion , 8/9th Battalion, and a lot of our fieldwork was always with them, carrying them around for weeks at a time, and we got, we always worked with the same sections, which was good 'cause you got to see the same guys next exercise and you built up a bond with the infantry and they were really good guys. As far as I'm concerned infantry are the best in the world. We make fun of them, we call them grunts, we call them schmucks and the dumb arses and you've got to be dumb to be in the grunts, but I wouldn't want any other infantry soldier

12:30 beside me as far as I'm concerned, and you build up a bond with the guys, they'd actually sort of give you snacks from their ration packs. They'd sort of give you a bit of a feed while you're going along 'cause they're sitting in the back and they've got time to have a bit of a drink and brew and something to eat and we're driving and being in a crew commander's position so we can't do that. But we do live fire exercises with them, which was good. It's always better to do it in section and then in troop, because troop becomes a clusterfuck. It works well, but it's a lot more organisation,

13:00 where within the troop, it's a lot more freedom, a lot more faster and you have a lot more fun, and just patrolling along you have a lot of fun with the guys too. Infantry guys have a great sense of humour. I mean, they just pull the piss out of each other and sitting in the back when you're on patrol you can sort of hear them having a conversation and you join in. I remember once we were out in the middle of nowhere, up at Katherine somewhere, and

13:30 we had our section and we had two vehicles on one side of the road and I was on the other and one of the guys who was, like, the section clown hopped out of the vehicle and went to walk across the road to talk to one of the other guys and he tripped in the middle of the road but there was nothing there. It was just a flat road, and he got up and said, "You bastard, you didn't even stop." You know, and it just cracked us up, it was like quick as a wink, so they're just funny guys and they're very professional and they sort of, when you sort of see them you think they're clowns

14:00 but when it comes down to do the job they're the guys you want watching your back. So they're very, very good, and we'd look after them as well. Like at night in all around defence, we'd have like vehicles in all around defence but they would be between the vehicles and we'd boil up water for them because that way you could have brews and hot meals and they would really appreciate it. We'd invite their section commander to come inside and have a chat and he could write up his orders inside the vehicle

so that way he's got somewhere to sit and he's got light to work on. He's not sitting under a hoochie with a little torch and

14:30 stuff, and we'd swap rations because they were on one-man ration packs, we were on 10-man, and we'd do trades and we'd get a bit of extra rations, so we'd make them waffles, or make them jaffles, should I say, and yeah, so there was that good common bond, so that's why I think we worked together. There's that rivalry between infantry and armour, especially on the football field, but when it comes down to do the job it's good teamwork.

And what do they call you guys, do they have a nickname for you guys?

15:00 Buckets, wimmer bins. That's pretty much it, just buckets usually.

And how did you go, I know now they use the short barrelled Steyrs for the crews, what were the SLRs like back then?

We actually didn't carry the SLRs in the vehicles. They were working on which way to go with them, but basically the crew commander carried the 9 millimetre automatic and the driver carried the F170 machine gun. Later on it worked out

15:30 that we did carry the SLR and actually rode on the outside of the turret for a quick response but usually it was the pistol and F1. I think they, the Steyr came, I think it was good that the Steyr came into vogue because, especially in Somalia, I wouldn't be wanting to walk around with just a pistol. I'd want to be carrying something that packs a punch. So I really, carrying the SLR in the vehicle just didn't work. That's why I just used the short weapons.

How hot

16:00 **did it get in the vehicle?**

Depends on the weather, really. You just acclimatise to where you go and usually you're driving around so you've always got the breeze going along. But whenever we stopped, if we were, like, doing leaps and bounds and patrolling, you'd always stop under a tree. Obviously for the shade reason for tactical to give you camouflage but also it's cool and there's always a breeze so it wasn't that bad. I mean, I didn't mind it. When you were firing weapons it got a bit

16:30 hot because the weapons would generate a fair bit of heat. You'd have all the smoke from the weapons firing, but other than that, yeah, it wasn't too bad. Shoulder Bay is, it's gets pretty warm during summer but it gets bloody cold during winter so you take your warm gear and rug up with your scarves and jackets and stuff and you drink shitloads of Milo and coffee.

And what about the noise?

We had pretty good helmets. When I first joined we actually just used like a headset, but I think it

17:00 was just a matter of a month I think they brought in what they call the Racal helmet, R-A-C-A-L, and because of basically fallen trees and stuff like that we needed some protection, so the interior of the helmet actually looked like something you bought from a Russian army reserve shop. It had all black foam encased in, like, black material and you had your earpieces and a boom mike and little chin strap and then they gave it like this fibre glass cover on top and that was really good, 'cause that way if something fell on you, which happened

17:30 quite a fair bit, at least you wouldn't feel it, and that also allowed you to wear, have your dust goggles properly sit up there, and also it had like little slides at the back so you could actually raise the slides so if you needed to talk to someone while the engine's running, like outside the vehicle, you could do it, but flick the slides down and the noise attenuation would drop dramatically and the communication between the driver and crew commander was better and it was just an all round better helmet. So it was a good invention.

Did

18:00 **blokes customise or do anything, personalise APCs?**

Oh, of course we did. Oh, yes, we did. The big difference between, like, an APC and a helicopter, because helicopter you've got to stick to the rules. You can't go just throwing on a bracket here and a bracket there because it's aviation. But armour, you could customise your driver's holes, customise your seats a little bit, add some cushions and some seat pads. Actually, a lot of customisation went on. On

18:30 top of the vehicle you could put brackets for your water jerries and extra ammunition or for storage and stuff like that, but the interior, some of the vehicles were a work of art. Some guys would rip out the left seat and actually put in, like, a box seat, so the box was the storage, but then they had this big mattress on top so they could sleep on that. So it worked as a seat and did its job but it also acted as storage. Then you had guys who would have these lights and siding. You had a red light and a white light, so someone would have two or three lights and side so you could have decent lighting at night. Different brackets, rubber

19:00 mats came into the regiment, so we were able to lay the rubber mats on the floor, 'cause the floors were aluminium and they make a lot of noise, but you put the rubber mats down, you drop something, you

don’t hear anything. As I said before, guys were ripping out the filters in the cargo hatch vans so that way they could put in cans of coke or cans of beer and stuff like that. Yeah, so that happened a lot. I’m just trying to think what else. Putting in a little comfort seat behind

19:30 the driver’s seat, because where the driver sat, directly behind him was the bench seat for the infantry, so you’d actually make behind that like another little seat and you could make other different brackets, and I knew of a few troop sergeants who would actually use one of the water jerries that was on the vehicle, they’d fill it up full of port so they could have a few drinks while they were out on the field, ’cause in those days troop sergeants were troop sergeants and very prim and proper and they liked a port occasionally. They weren’t out there getting drunk and drinking and driving, but it was just very traditional, they would

20:00 have a bit of a wine and dine right out in the field and have a couple of ports and discuss troop sergeant things and stuff. But yeah, they used to customise them all the time, so we could get away with that.

And what did you think of the NCOs and officers?

Brilliant. When I first joined, I actually was in my regiment and I was 17. My regiment had a lot of Vietnam veterans. In fact, the first line troop I went into there were a couple of corporals there who were Vietnam veterans, and we

20:30 learned a lot from them. Great amount of respect, and they were good guys because you learned a lot from them, but they were funny guys too. A lot of the sergeants and squadron sergeant majors were Vietnam veterans, and they had a good sense of humour and they were very realistic in the ways they do things. Some guys do sort of, they’re just too military. It’s hard to explain, too by the book. The book’s good, but you’ve got to modify it from the book, and these guys knew how to do that, so they were very good.

21:00 **As a 17 year old soldier in Enoggera, was it regimented did you think?**

Yeah. Armoured is very regimented, but it’s a good thing. The RSM [regimental sergeant major] is God and I actually like that. The RSM is an RSM, he’s a soldier’s man and don’t fuck with him and he’ll just turn you into ash by looking at you. The troop soldiers were good, the squadron sergeant majors were good. They were there, they were firm and fair but they backed you up. If you were right, they were there.

21:30 If you were wrong they nailed you but they did it in the proper way, and it was good. It was good esprit de corps within the regiment. The regiment was 500 strong, and we were very popular because we, because of the colours we carried with our gear on and having armoured vehicles on parade or going away often, doing demonstrations and stuff like that, plus when we went on parade we

22:00 carried lances and bandoliers which derived from the Light Horse days. So we were always doing things for the RSL [Returned and Services League] or just little parades here or little parades there or memorials and stuff. I did one at the Brisbane City Council and it was for the widows of veterans and it was just four of us just in our uniforms with bandoliers and lances. We did an honour guard for the ladies when they came in and they just thought it was Christmas. They just couldn’t believe it, wow. They weren’t told we were going to be there. We just arrived early, got in position and then when they

22:30 came in we stood to attention like, and they just thought it was Christmas. So yeah, it’s great esprit de corps.

Did you have a preference for, did you prefer being on exercises or did you like being in barracks?

We used to go away. I think we used to go away far too long. My first time there I was away for three and a half months. I was

23:00 in the field for a month, back for a week, in the field for a month, back for a week, in the field for six weeks. I was single at the time so I didn’t care less, but I think for the married guys it’s a bit hard. And at the moment you’ve got this political football with the troops in Iraq. Mark Latham [Opposition Leader] is saying, “Bring them home.” John Howard [Prime Minister] is saying, “Stay there.” Do you guys realise what you’re doing to the families? Using human life as a political football, what are you doing? I didn’t mind going bush because you

23:30 learn the tricks and traits and how to be comfortable very quick and we had a good time. I think it’s, once it’s the end of the day a month’s period can really drag out and, but being in barracks was good too. You’re back at home, and I remember once, I used to have a routine when I came back from the field, you’d come home and shower and change and that night I’d go off to a restaurant in the city called, it was Jo-Jo’s in the city. I don’t know if it’s still there or not but they always had really nice food there

24:00 and I always really enjoyed going there. I remember it was, like, we had a couple of days before we got home and I had these infantry guys in the back and they were sort of, “I’m gonna get home and get a Big Mac and a cherry pie and fries and a coke.” and they turned to me and said, “What are you gonna get?” “Well, I’m actually going to Jo-Jo’s restaurant and give myself some oysters and Barramundi Admiral and probably sorbet afterwards.” Thought I was very strange. So I sort of like the finer things

in life, but I didn't mind Macca's then, but not now.

24:30 **So around about 1990 the Defence starts talking about getting Blackhawks?**

They actually come in in 1987. The RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] had them first and I think they really did a botched up job. They just didn't use them properly. The RAAF are supposed to support the army and they just never seemed to do it very properly. I just noticed on a lot of exercises, I don't think it was the

25:00 RAAF who were flying the helicopters at the time. I think it was just the hierarchy basically not wanting to do the job properly and the old RAAF sort of army sort of thing. But they came in in 1987.

So when did you first get the option of going down that path?

I actually put in for a corps transfer from armour to aviation in '86. I wanted to go to reconnaissance helicopters and I wanted to go to aviation anyway.

25:30 They kept on saying, "There's no vacancies." and I said, "OK, righty-o." and I kept on applying and applying and eventually I got through in 1990, but that was just to aviation. I didn't go to Blackhawks straight away, which was actually good. I got to see things from the ground and that's always a good thing to have because the experiences I got were good. So being part of the ground crew I was offered to go to Cambodia.

26:00 So that was a good thing. So when I was posted aviation I went to, there was actually a bit of a mix up with my posting to aviation as well. They made some mistakes and they said to me at the end of the course, "Look." they sort of apologised for the muck ups, "We'll give you a cushy posting. We'll send you off to the Australian Defence Force Helicopter School in Canberra." I was like, "This is great, nine to five in an office answering the radio. How hard can it be?" It was great, and then when I got posted to 173 Surveillance we did a bit of fuel work, but nothing

26:30 exciting and compared to armour it was actually pretty easy stuff. I'd only been with the unit for about a year, and that's when I was asked to go to Cambodia. So that was good.

What was your original reason for deciding to get out of cav [cavalry]?

I was enjoying it, but I wanted to go flying and especially when I saw the Blackhawks come in, "Well, that's what I want to do. That's where I want to go." You know, sort of, I changed my hair so it was like Val Kilmer from Top Gun and

27:00 I used to wear Raybans [brand of sunglasses] and I just always enjoyed, I had I think one or two guys in the regiment who had Nomax flight gloves to wear out in the field, 'cause they were very hard to get in those days. I just always wanted to go, and when the Blackhawks came in I thought, "That's where I want to go." So yeah, it was about '86, '87 it really kicked in and I was chasing it for a while and then I eventually got it.

Did you do much work with aviation being with APCs?

27:30 I did a lot of work with reconnaissance. Basically, we were doing exercises where they would act as helicopter gunships, and basically we would learn the pros and cons of how to do field work against helicopters, because having their anti-tank missiles on board makes it very difficult to cross open plains, so we learned, basically, stay amongst the trees. In amongst the trees you're fairly safe. Out in the open you're screwed, they'll just nail you. Nowadays you don't even see the helicopters. They're off in the distance, especially with, like, the Apache. They're firing off at seven kilometres away.

28:00 You've got no hope of seeing it. So that was always good practice and of course they're sort of very 'sneaky pete' and they're small and they'd zip around the flanks and they'd pop up behind you in the flanks and so it's good experience to learn how to do those things.

So how hard was it for you to get that transfer?

Wasn't so much hard as prolonged. They just didn't want to let me go. They were going to have to let me go regardless because a guy's putting in for it, we've got to let him go, but they sort of dragged it out as long as

28:30 they could. They stalled my promotions, but that didn't bother me. Like, I still enjoyed my work and I was still going field, and fun with the guys in barracks. So eventually they said, "Yeah, we've got to let you go."

Did you say there were two blokes, you and another bloke that went across?

When we went and did the initial course, the ground crewman course, it was a multitude of corps. In fact

29:00 one of my old section commanders was on the course and there was another couple of armour guys from different armour units, infantry, ordinance, things like that. So the whole course was just a corps transfer course basically. The whole course was made up of guys who weren't aviation.

And when you originally signed on for the army how long did you sign on for?

In those days they had a process of three or six years. It was later when

29:30 they brought in the open end engagement where you'd do a minimum of four years and then you could put in your discharge and be out in six months. But when I first joined on it was three or six years.

By that stage you'd re-signed on for another?

I'd signed on for six, and I think they brought the open end engagement in pretty soon after that, but I never contemplated discharging so I was quite happy to stay.

So you were ready for a career in the army?

Oh yeah. I knew from day one I wanted to stay in. I wanted to do my 20 [years], so I was quite happy and I was enjoying it, especially when I got to my unit.

30:00 I thought, "This is where I want to go." and when the Blackhawks kicked in, "Wow, this is definitely where I want to go."

So what was that course like when you first transferred across?

Ground crewman course, pretty easy. Just learning the basics of aviation, refuelling, communications, but I'd already done all the communication work in armour so using radios was a walk in the park. Navigation, I'd spent four years as a crew commander so navigating a Land Rover, that's a piece of cake.

30:30 In fact I was criticised about my navigation because it wasn't accurate enough. I said, "Well, it's not me, it's the maps." and I pointed it out and they went, "Oh, you're right, OK." So the course wasn't that hard. In fact, at the end of the course they, we as students basically severely bagged and critiqued the instructors because they were just really woeful. Yeah, it just wasn't a very well run course. I mean, you learn a lot, you learn about the basics of aviation.

31:00 But you're only learning sort of ground crew work, that sort of thing.

How old was army aviation at that stage?

Been around for a long time. The aircraft that they had were Vietnam vintage, the Pilatus Porters, the Kiowas had all been to Vietnam in the reconnaissance squadrons. I think it's been around for

31:30 40-odd years, I think. I'd be guessing, but I'm not too sure, about 40-odd years plus, easy. Because they're using the Sioux helicopters, you know, the ones with the big, the Skippy choppers? They've been using them for a while too, but they've been well and truly phased out. They actually had a working one which occasionally did a flight here and a flight there, but it was more so just historical factor more than anything else.

So where was that first course?

32:00 It was done up at Oakey, outside Toowoomba and at the Oakey Aviation Centre, which is so dull and boring. Oakey is a quiet town. In fact they got very excited when they got their first ATM [automatic teller machine]. It was in the Oakey Champion paper. But the guys on the course were good and it was just a quiet base basically.

And how long was that course?

Six weeks, I think, something

32:30 like that.

And then it's off to Canberra?

Yeah, I went down to Canberra. Down there they had no idea what to do with ground crewmen. No idea what an aircraft handler was, because it's the Australian Defence Force Helicopter School where they train pilots how to fly the Squirrel helicopters and they do the basic loadmaster course down there as well. Well, myself and a chap by the name of Gary Tranter got down there. They just said, "What do we do with you guys?" So they put us in the Q [quartermaster's] store, which was a big mistake 'cause freedom of all the equipment, so we kitted

33:00 ourselves up and everything. We were happy and good to go. Actually they put us, we sort of said, "This is what we do, these are the things we do." They said, "OK." So we established the flight operations within the helicopter school building itself, and at the time it was manned by the pilots and the loadmasters and they were glad to relinquish it because we said, "This is the work we do. You guys aren't supposed to be doing this. This is what we do." And they said, they were glad to get rid of it because they wanted to do the courses and wanted to go flying. They didn't want to sit at a desk

33:30 and answer the phones, radios and maintain flight ops, and it was good because we got to work in close with the pilots. Acted as the personal aide to the officer commanding of the helicopter school, and got to work with the operations officer and learn how flights are done, so it was a different aspect of aviation. It was good. A lot of good trips. In fact probably the best trip I did was, there was a pilot by the name of Captain Dudgeon who was quite a character, and

34:00 we sort of got established within the helicopter school and he said, “Look, we’re flying to Sydney for the weekend. We’re flying a general up to Victoria Barracks.” and I always wanted to fly into Victoria Barracks. I’d seen helicopters land there when I was on guard duty. “Man, I’ve got to do that one day.” and he said, “Do you want to come up?” “OK, great.” So the general rocked up and we put him in the helicopter and I acted as sort of like his crewman to look after him, and we flew up there and we landed and we kicked him out. Then we went off to RAAF

34:30 Base Richmond, refuelled. The other pilot jumped out because he was meeting friends there and then we flew back, and on the way, on the flight back, he let me fly the helicopter for my first time, and it’s really pretty easy. He controlled the pedals and I used the cycling collective, and flew over the Sydney Harbour Bridge at night and that was great. We landed, shut down and went off and caught up with friends for the weekend and then Monday morning when we came back he said, I said, “Where’s the general, aren’t we taking him back?” He says, “No, no, no.” Said, “We’ve got to fly back for afternoon.”

35:00 Says, “Yeah, but it’s a weekend of partying in Sydney, come on.” So that was pretty cool. We flew back and [UNCLEAR] drive back, so it was great.

You must’ve been virtually pinching yourself were you, when you were flying over Sydney like that?

I thought, “Can it get any better than this?” And it did, because I’m back to Sydney to train with the SAS [Special Air Service] and we flew over in Blackhawks and that’s even better. But yeah, I thought, like, and also the sun was just going down and the traffic was just putting on their lights and it’s like,

35:30 “And people pay for this?” Especially when they do those walks up and down the Sydney Harbour Bridge on top. I hear it’s really expensive, and I’m being paid to fly over the Bridge. So that was good, good value.

So how long did your time, how did your time run out down at Canberra?

I spent about eight months there and was posted to 173 Surveillance Squadron and that was good fun too because we got to use the Nomads and Pilatus Porters fixed-wing aircraft. The Pilatus Porters are a lot of fun. It’s

36:00 a short take off/landing aircraft or a STOL [short takeoff or landing abilities] aircraft, and basically the length of a cricket pitch and you can take off. Manoeuvrable, a lot of fun. We used to do a lot of negative G work where you could fly along and the pilot would do a bump so you’d come up to a point and just throw the stick forward and everything at the back would just have no gravity and you’d have head sets and things floating around and it was just a lot of fun, and the pilots would fly 50 amongst the trees and we’d have a lot of fun. So it was good stuff.

Even at that stage was there a large

36:30 **percentage of RAAF, ex-RAAF blokes in army aviation?**

With 5 Aviation Regiment, the Blackhawks, yes. With everyone else, no, because the RAAF initially had the Blackhawks and they were doing the transition to the army, they were everywhere, but in the other aviation units in the reconnaissance squadrons, 161, 162 and with my squadron, 173 Surveillance, and even with 171 Support Squadron which was the

37:00 Iroquois, they just weren’t there at all, but with 5 Aviation, yeah, they were fairly heavily involved.

So what sort of proportion of field work and barracks work are you doing in 173?

The good thing with aviation is we fly everywhere. We only used to go to field for, like, one or two weeks. Not like armour, was like a month, six weeks, so one or two weeks in the field, it wasn’t that hard to do and we were always, like,

37:30 established at an airfield. It was a bush airfield, but we were always established there and we basically would just go from airfield to airfield around, so it wasn’t really that hard.

Where’s 173 based?

It’s based in Oakey. Within Oakey you’ve got the School of Aviation, you’ve got 173 and you’ve got 171.

So from Canberra back to Oakey, what did you think about that?

It was good, different aspect of aviation. Had a good group of guys. Some of them questioned

38:00 their sexual motives, but some guys are just really big on porn and stuff like that, but yeah, a good bunch of guys. Funny, always had the troop clown or whatever. We were always cracking a joke and the guys in general were good, the troop sergeants and the pilots were good hands. In fact we had to go down to, down south where that Nomad crashed into the side of a hill and we had to basically start at one end

38:30 of the airfield within the practising and do a walk through to try and find bits and pieces of the aircraft to see what happened and it just didn’t dawn on me when I got to the crash site, three people have lost

their lives here, and you look at it and go, “Wow, this is a lot of damage around here.” So that was interesting, but it just doesn’t dawn on you when you do it what’s actually happened, even though you can see where it’s crashed through the trees and things like that. In fact we actually had

39:00 a crash in one of our Porters. A pilot by the name of Monaghan was doing parachute work, and I can’t recall what happened, but he crashed at a fairly low altitude. Everyone was OK, but just basically he got busted up and broken nose and a few other broken ribs and bits and pieces, but yeah, sort of crashes like that sort of, it sort of rocks the squadron a bit because one

39:30 of the officers, you know, who is a mate so to speak, has been in an accident. It’s just not a good thing. It’s not like a car crash.

Obviously we’ve spoken to a lot of airforce blokes from World War II and that whole sort of aircrew-ground crew relationship, what was that like?

There’s a bit of rivalry there. Sometimes not in a good way. The esprit

40:00 de corps in aviation is nothing compared to what’s in armour. Having been a ground crewman the pilots treated us really well, and we were happy to look after them as best as we can, but when I went to 5 Aviation Regiment, we got on well with the ground crew but I felt they were a bit lazy. They could’ve been doing a lot more of the work they should’ve really been doing and they somehow tended to rely upon us

40:30 to do their work. We were aircrew, we’re doing our jobs. “You’re ground crew, you’re supposed to do your job.” but because we come from a ground crew background they thought, “You can do this, you can do that.” “Go, no, no, no, that’s your job, this is our job, that’s what you do.” So I thought they could’ve been a little bit more professional in some of their work.

Righto, we’ll stop and change tape.

Tape 4

00:32 **OK, the lamington story?**

The lamington story. I’d done all my aircrew courses and that and I was now officially a loadmaster with 5 Squadron Aviation and I think, just within the army you’ve got your sections and your troops and platoons and stuff and where all sort of, we’ve all got our jokers and clowns and got a good sense of humour and that and sort of bonds the guys, and one of the guys, Gerry Scott, came into work one day with two ice cream dishes full of lamingtons

01:00 and I thought that was nice of him ’cause aircrew, we like our chocolates and we like being big fat bastards and lazy. So he put them on the table and he said, “Guys, made you some lamingtons, help yourself out.” This is great, lamingtons, you know, so we’ve all grabbed a lamington each and I went and sat at my computer terminal and put it down. Subconsciously I’m going, “Gee this lamington’s light, oh, whatever, I’ll eat it in a minute.” and I suddenly turned around and all the guys are choking and spluttering because the lamingtons are made of foam. I thought, “Thank God I didn’t eat it.” But that wasn’t the best part, was when

01:30 one of the other guys came in and he was renowned for being a pig, just eating all the time, and he was lined up well and truly and Rod Knox said, “Hey Gerry, these lamingtons for anybody?” Gerry goes, “Yeah mate.” and this guy’s just gone, “Rah rah.” like a seagull to a chip, and just swooped in and grabbed a bit of lamington and he’s taken a bite, a bit tough, so he’s taken another bite and a third bite. He’s suddenly realised these are made of foam and we’re just all there pissing ourselves laughing and he goes, “I didn’t want to say

02:00 anything because I didn’t want to insult your cooking.” And we’re going, “Yeah, sure.” So you never trust a loadmaster and his lamingtons, I always say.

So what sort of things were the Pilatus Porters doing?

Reconnaissance work. Reconnaissance work, especially with doing a bit of work

02:30 with the Engineers. They go off and survey places for bridges or airfields. In fact, there’s a good story where one of the guys, one of the pilots, took up an engineer major, going to check off an airfield where they were building this new airfield and when he flew over he was checking his map and talking to the pilot and they were checking the maps and realising that his engineer squadron is building it in the wrong space. They were actually on the wrong side of this creek on the wrong side of the strip, and they were just totally away from where they should

03:00 be building. So they flew down low, and trying to get their attention saying, “No, no, you’re building up in the wrong spot. Move it over there.” and they had to move it, like, 500 metres because where they were building it was just not going to work, and after the third or fourth time of buzzing the guys, the guys on the ground got the shits, so they started mooning the aircraft as it came past. So eventually, [?

UNCLEAR] “You clowns, you’re building it in the wrong spot.” So they were trying to do the right thing and the guys on the ground just got jack of this, sort of getting buzzed and said, “Here, cop this.” and everyone was just dropping their trousers. So we heard about that one later and thought, “Yeah, that’s

03:30 good corps rivalry.”

And what other things like when you’re out in the field, those weeks that you’d spend out in the field, what sort of things would you have to do?

It wasn’t always work. But basically, once we got an established airfield a lot of it was basically redeploying from airfield to airfield around Shoulder Bay and Shoulder Bay had four airfields or so. So basically just deploying from airfield to airfield, setting up your perimeters, setting up your communications,

04:00 establishing, like, the kitchen, establish communications, establish your corps and stuff like that, establishing toilets, and then you can just practice ops, aircraft landing, day and night work, maintaining the aircraft, and then when things got a bit quiet we’d go off and go for a bit of a joyride and go along with the pilots and do a bit of night flying. And then of course there was Aviator’s Beach, and the reason they called it that was the only way to get there was by helicopter or Pilatus Porter, ’cause Pilatus Porter could land on the beach, no dramas,

04:30 and you could only fly there by helicopter too, and the good thing is you’d go swimming in the surf and have a really nice day, but there was a fresh water waterfall so you could sort of wash yourself afterwards and relax a bit. We saw a few armoured guys try to get there and it just wasn’t going to happen. They actually got severely bogged and had to get pulled out and they were nowhere near Aviator’s Beach and to the best of this day no one’s ever got there but by helicopter or Pilatus Porter. Go off and do familiar work with other

05:00 units. Go off and take guys rides in the Kiowas or the Pilatus Porters, take them for a bit of a joyride. Familiarisation rides is the code word for joyrides. So just reconnaissance work and practising flying from airfield to airfield, that sort of thing. It was fairly sedate compared to armour.

And for people that don’t know can you just explain the Kiowa?

The Kiowa is a light observation helicopter. It’s basically what

05:30 Channel 7 uses. It’s basically the smaller version of the Bell Jet Ranger. Usually a crew of two, you’ve got your pilot and an observer. The observer is a co-pilot but he’s usually a corporal or a sergeant. You can fit three people in the back. You can use it for medevacs but you can only usually carry one person, or you can carry one litter patient and one medic. They don’t have any weapons, although they can be armed. In fact, the

06:00 American Army have what they call their Kiowa, the Warrior, as it’s basically the eyes and ears for the Apache attack helicopters, and usually on the Warriors they’ve got the big baseball which is like an observation ball which sits on top of the rotor and that’s got all the thermal imagery infrared night vision equipment so they can spot targets at distances, and sometimes on the Warriors they’ll carry a couple of Hellfire missiles or a small automatic weapon. On our Kiowas they don’t carry

06:30 any weapons whatsoever. In fact there’s a video made by Bell called Kiowa, and it’s basically a piss-take of the Kiowa, talking about the weapon system which is a bag of rocks and the long range fuel tank, which is a couple of oil drums strapped to the side, and the very futuristic targeting system which is a coat hanger wrapped around the pilot’s helmet coming to a little circle in front. Yeah, and it actually, they actually do two videos,

07:00 one’s for the Apache and it shows this Apache warrior bristling with muscles and he’s running through the scrub with his bow and arrow and his spear and he’s jumping logs and parting trees and then they show the Apache doing the same sort of thing. But the Kiowa shows this fat, lazy Indian sort of running, tripping over logs and hitting himself in the face with brushes, and then they show the sort of Kiowa sort of moseying along and trying to catch up. It’s actually good, they make fun of it, it’s a good joke. Yeah, when they talked about the weapon

07:30 system there’s the observer, like, throwing rocks to the ground and that was quite funny. So it’s good they sort of make those videos. Makes a bit of a joke of the situation.

And what other aircraft did you have dealings with in 173?

173 was just Pilatus Porters and Nomads. The school operated the Kiowas. 161 and 162 operated the Kiowas wholly and solely. 171 used the Iroquois helicopters. But yeah, the Kiowas were used for observation

08:00 and they do a really good job of reconnaissance observation. They do a really, really good job. The guys are very professional, very sneaky pete, and they also do a bit of ferrying around for, like, bigwigs and generals, and we get to do a bit famil work as well. Usually when we’d go to Puckapunyal to do exercises with the cadets from [Royal Military College] Duntroon we’d have a couple of Kiowas with us and when we’d have quiet time we’d go for a joyride and zip around the countryside. But

08:30 that was pretty much what the Kiowas did, and now they’re being replaced by the Tiger, the Eurotiger.

And how often, being ground crew, how often would you actually get up in an aircraft?

Plenty of opportunities. Because we work closer with the aircraft and we fit the aircraft out with the seating and do the refuelling and organise the rations for the pilots, if the opportunity was there we'd be able to go for a flight pretty much a couple of times a week if we wanted to. But I think sometimes, because we went away a fair bit, sometimes you

09:00 just didn't really want to do it anyway. But I did trips to Brisbane, trips to Rocky [Rockhampton], that sort of thing. Even up in Darwin did a few trips around there at night and did a bit of day work, but we were quite happy to relax and run the ops and that. The opportunity was there, which was plenty of.

And living up at Oakey, how often would you get home?

On the weekends, just catch a bus. I didn't have a car at the time. I was between cars and yeah, there was a bus that'd leave at five

09:30 o'clock in the afternoon. I'd be in Brisbane in an hour and a half and catch up with family and friends and catch the Sunday afternoon bus back, or usually your mates would, there was a big exodus Friday afternoon so there was always guys heading down to Brisbane so you could grab a lift. I mean, Oakey was a nice little town, it had nice little shops and stuff, but it was all very nine to five. After that I think one or two pubs were open and that was it. So there wasn't much happening. They started to throw a bit of money into the base and improve the gym and put a pool in and a few other things.

10:00 But I'd be going to the gym every night when I was based there, but time seemed to fly past before I went to Cambodia, so from what I can tell now the base is quite large because it's got the Singaporeans there with their Super Pumas.

Was it a live-in situation there?

Yeah, pretty much all bases have a live-in situation across Australia through the Defence Force. I think there's only two RAAF bases that didn't have live-in accommodation, but they were different styles of bases.

10:30 But they've got accommodation there and you've got a room to yourself, you've got heating, you've got a fan, you've got cupboards, large toilets and showers, pretty good mess, and that's pretty much about it.

Had you made a plan for your career in aviation, like where you were going to go and how far and what area?

When they brought the Blackhawks in that's where I knew I wanted to go, and basically the,

11:00 going to 173 was just a step, a stepping stone towards aviation 'cause once I came back from Cambodia my squadron sergeant major was very supportive. In fact, he was brand new and he and I really clicked and he was more than happy to look after me and say, "Well we'll give you your courses and give you the education you need and send you on your way." He was great.

So when did Cambodia first hit the desk for you?

I was on exercise in

11:30 Darwin in early '92 and I got a phone call from my squadron commander and he said, "Have you got a girlfriend?" He said, "Are you married at all?" I said, "No Sir." "Have you got a girlfriend?" "Oh yeah." "Would that relationship stop you from going to Cam?" He didn't even get Cambodia out. I said, "Yeah, I'll go." Didn't even think about it, which is a bit sorry for the girl at the time, but operational service you don't turn down, and I said, "This is great. I want to go, can't go fast enough."

12:00 And then we went back to, the exercise finished. In fact, that was an interesting exercise because we almost didn't get home. Being up in Darwin, being in the tropics, there was a cyclone coming in and we had all our vehicles and everything and equipment scattered everywhere and they said three o'clock in the morning or something, three o'clock in the morning said, "Pack your bags, you've got to go now." and we were all really tired 'cause we'd worked all day and into the night and we'd only had,

12:30 like, two or three hours sleep. And so the whole squadron packed up and we started driving out of Darwin and I remember being in the lead vehicle with my troop sergeant and we were singing songs and howling and trying to get the windows down and get the fresh air and trying to stay awake. It was like, and unfortunately we'd a few beers that night as well, and fortunately I don't drink so it wasn't a big deal, but I think if we had've got pulled over a few guys would've gone DUI [driving under the influence of alcohol], but the squadron commander said go and we didn't want to get wiped out by a cyclone. So once we got back from that exercise, which was eventful,

13:00 yeah, we started going through all the procedure, doing our paperwork, getting our official passports and inoculations and things like that and then eventually we were actually posted to the UN. We went down to Brisbane, did our training down there. We met up with the other guys who'd be going.

What sort of training?

We had to do weapons training. A lot of guys weren't qualified on the Steyr. The Steyr had come into vogue, and this is the third time I had to qualify on the Steyr because I

13:30 was actually on the trials team in 1984 when it was first brought in. They brought in the Steyr, the M1602 and the Minimi and I was qualified, fully qualified, but I had to qualify again because they kept on changing the ground rules. So I had to qualify again, and that was easy 'cause I knew what I was doing. Did some navigation work, first aid. We did some mine clearing work, not so much that we were going there to do that, but just to expose us to it. Language,

14:00 etiquette, protocol, that sort of thing. Get used to a lot of first aid stuff like what we were going to expect. In fact we had a medic giving a lecture and he started to freak a couple of the navy guys out about the diseases and the bugs and spiders and stuff over there. He goes, "I didn't join the navy to do this." I said, "Mate, you're in the Defence Force, just deal with it." you know. He was just totally freaking out and they didn't send him anyway, which is a good thing. I'm just trying to think what else. The language lessons were really good, because they actually brought a couple of Cambodians

14:30 in to sort of give us one on one lessons.

What sort of basic phrases would they be teaching you?

Just hello, goodbye, thank you, my name is, just sort of keeping it really basic, and they started getting onto some phrases and stuff but you just, nuh, it wasn't until I went over there and got exposed to it that I started to really pick it up, which makes a huge difference. When you're sort of, especially doing hearts and minds work, you've got to speak the lingo, otherwise you're just lost. You're wasting your time.

15:00 But other than that, the training, we did some PT, did a lot of PT, a lot of sort of bonding with the guys that we were working with. I think the biggest pain in the arse was the equipment we were taking. They said, "OK, you can take two ash bags and a trunk. OK, you can take one ash bag and a trunk. OK, you can take two ash bags and no trunk." and then they started giving us weight limits, and we're going, "Come on, we're going away for a year,

15:30 give us a break." and I thought, "Well, I've got to take my gear." A lot of my personal gear is all customised because I found the military equipment was pretty crappy, and I figured, "I'm going away for a year, I don't know where I'm going, I want to have the best gear." So I had it all customised and packed it all up and it was all, basically my bags were full of military gear. I think I had a change of civvies [civilian clothing] and that was it. So it was all military equipment in my ash bags and they were bursting. Some guys had, took the two ash bags, but like

16:00 half their ash bag was half empty. I'm going, "How can you do that?" So I think some guys were just going to get reissued with new equipment over there, but I wanted my own.

Where would you get your gear personalised?

At Enoggera Barracks is a place called the quartermaster's store. That's when they really started to bring into vogue about personalised equipment and you've got all the chest webbing and the thigh rigs, the pistols and knives. The webbing I used, actually the magazines were on the outside and like

16:30 a little pocket would sit with a velcro cover and then you've got the interior of the basic pouch for whatever you want. I used like a, basically a waste belt with a pad, so you had the normal belt with a quick release buckle and an adjustable clip, and then I had, like, padding as well to make it more comfortable, and then I had customised shoulder straps 'cause I knew that I was going to be away for a while so I wanted the gear to fit well and truly, and I had some spare stuff as well.

17:00 I had the water bottle pouches customised so the water bottle would go in with the cups canteen, and on the outside you'd have another pouch with two shell dressings and you could put some more equipment inside it. So that way I was well and truly set and then it all sat flush across my body, so the basic pouches weren't sitting in front of me, they were actually sitting to the side and I found I could carry more equipment in my basic webbing than anybody else. In fact, I carried double what you carried in the issued gear. And it paid off, it was

17:30 well worth the gear when I got over there.

And what had they told you about sort of the job you would have, the charter that the Australian forces would have there?

We were told we were just doing communications work over there. When we got over there and we started getting lessons, then we sort of, "OK, this is what we're really gonna be doing." and they said basically, "You'll be going off to a village wherever, setting up with you and your communications team and just basically helping the elections for the country and you're working with the UN staff."

18:00 They had UN civilians and they had UN police, and then they had us come in as well. We had infantry over there but they were Uruguayan infantry. I think we had some Cameroon infantry who were a joke. We had Pakistani police, very worrisome people, Indian police, even worse, had Sri Lankan doctors who really needed to take a shower.

18:30 We had the French Foreign Legion there, they were great. They were very professional, they used to

cruise around there in the Land Rovers. They had a sniper, a machine gunner and two riflemen. So they made a good little fire team, so they were good to have around, and we had a few other countries over there as well. But basically once we got there, we were basically two or three or weeks in Phnom Penh, got acclimatised, went through the Ho Chi Minh two step phase where you got the shits and trots and you were sick as a dog for 48 hours. Everyone

19:00 went through it, and then you got your equipment and you were deployed by a Russian helicopter. But the weather was a deciding factor over there. It took us four times to deploy. Three times out of Phnom Penh we had to turn around and go back, and then the fourth time we actually got to our seat to command and then it took another two times to get to the village, so yeah, the weather was just horrific. Surprisingly like, if you do a comparison of the equipment that I would wear when I went to transfer to Blackhawks to what the Russian helicopter guys wear,

19:30 it's vastly different. Like, we'd have boots and flight suits and gloves and vests and helmets and all sorts. They wore thongs, stubbies and singlet and a bottle of vodka, but they did a really good job. They flew very well, they were safe, good guys to talk to and yeah, they were a blast. They were good fun.

Before you left did you have embarkation leave or anything like that?

We had a few days off. Yeah, 10 days off, I think, something like that.

20:00 Probably a week, I don't know, can't remember, but it was about a week or so. I just stayed in Brisbane and just caught up with family and friends and just basically partied on and caught up with more friends and hit as many restaurants as I could and eat as much good food, because I wasn't too sure what I was going to have over there. Yeah, that was it, just caught up with family and friends and eventually we left, and it was good because we flew over by 747 and it was just all civvy air. Landed at Bangkok, and then it was like,

20:30 yeah, Bangkok was interesting because we landed there, what was it, something like eight o'clock at night and we were pretty tired and we spent an hour at Bangkok Airport and they said, "Look, it's a three-hour drive to the hotel, we've got to be back at the airport at three o'clock for the flight out." We're going, "Can't we just stay at the airport?" But due to security and stuff over there they said, "No, you can't sleep here." We were all happy to grab our bags and go sleep in a corner somewhere, but we had the three-hour drive to the airport,

21:00 to the hotel, sorry. We got there, we were all really really tired as it was and some guys decided they go off and hit the clubs and pubs and just stay awake the whole time. I got three hours' sleep, which I think actually did more bad than good, and then we woke up, had a really interesting breakfast. I mean, Thai food, Thai food's great. Thai fruit really sucks. I had a mate who tried the watermelon after I told him not to and he spat it out and said, "Ooh, that's pretty bad." Their oranges are funny, and

21:30 some other weird fruit, and then we hopped on a Thai plane and flew into Cambodia, where we were served breakfast with the smallest croissant in the world. I didn't realise they could make them that small. It was just minute. I took a photo of it. It was just amazing, and then we landed. We were picked up by trucks and taken into Ptheh Australie or Australia House which was the established base there.

What was your first impression of Cambodia?

22:00 Very hot, and the people are very friendly. They're all waving to us and everything and we're saying "Hello" in Cambodian to them. They were obviously, I think they knew we were there to try and bring a bit of good to the country and bring a few things there to make things easier. When we got there we were issued more equipment. We had, like, these big, was the big 20 by 20 tents and we got our magazines and ammunition and

22:30 Kevlar helmets and Kevlar body armour and additional stuff we needed. It was just a great time in my life. I was taking photos of everything. Like I had, like I just got all my gear, piled it onto my stretcher and all the new equipment and other shit and had to take a photo of that, and it was like new backpacks and rifles and kitchen sinks and Swiss Army knives and that night everyone was just exhausted. We just all crashed out, like I think it was by six o'clock we were just unconscious, and the next day

23:00 we sort of got up and it started. We started getting lectures on first aid, on how to look after ourselves medically, the tablets Chloroquine and quinine, how to take that. Try and drink tonic water because it's got quinine in it so that's a good thing. We were also given lectures, where we were actually staying was like a theatre. We were actually staying around the outside, but they used this theatre as, like, a lecture hall, and it was good because we were told the price of a cab from the

23:30 base to the city. We were told the price of jeans, we were told the price of Lacoste shirts because the locals knew we were there, knew we were cashed up. They were going to try and take us for a ride. They said, "No, no, no, this is the price." and always haggle, haggling's fun, and they told us the rules of the streets and stuff. Stay away from the prostitutes unless you want something falling off in public when you get home. Yeah, it was almost like these are the rules of David Jones, but it was good, very, very good, well prepared,

24:00 and we got to go out and sample the local food and they were quickly adapting to Western-style food because a couple of the places opened up, and they made a really good damn hamburger with chips. In fact it was a cheeseburger with chips, so we'd have a coke and a cheeseburger with chips. In fact, every

time we came back in from our villages we'd always go to this particular restaurant and it was really nice, and the shopping was really good. I got some nice jewellery from over there, some nice gold, and you pay like

24:30 $50 or $60 here and you come back and have it valued at $200 or $300, and they had some funky clothes over there, and they conned on that we like our music, so, not so much the, DVDs [digital versatile disc] weren't out then, but videos were just galore. In fact DVDs were in I think, or was it CDs? [UNCLEAR] when I came back to the markets. There was the Russian markets and the central markets and the Russian markets were smaller but they had better stuff.

25:00 They had the G-shock watches and the Lacoste shirts and the jackets and you always go there and see what's going on, a bit of a haggle, the Rayban sunglasses and all that sort of thing.

And real stuff or knock off stuff?

Both. With a friend of mine, wanted a pair of Rayban sunglasses, the Aviators, and if you look at Raybans you look at the little BL, Bosch and Lomb on the lenses itself, and she bought them and said, "Yeah, these are the ones I want." Said, "Yeah, they're real." and she gave them back to pay for them and the lady did the switch and gave her the dummies. Said, "No, no, no, no, no, give us the real ones,

25:30 the real ones. What are you trying to do?" So they're cheeky buggers and sometimes you'd haggle and they'd hold your money in their hand. They wouldn't give it back to you. "No, no, you pay this." "Give me the fucking money, bitch." But it was a game, you know. It was a game to them. They just really enjoyed it. So jeans were like $7, Lacoste shirts were $5, and they had a thing where you'd go to the markets and they'd have these cages of birds, little small birds and they were alive, and beside them they had the bird's

26:00 barbecue and what you do is pay $1 to release a bird. So it was like this guilt trip and you walk past and you go, "What's all this?" "Well, if you don't buy a bird this is what happens to them." "Oh, here you go." So I couldn't believe it. But yeah, they were great, a good sort of thing, and they got better and better and better as we came in because they realised this is what Westerners like so this is what we'll get. The restaurants started to pick up and I think they hit the big time when they introduced Magnums into Phnom Penh, the Magnum ice cream. When that came in I went, "Whoo." because everyone loved a Magnum.

26:30 So yeah, it was good; the place was getting really established.

What about the serious side of why you were there?

It was pretty quiet at first. It wasn't until we were actually deployed to the villages that you sort of, OK, we're on the playing field now. Let's sort of, you know, let's start being serious, but I found I spoke the language well. I picked it up pretty fast, and I picked up French and Spanish and Russian as well, because we had French Foreign Legion, we had Spanish

27:00 troops, or Uruguayan troops that speak Spanish, and we had the Russian helicopter crews who spoke Russian. So my Cambodian got pretty good and I found that myself and my team, we developed a good hearts and minds relationship with the locals. In fact they would actually come to us for medical help more than the doctor. We had a Sri Lankan doctor and they would come and see us. We stayed within the village. Occasionally we'd patrol out a little bit but just to see, we didn't sort of

27:30 really delve out too far and if we did it was in a vehicle. But once we got our communications established, we learnt that they deal with things differently over there. Like, over there a marriage tiff sometimes ends by the husband shooting the wife. That happened a couple of times, and it's like, well, this is what they do, stay out of it. We had a drunken soldier threaten our provincial boss. He was

28:00 Eduardo Zenna, he was a Spanish chap who ran the UN side of things, and there was a drunken soldier outside his house with an AK47. We went down with two Austrian police officers who were GSG9 [Grenzschutzgruppe, Border Protection Group] which is the anti-terrorist team. They were just on posting to the UN, and we went down. I went down with myself and another, one of the guys in my team and the Austrian guys talked him out of it, but the whole time we had him covered with our rifles just in case he did something stupid.

28:30 There was a few killings in the village, a couple of old marriage spats and the husbands would kill the wives, but it's just the way they did it over there. I don't think it would go well in this society, but a lot of medical work. A little boy was brought to me and I didn't realise fever could affect someone that bad. His toes were hot. He was five or six and he was just screaming fever and I spoke to his

29:00 grandma who was looking after him and I said, "What are you feeding him? What are the medications?" And she was just overdosing on medication and feeding him too much fat and grease, and the body just wasn't getting a chance to clear out. So I said, "OK, change his medication. Give him this, this, this and this." and I said, "Next week feed him this, this, this and this." and four days later he was playing with his mates, and he's actually, like, from what I could tell when I spoke to one of the doctors he said he was getting malaria but because I changed everything and just used common sense in his medication

29:30 and his diet it staved off him, and that really got me big brownie points amongst the locals. On the good side of things we got invited to weddings. The Cambodians really know how to wedding. They really,

they just, it's like a 48-hour thing, drinking and eating and dancing and them some more drinking and eating and a bit more dancing and drink and eat and if you're still standing you'll do some more dancing and things like that. We got invited to some lunches or dinners and the idea is to make you eat as much

30:00 as humanly possible. You never look away from your plate because if you do the plate's taken away and replaced with more food. You've got to watch out for that one. They served up goat which is beautiful, it's like a roast. The food over there is fabulous. It's really, really nice. We got a lot of traditional food.

Did they warn you at any stage before that not to eat local food?

They said be careful how you eat it, but really

30:30 you had no choice. We had rations with us but we had to mix it in with the local food and you had the Ho Chi Minh two step, so what can you do. There was a restaurant there that was run by one of the grandmas and she was a fabulous lady and she would cook this vegetable satay meal to die for. I mean, it was just so good, and then she would do this pork. I don't know how she did it but it was just so yummy, in a restaurant,

31:00 loosely termed, with dirt floors, wooden benches and rats would run along the rafters but we didn't really care. And they always used to watch kung fu movies, these martial art, all put the volume up way too loud and you're sitting there, "Come on guys, give us a break." and that's how the kids learned, and they did it pretty well actually. They'd watch TV and that's how they learnt. But the food was good and you didn't mind the rats, and they made enough money out of us to actually build a decent restaurant and it had lights, and the fairy lights

31:30 and was all lit up and was like, "Wow, this is pretty cool." and they made the same food and the kitchen was slightly more hygienic and stuff. But yeah, and you'd sort of come in and you'd sit at a table and they'd have, like, a jar of chocolate-coated nuts and that was sort of a freebie to entice you in and we'd go up there all the time anyway, so being the only restaurant in the village. But it was great. We had a really good bonding with them.

Did the Australians do anything different to the other people that set them apart

32:00 **from the other UN troops?**

Yeah, we used our brains. When we go to a country we don't try and take over. We like to establish ourselves with the locals. We establish a connection with the chieftains. We learn the language. We do hearts and minds and we do it very well. We don't try and take over. The Americans have got a bad habit of doing that. We got a compliment the other day from, I think it's General Peter [Michael] Rose who was in charge of the Bosnian peacekeepers, he said, "The Australians

32:30 are up there with the British in the peacekeepers." So as far as I'm concerned from my experience the best peacekeepers in the world are us and the Brits. And we get a bond with them, like we play soccer with the local kids and we do medical work and we play cricket and we teach them things and we play games and speaking the language is a big thing. Once you learn the language you're halfway there. You've got everything sorted out. We would meet with the chief of the village and get to know him and bond

33:00 with him and I used to sort of bribe him with some ration packs and say, "We're here to do good." and especially when I helped the little boy out with the grandma, that was big brownie points. I'd go to the markets on a daily basis and say "Hi!" to everybody, go around and sort of, "Hi, how are you going? What's happening?" I established a relationship with a couple of the traders there. One guy would go across the Vietnam border for us because we were only 30 kilometres from the Vietnam border. He'd go off and get us chocolates and stuff that we'd like.

33:30 He got me a Vietnamese flag, a Vietnamese helmet, and also he was under the impression that we were better people than he was. He'd say, "You are so much better person than I am, you are smarter, more intelligent." I said, "No we're not." I said, "You speak English, you speak Cambodian, you've got a business running here." They were impressed that we showed respect, that we weren't sort of belittling them and taking advantage of them, treating them like monkeys because they were nice people. In genuine, they're hypochondriacs, they love the drugs.

34:00 They love to sort of get the medication and, "I'm sick, I'm sick." Give them a Panadol, but in general, yeah, they're nice people. They look after us and treat us well 'cause we sort of did the same thing back.

Did you have any maids or anything like that working for you?

We had a maid, yeah. She was fabulous. She poisoned us. We had to get used to the local food and we had to actually teach her not to use so much cooking oil and the foods we sort of liked, and they put sugar on avocado of all things.

34:30 It's very weird, and on their chips as well. I don't get that one. No, they like sour cream on their chips and mayonnaise. It's vile. But she was great, her name was Oon but we called her Baldrick from Blackadder [British television series], and we actually told her that Baldrick was a sign of respect but she didn't know. But we looked after her very well. We paid her in American dollars. We were actually given an allowance to have maids. It was a good hearts and minds thing to bond with the local community and to boost up

35:00 the village economy so to speak, and she would cook and clean for us and wash our clothes, which was good because basically we wanted to be able to do our jobs and not, wanted to alleviate a few of the menial tasks. But it was good, and once she sort of cottoned on how we want things, how to cook and that, was great, and she wasn't backward in coming forward in playing tricks on us, 'cause one of

35:30 my guys, Drew Pickett, he was just a character. He burnt her with a spoon; you know the old spoon out of the coffee cup, sssss. "I'll fix this." so she got one out of the boiling pot and got him and we're like, "Oh my God, this is like, when are the knives going to come out?" Yeah, then it was the pinching, the pinching competition, the punching competition. She wasn't sort of holding back there, but she was great, she was good value, and because we were actually living in this house, hut sort of thing we were

36:00 amongst the locals, so we got to know them and they were our neighbours and we'd go and say "Hello" and they loved having their photo taken. So yeah, so you really got in amongst the community and that's where your language really built up, because you're amongst them all the time, so you couldn't no longer read from a book. In fact when we first used the language it was just a debacle. Our skills were just absolutely woeful and we went to a local restaurant. Actually there were two restaurants in the

36:30 village, that's right, and we said to this guy, "Where do we go to eat around here?" He said, "Well there's only a few places to go, try this one." So we went in there and we were speaking to the guy with the book and I'm trying to do the language as best as I can and he's just looking at me going, like, "He's either playing with me, he knows what I'm saying or he doesn't know what I'm saying." and eventually we had to actually do animal noises to get some chicken and some pork and we pointed on the table, "We want some of that, we want some bread." We gave it away as a bad joke and it worked. We got our chicken, we got some salads and we got the pork and we were very happy, and then as our skills built up we were fine

37:00 from there. But I'm sure he knew what we were talking about. He was taking the piss out of us.

Was prostitution a problem there?

In my first village, no. Second village, yes. But I banned my guys from using them. In my second village the team that was there actually had a few problems and when I came in I said, "Yeah, just stay away from them, you're just asking for trouble." In Phnom Penh it was just rife. They were everywhere,

37:30 and I'm pretty sure a few of the guys were using the prostitutes, but you're boosting the economy, so hey. But in my first village prostitution, I don't think really existed actually. It was a village in the true meaning of the word village, middle of nowhere, sort of surrounded by hills, and they had little crops around the houses and stuff like that. In fact it's sort of funny, it got that cold there we used to wear body armour to stay warm because we thought

38:00 Cambodia, it's going to be really hot, but we were up in the mountains and we used to freeze our arses off. It wasn't until we came down to Phnom Penh and my second village on the Mekong River that it actually got hot, so it was sort of funny.

Does ever not using the prostitution thing and the respect for the people, is there a link there with how they're treated?

How do you mean? As in?

By certain soldiers going in and using the young,

38:30 **the girls and that, does that show a disrespect to them?**

In the city it didn't seem to be a big thing. It was sort of almost half expected. In the villages it was a big no no. A few prostitutes had been killed because they were prostitutes. So in my first village it wasn't a big deal. Second village I said, "Guys, just stay away from them." and the maid we had there constantly was going to sum lup chow them, which means cut off

39:00 their heads, and she was, they call them taxi girls because they used to get ridden a lot. So she was very adamant, and unfortunately in my second village we were in this building, unit, flat sort of establishment. We had one apartment, so to speak and then next door were the prostitutes and we had the only two balconies. So I said to the guys, "Guys, don't even think about it, just stay away from them. Something will fall off in public or you'll embarrass your wives, and the

39:30 maid will kill them later on anyway." But yeah, in the villages, yeah, you want to be respected. You don't want to be crossing the line. Actually found a few Uruguayan soldiers crossed the line and they were ambushed. They paid the penalty. They weren't killed but they got carved up pretty bad.

How did the married blokes handle being away from home?

Pretty good. Not being married, when I went over there I was single, so

40:00 it was easy for me. I had a blast, it was great, but for the married guys, some of the guys it was very hard. I had a guy in my second team when I was in my second village and when we got phones established to Australia he was on the phone every day and I was thinking, "You're gonna be paying for this. This has got to really rack the bill up." but we actually never paid for our phone calls. They gave them to us for free, we found out later. We were told we were supposed to pay for them but we never

paid for them, which is a good thing. Yeah, some of the guys

40:30 just didn't deal with it very well and it's understandable when you're away for a year. I mean, you did four months, you were given a week off back to Australia or wherever you wanted to go, four months and then you were given a week in Singapore. I went to England both times, and then another four months and you went home. So for me it was fine, but I even found I was getting tired at the end. I was like I just want to go home now, but for the married guys especially with families, a year, that's a long time. So it would've been hard

41:00 on them. But the guys in my teams were very good.

Tape 5

00:30 **What was the uniform that you were wearing in Cambodia?**

We wore the DPCUs camouflage uniform with, we had the new brown boots that had come in. Not the ones that recently came out, but yeah, just the Australian DPCUs. We had a brassard on our right shoulder which had, like, the Australian flag and Force Communications Unit, and later on we got the new brassards with the UN badge

01:00 and the Australian flag on it, and then we just wore basically like the blue hat or blue beret, and then just carried normal stuff like the webbing and rifle. It's pretty much the Australian uniform.

The UN blue hat or beret, whenever you were out were you wearing that all the time?

Yeah, every time, yeah.

As were all the other….?

Some guys wore the caps. I'm used to wearing a beret from armour; it's always the black beret,

01:30 so I'm just used to wearing a beret, so I just used to wear it on patrol and it didn't bother me. I remember one day, when you get a beret you've got to wash it and do what they call, you bash it, so you take it in the shower with you and throw it on the floor and you have a shower and all the soap that washes onto the beret softens it up and you stamp on it up and down and rinse it out and beat the crap out and you put it on and give it a shape. When you get it, actually, initially out of the

02:00 bag it's just not ready but once you've done that initial bash it pretty much sits like the way you want it. Unfortunately when I actually picked it up and went to bash it the second time to sort of fit it out I had this really weird feeling in my head and realised there was this cockroach crawling in my hair, so yeah, really made my day.

Nice.

Yeah.

Can you just explain for people that aren't familiar with it, explain a little bit more about the hearts and minds work, what that actually means?

02:30 Hearts and minds is where when you come into a village the locals are looking at aliens. You're six foot tall, you're blond hair, blue eyes and you look nothing like the locals. You're in a uniform, you've got weapons, and they're just not too sure what's going on. So you want to establish yourself amongst the community to say, "Hey, we're not here to kill you, we're here to be kind and help you out." and usually having contacts helps. The SAS are very good at this. They

03:00 establish themselves very well when they go overseas, and what you do is you find out who are the local chieftains, you introduce yourself, you're pilot, you're courteous, you say, "Here, this is the reason why we're here." You have interpreters who tell you what's going on. When you're sort of talking to chieftains because of the language barrier at first or you've actually, with some of the missions that we've had you've actually got guys who are from the village itself who have established themselves with the Australian forces and then they come back to the village, say,

03:30 "These are the Australian soldiers. They're here to do good." We didn't have that, so we just had to sort of meet the local chieftains and just went around bit by bit and spoke to the locals. Learning the language and doing medical work is a big plus, and then playing with the kids, playing some sports with the kids and that sort of thing. That's really good. So you're winning them over so they trust you, so you become like a, you're sort of like the uncle for the village, like Uncle John

04:00 for the village. The pilot term, or actually a sign of respect is to be called Pu which is a bit strange here but over there they would address me as Pu John, so it was sort of like being called sir, but I really worked hard for myself and my team members to sort of learn the language and to be in part of the community, and that's why we got invited to wedding and to lunches and dinners and stuff like that. And it just makes it easier, so if there are problems

04:30 within the village you can deal with them and the locals will be on your side more so than the other person's side if they were causing trouble.

What do you think the locals' understanding was when you got there of why you were there?

I think at first they didn't have a clue. They weren't too sure of who we were or what we were doing. Once we got established and explained why, and also the UN staff had been there prior to us so the locals had an idea, so all we had to do was basically,

05:00 "We're just here to do communications. We're not commandos, we're not going on a killing spree." and I would talk to the locals at the markets and say, "Look, if you've got any problems let me know. If your kids are sick or you want a hand with anything let us know." and it sort of built up from there. Especially once, with the little boy and the grandma, that was like big Brownie points. That just really established me amongst the locals big time, because she looked like to be a bit of a

05:30 senior person amongst the village, and I was kind enough to get, they had like these little elephant tusks and the local high priest blessed the elephant's tusk for me. I'm kicking myself because I lost it, so it's just like, it was better than a DVD player. Something you want to keep for ever and a day, but something I just lost on the way home. But they're just, it's funny, you give them simple things and we used to give like, share out lollies from the ration packs with the kids and they

06:00 really liked that, so that sort of established what was going on. And the maid we had, her sister had a little son and he was willing to give up his family. He wanted to come back to Australia with me. So it was pretty hard to leave 'cause he used to come around all the time and we'd play games with him and he'd hang out and used to come on some of the walks around the village with us. Yeah, he was almost like my adopted son. I'd like to go back one day but I just don't see it happening. I'd like to see where he is and what he's doing,

06:30 but getting to the village is, you can only get there by helicopter. There's no way in the world you could drive there. It's just not going to happen, especially in the wet season.

What was your knowledge of the political situation there before you got there?

We were explained that there were four factions, or four warring factions or four competing factions within the Cambodian infrastructure. We had the government, the NADK [National Army of Democratic Kampuchea], the KPNLF [Khmer People's National Liberation Front] and the Khmer Rouge, and they were all

07:00 basically vying for power. We were there to establish the elections, to basically put a government in power which had never been done before, and basically bring the peace and say, "Hey, you know, we're just trying to get things settled." and that we'd basically be providing communications for the UN electorates out in the middle of nowhere because there were no telephones, the internet wasn't thought of in those days, and the radios that the UN personnel

07:30 had were just, they were only good for like local areas. They were using the Motorola radios, which are good for, like, around the local area but they were no base stations so basically it all had to be done by military radio.

I'm just trying to get a picture of the timeline. When were the elections compared to your service there?

I was deployed to Cambodia June the 10th, 1992. Three

08:00 weeks later I was in my first village. I spent six months there. I was then purloined to a village called Krâchéh in the Mekong River and it was probably about my eighth month the elections began. They'd basically been establishing the elections, like registering people, giving them ID cards, doing the hearts and minds, saying, "Hey, we're here to put governments in." We were there to liaise

08:30 with the local government, the local villages, the local elders, that sort of thing, say, "This is what we're doing." and we had to take photos and fingerprints and that sort of stuff and get everyone registered to be a voter. So it was about the eighth month I think, around about that time.

In your opinion what was their understanding of their own political situation?

Some of the villages didn't even know what money was. So I think it would be a politician's nightmare to sort of

09:00 establish yourself because, like, some of the villages I went to, they were just like villages in the caveman sense. It was huts and that was it. There was no power, there was no running water. I've been told that one of the villages had been established for 1,000 years. OK, that's what you guys are saying; I'll take your word for it. We talked to some

09:30 of the locals and said, "Wouldn't it be nice to have established commerce and get some money and get paid?" And they're going, "What's that?" They had no idea, because they trade over there with rice and pigs and cows and fish. So some of them understood what was going on, but others like, "OK, we'll go along with the crowd." They had no idea.

What was there understanding or interest in

10:00 **who was going to be in charge?**

I think more so for the senior people in the villages, especially with the military, because there was military sort of all over the place. They had a vested interest but some were just like, “Oh yeah, whatever, just something to.” They were really totally clueless on how they run things and I’m sure if I went back to the villages they’d be exactly the same. Some of the villages I visited were just

10:30 shacks and huts and stuff and people lived there and they had established crops and they had their crops and their pigs and cows and stuff and I’m sure it would be exactly the same now, where some of the other towns would be a bit more established but pretty much the same.

Being that remote did they have a clear understanding who each of the election options were, like who the Khmer Rouge were?

Well, everyone knew who the Khmer Rouge were.

11:00 I actually got to meet a few of the guys, which is interesting ’cause they were very, not all Khmer Rouge were bad. That’s the thing, half of them just went along with the crowd and I think they probably knew the government and the Khmer Rouge and that was it. The NADK and the Kapaff [Kampuchean People’s Front] may not have been so well known. It’s, the villages were just really isolated. I mean they could be just across the river but there’s no telephone, there’s no TV, there’s no video, there’s no

11:30 internet and their life is, they get up in the morning, they feed the kids, they tend the crops, they look after water buffaloes, they have lunch, they look after water buffaloes, they play, they have evening dinner, they wash the water buffaloes. That’s pretty much about it. They, yeah, it’s a very basic lifestyle. It’s like you want to go live there yourself. It’s like, “Wow, this is a pretty easy lifestyle.” Sort of no doing your taxes and

12:00 no sort of dealing with government bureaucracy and things like that, so it’s very, it’s a very different lifestyle. I think sometimes we should combine our lifestyle with theirs to sort of be a little bit more relaxed.

Did the local villages there, did the Khmer, I’m just trying to get a grasp on when you read in text books about the Khmer Rouge, it’s painted a pretty ugly picture, were the villages, you know, were

12:30 **they afraid of the Khmer Rouge?**

They knew who they were. They were well aware of who the Khmer Rouge were. In fact we actually, I suppose to explain how, the best thing is to tell a story of, there was some Uruguayan soldiers down in one of our sister villages down the Mekong River. On my second tour, on my second six months I was in a village called Krâchéh, which is like the main village,

13:00 and then we had a village across the river and another one further down, but pretty much the only way to get to it was by the river. The road down there was just impassable. Some of the Uruguayan soldiers had got a bit friendly with some of the local girls. They weren’t prostitutes but they were just local women, but some of the local lads

13:30 had a sense of humour failure and ambushed them. So we did a rescue mission that night and even though it wasn’t my job, we had Uruguayan soldiers up here who went down in boats. We’ve lost communications, they’re not going to be able to establish communications, we’ve got to go, so I just made the decision that me and my, the signal I had at the tech, we should go as well, so we went down there and re-established communications and we got down there

14:00 in the middle of the night and it was all over. We had the guys medevaced out, and anyway, we came back the next morning. We basically stayed awake for 24 hours just sort of re-establishing the comms and reporting back to base and we came back and we’d actually camouflaged up, which is obviously the thing we should’ve done, but at the time it’s like you work amongst these people, your mates are in trouble, you go, and when we came back, we’d come back from, we were walking through the streets back to our thing and people were looking at us and thinking, “What are these guys doing?” My mate’s sort of saying,

14:30 “Are you playing games?” And I said, what did I say? “Kon yum sum lup chow konum my konohom.” which means, “I’ve just been off fighting the Khmer Rouge.” and it’s like, the look in your face was like holy shit. So they’re saying, “Don’t fuck with the Aussies.” and I couldn’t think of another way to explain to them. We weren’t down there, there was no contacts, we didn’t fire a single round, but I was just trying to explain to the

15:00 locals what had been happening, where I’d been and what I’d been doing, but it seemed to be the most appropriate way at the time, and it was like, “Wow, you guys must be pretty brave to take these guys on.” But I met the Khmer Rouge quite a few times and a lot of them were just misled soldiers. They didn’t realise what they were doing. They were just like, “OK, we’re soldiers. We’ll just follow our orders and do our thing.” and some of these guys were still in the jungle. I mean the atrocities

15:30 that happened were long gone but these guys were still in the jungle awaiting orders to do whatever, and we told them, said, “Hey guys, war’s over. It’s all gone.” They said, “Oh, oh, OK.” So we convinced a few of them to hand themselves in and they got re-established, but I’m sure there were ones out there who were just like absolute bastards who did what basically the Germans did to the Jews in World War II, but a lot of them were just soldiers,

16:00 just following orders and didn’t realise, and they were following the propaganda and the rhetoric and they were just going, “OK, they’re bad people, we’ll kill them.” They had no idea, and when we spoke to them it was like, “Really? We probably shouldn’t have been doing that.” But some of the other Khmer Rouge we met were the full-on dudes. They were just, like, out for blood and wanted to kill us and there were a couple of standoffs which we managed to talk our way out of.

Can you give us some details of that?

We did a river patrol up the Mekong, up

16:30 the Mekong? Up the Mekong. We had Zodiac inflatable boats and the tide was down a bit, but it was, sorry, the river level was down a bit but we were still able to get up because of the Zodiacs, and actually they’ve got dolphins in the Mekong too, freshwater dolphins. That’s pretty cool. And we came to a village. They dropped us off at one end and we started patrolling through the different villages and it was just myself, I had a radio back pack and my rifle and we had

17:00 a couple of Royal Marine commandos who were unarmed, one or two Royal Navy guys who were unarmed. So I was the only guy who was armed and when we got to the very end of the village we were just about to hop back in the boats and we met a fellow called, company commander from the Khmer Rouge, and he was sort of asking what was going on. We were having a chat and his, one of his sergeants came down with a hand grenade and he just wanted our blood. He said, “What are you doing here?” Blah blah blah blah blah, “Get out of our village.” So then it was just a stand off between me and him because he had his grenade and I had my rifle and

17:30 everyone was really cool and calm because we had Royal Marine commandos and they’re very well trained. The Royal Navy guys are pretty good too, and I said to one of the Royal Marine commandos, I said, “Stand aside so I can get a clear shot, so I can shoot from the hip.” because I can’t actually raise the rifle, it will just give the game away that I’m going to take the guy down, but he had a hand grenade. With the hand grenade you’ve got four seconds, which doesn’t sound like much but it’s plenty of time to get the grenade and throw it in the river so we can get away. But he never threw the grenade and we talked our way out of it, said, “Look, we apologise. We’re

18:00 just trying to help people out.” and explained we’re here to do medical work and I’m here basically to protect the others from bandits and that sort of thing, and they went like, “OK, we think you should leave anyway.” So we said, “Yeah, we’re out of here.” which is a good thing because when we went back down the river they had an ambush waiting for us and they had RPG7s [rocket-propelled grenades], two or three heavy machine guns, so they would’ve carved us up, but because we did the good thing, and let’s talk our way out of this, let’s say this is why we’re here and explain to them, they said, “OK, well we think you

18:30 should go anyway.” So we never went back, it was too heavily defended and that’s Khmer Rouge territory so we’ll just stay out of there. Another incident we had at the opposite end of the river two, we’d been speaking to half a dozen Khmer Rouge guerillas in the jungle. We’d actually been going in there and having a chat with them and saying, “Listen guys, the war’s over. Hand yourselves in.” you know. We actually took, one of the Royal Navy guys was seeing

19:00 a local girl, although she was UN staff and she was quite a pretty Khmer Rouge, sorry, she was quite a pretty Cambodian lady and she came down sort of dressed nicely and everything with the perfume and she’d say, “Guys, look what you’re missing out on.” and they’d go, “OK, maybe we should give this jungle crap away, there’s women there.” So we talked two of them into coming and handing themselves in, and they’d basically come to the edge of the jungle and we were waiting with our four wheel drives, did

19:30 a bit of a snatch and grab, so as soon as they came in we wanted to get the hell out of there and they were just about to walk out of the jungle when a government patrol came along and they asked what we were doing. We said, “Just taking photos.” They said, “OK.” Off they went, and then the guys came out and hopped in the vehicles and we just bolted. So I think we were just trying to establish peace and just trying to get it spread through what was left of the Khmer Rouge elements like, you know, “The UN’s here to help and you guys are living in the jungle really missing out on life.” and these

20:00 guys were later on established. So yeah, that was quite an interesting day.

So what would’ve happened to those two Khmer Rouge who came out?

They would’ve been carved up by the government troops. There were half a dozen of them, they were well armed and I’m pretty sure they were known to. So it could’ve been quite messy, because we could’ve been linked to the Khmer Rouge which is probably not a good thing with the government forces, but this is the job we do.

So then once you

20:30 **sort of got them in the four wheel drive then what would've happened to them, then what do you mean they got established?**

We took them back to the village and they were re-established back to Phnom Penh and from what I can tell they were given a pardon, so to speak, and re-established amongst society.

What about the actual election process?

21:00 There was a mass hiring of the locals for this. The UN staff just did not have the manpower to do it. I think it was done for two reasons. Obviously they needed manpower or women power, and plus it was putting a bit of money into the Cambodian economy, although really like the amount of money that the UN use they waste a lot of money. It's just unbelievable what they spend.

21:30 So it's a sort of a double-edged sort of thing but it was good. My maid that I had in my second village asked if she could go off and work and I said, "You go for it, because you'll make a lot more money than what we're paying." and I think they were paying something like $100 a week, $100 US a week which is a fortune for the locals. So we established election points, and on the first

22:00 day I was in the lead vehicle with Major Chris Lincoln-Jones from the Royal Artillery in the British Army and we were in the lead vehicle, and when we were actually heading out to the village, the problem with the villages is the villages are established in certain areas. Once you go outside that village you're in bandit country. There was a Dutch patrol,

22:30 there were a truckload of Dutch soldiers which were ambushed by the Khmer Rouge. Not a shot was fired but basically they were stripped of everything. They took all their weapons, all their food, they took everything off them. We had Morris Catering over there, they got robbed on a regular basis. They just descended upon these trucks with shipping containers and took everything out and off they went. So we led the patrol out to the village. On the way out there we came across a, was he Yugoslavian

23:00 or was he Dutch? I think he was a, could've been Czech. I can't quite remember, but we were going along, I said, "There's one of the local soldiers, he's a bit close." We were going, like, no, no, no, he's white, and we were like three or four kilometres out of the village which is bandit country big time, and basically it boiled down to he got drunk, was pissed from the night before and got the shits with the army and said, "I'm out of here."

23:30 walking off into the Cambodian jungle, which is not good. So we said, "We think you should come with us." so we put him in the vehicle, took him back and handed him back to his commanding officer and went back down and established the first election point, and when we got out there my maid was out there and she was so pleased as punch that I came out to say hello and everything. She was taking me around and meeting all her friends and it was like, "This is Pu John." and everything. I'm saying hello to everybody. Of course, like, I'm six two and they're four foot nothing and I'm quite large

24:00 and they're just sort of like, and I had body armour on and my equipment made me look even bigger and they're all going, "Oh, oh." and of course they like to pat your forearms because of the blond hair, or they don't have hair on their arms, so they like to do that. It was just nice to go out and visit the locals, 'cause I'd say she'd been telling her friends about me 'cause we just treated her well, paid her well and gave her food, any spare rations we had and we just, you know, she was looking after us, why not look after her?

24:30 But just getting the elections established, that was good, and once we got them up and running they ran for about two weeks while everyone went in and did their thing.

So in the areas that you were, did the election process run smoothly?

Yep, yep, pretty smoothly. I didn't hear of any hiccups. The Blackhawk helicopters actually were deployed to Cambodia for the election process. They actually went around and collected all the ballot boxes and they did quite a few good

25:00 medevacs as well. In fact some of the guys who were over there, I actually met when I was posted to 5AO [area of operation], aviation. So, in fact some of the guys who were over there were actually on the same ground crewman's course as I was. So from what I remember I think it all ran fairly smoothly. During the period we were over there, there were incidents before the elections of just trouble with the Khmer Rouge, trouble with

25:30 bandits, that sort of thing. We had one guy who talked 20 bandits out of robbing a village. They came to town to have a bit of fun and he spoke the language very well. In fact I think three weeks prior to being deployed to Cambodia he spent that time in a house with Cambodians down in Melbourne. He just hung out with them and his language skills were brilliant, so he managed to say, "Come on guys, this is not the thing you should be doing." Said he wasn't stepping back and he wasn't going to lose his ground, so

26:00 he stood up to them and they said, "OK, we'll head off." I think because he just showed no fear and I think the Cambodians were going like, "This guy's not backing down and it looks like he can take a few of us, so let's just give it away as a bad joke." We actually had a drunken soldier come into our compound. We had established quarters outside of the compound in one of the flats for want of a better word, but we had like an established UN compound and in one building we had the UN police

26:30 and in the more larger building we had the UN staff who were doing all the electoral stuff and then this soldier wandered in and he had an AK47 and a hand grenade and he was threatening people. I was on patrol when I heard about it, but he mouthed off and carried on and everything and eventually he just wandered out, but he scared the living shit out of the electoral staff. I sort of

27:00 felt a bit sorry for them. They were civilians and really, some of the things they went through, they weren't trained to deal with it. We had, one night there was a lot of shooting in the streets and there was mortar fire going off and I don't know if it was government troops against Khmer Rouge but someone was getting a little bit carried away with their weapons and we had like a little club within the compound, a little boozer or sort of

27:30 café, so to speak, and we just, a few beers and soft drinks, and we just got, half a dozen new UN staff had come in for the elections to help out and they were just terrified and I'd come in and I had my body armour on and my rifle and to sort of see what's going on and how things are going, 'cause our communications were within the UN building itself with the electoral staff. They said, "What do we do if we're under fire, under attack? What should we do?" I said, "Have a drink." They went, "Oh." and so they went,

28:00 "Oh well, he's going to sit down and drink, we'll have a drink too." So they didn't worry about it so much. We had fairly high walls so we were safe to a certain extent, but what more could you do? And because I kept my calm and made a bit of a joke they seemed to relax a little more and made things easy. Although one day we had four Australian backpackers come to my village. I'd come back from patrol, come up the steps from the Mekong River, I've got to tell you a good story

28:30 about that, and there were these four people. There were two guys and two girls and I walked up and said, "How you going? I'm J.J. Fraser, who are you?" And, "We're from Australia, we're backpacking around the countryside." I said, "Are you kidding me?" I said, "Come on guys, this is not a good thing." So yeah, we basically bundled them up, put them in a helicopter and took them back to Phnom Penh, but they'd just been trekking through and, "Guys, this is not a good thing to do."

29:00 **That incident with, I'm sure there was at least one Australian, those couple of backpackers that got killed on the trail, was that while you were there?**

No, that was afterwards. No, I think that was a tragedy and I remember getting a phone call from my sister saying, "They're advertising for holidays in Cambodia. Do you think it's a good idea?" And I'm going, "Nuh, no way." I'd be very sceptical of even doing it now. It's just

29:30 not established. They don't have the infrastructure that we do. If you get lost, well, you get lost. It's tragic what happened but like, hey, unfortunately you pay for your actions and I think what they did was pretty stupid. So I mean, we used to take some of the electoral staff out on patrol with us because they had to do a bit of work, and we'd be there with our webbing, our water bottles, ammunition, food, first aid, you know, we'd be all sort of kitted up and they'd come down with a water bottle, but they

30:00 just didn't know so we had to educate them. You've got to take a bit more gear than that. But yeah, they did a few silly things, but it's like they didn't have the training. They were pretty much, one day they're in an office, the next they're on a plane to Cambodia and go off and do this. They weren't trained what to do and how to do certain things. So, yeah, that's just a real tragedy but out in the middle of nowhere in those sort of instances what can you do?

30:30 There's no infrastructure and we certainly weren't going to go in and rescue them, and I think if the military intervened we would've been carved up as well. Just one of those things.

What about the situation with landmines?

There were 18 million landmines still in the country and they've established a landmine clearing project. That's why we pretty much stuck to the village and the main roads. You just don't walk off the roads. As they say in the

31:00 movie, Apocalypse Now, never get off the boat, well, don't get off the road. I showed you the picture before about the truck that ran over the landmine. In the established area it was OK. There was a story of, in fact that photo I showed you before about the helicopter, on that same strip Khmer Rouge guerillas snuck in and planted landmines around the outside of the airfield but that was thwarted by a herd of cows. So they all turned into beef stroganoff, but

31:30 better cows than humans. It was a bit upsetting for the farmer because he lost all his herd, but it was just one of those things. There was an incident of a few people arrived in a helicopter and stepped off and didn't realise they were actually walking through a minefield and some mines can be a little bit itchy and the downward draft from a helicopter actually can set them off. So, plus a lot of the landmines,

32:00 some of them were French made and they're called Butterfly mines. They basically look like a butterfly, a green butterfly and they're deployed from a helicopter and they basically come out and spiral to the ground and just drop and then they're activated. So we'd had incidents of kids picking them up or people stepping on them and that sort of thing, and they're the worst kind because they're scattered. They're not marked in the areas. You can't mark them. If you throw them from a helicopter you don't know where they're going to land. Normally when you set a minefield it's established and you've got a

map

32:30 of where every single mine is and there's patterns in the way you do certain things. I did an assault pioneer's course and we actually set out a proper minefield on a parade ground and we set the mines in the patterns and then we were actually blindfolded and told to walk through, and you couldn't walk through without tripping one. So those are the worst mines when they're deployed by aircraft because you don't know where they're going to go. You can't go and pick them back up. The kids think they're a toy because they look like a little mini frisbee and they pick them up, throw it, their mate catches it and boom, there goes his hand. We saw a lot of

33:00 that. Kids with no arms or legs or saw a lot of the adults missing a leg or two. That's why we did a lot of medical work in the last six months when I was in Krâchéh. A lot of the patrols would go out and deal with medical stuff. I met a little boy once and he had, you know the oil lanterns you get? And it dropped on top of him and all the hot oil and everything had gone down and burnt his back

33:30 and his back caught on fire and he just came up and said, "Can I get a bandaid?" I said, "Whoa, let's have a look at your back." I said, "That's not good." and we had what we called the magic spray which is like, it's a very strong antiseptic, and this kid was so brave. I mean I'd actually used the stuff on myself and it stings like there's no tomorrow, and I sort of cut off some of the dead flesh and sort of cleaned his back up and put the spray on and cleaned it all up and he was just,

34:00 he was incredibly brave and he shed a tear or two and then once the sting wore off he was OK, and I said, "I'll be back in three days, come back and see me." Came back and it had all started to heal properly, but otherwise he would've been walking around forever and a day and would've got an infection for sure. Another guy I worked on, he had, we were doing like a clinic and we were just treating basic sort of cuts and abrasions or gashes that happens

34:30 in normal everyday life. This guy had a boil or cyst the size of a golf ball down here on his leg, sort of near his groin, and the local medic had just given him a bandage. He was just a Cambodian medic, said, "Here's the bandage, off you go." I said, "Hang on, what are you doing? What is it?" And he took it off and like, "Oh, that's interesting." I said, "I think I'll have a look at that." So I got him to lay down on a table and pulled out my kit and basically just, like, lanced the

35:00 cyst, boil, whatever you want to call it, and cleaned out all the pus and it was just, oh, it was just atrocious. It was just like, but oh yeah, whatever, I had my gloves and no big deal, and cleaned all the dead skin off, got all the puss and the blood, cleaned it up, used the magic spray and I was having a chat and said, "OK, try and be as careful as possible." and I said, "Yep, no problem." It looked a lot better and I said, "See you in three days, come back." He came back in three days, it was pink, it was healthy. It had gone down dramatically

35:30 and dressed it again and that and came back a week later and you could still see, it was like he'd had it, but it was well and truly on the way out. So they have certain things they just deal with. They just walk around with these cuts and abrasions and burn marks and they just got no other choice but to have it there and they can't do anything about it.

Were you ever doing any medevacs on landmine victims?

Yeah, we did one.

36:00 It was actually a bit of an embarrassing situation, not for the poor lady. She'd stood on a landmine and it was, but somehow it had actually taken a while to deactivate, for it to activate and go off. She'd actually stood on it and walked away and then it had gone off so she had a bit of time to get away from it, but she was shredded fairly well. She was brought up by boat and then we put her in a truck, but in the

36:30 back of one of the utes, but trying to get her up the slopes it was all muddy and we could not get her up, we just could not get her up. We had to take her out and carry her up the slopes, but it was embarrassing because I was driving and I got it bogged and I'm like, "Oh you jackass." but couldn't do much about it so we thought, "OK, enough of this wasting time, let's get her out of here." So we got her medevaced fairly fast and she was fine.

How old would she have been?

In her 30s. We never, I found out later she was OK,

37:00 but she was shredded fairly badly. I think in normal circumstances she would've died. The medevac procedure is just not there. The Russians did a pretty good job. We also got the French come in. They had their Pumas, so they did a lot of the medevacs and they were very good at what they did.

Things like that must've done a lot to ensure your reception amongst the locals?

Yeah, that was big Brownie points.

Amongst the various nationalities within the UN

37:30 **force was there trading that went on for souvenirs?**

Not really. It was more so, we were going for local souvenirs, bayonets, SKS rifles or AK47s, magazines,

that sort of thing. Oh yeah, we did a little bit of trading for uniforms, yeah, we did.

38:00 At my first village we had a Russian observer. He was in the Russian military, he was either KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, Committee of State Security] or GRU [Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye, Chief Intelligence Directorate]. No one speaks five languages in the military unless you're intelligence, and I said to him, "You speak that many languages, what are you, KGB or GRU?" "My friend, what is KGB? I do not know what you're saying." I said, "Yeah, OK buddy, whatever you reckon. You're just a little bit too freaky to be normal army." but he gave me his, he made me a trade. We had, I gave him one of my DPCU shirts and he gave me his colonel's dress jacket

38:30 which I've got framed downstairs. I'll show you later, and it's just beautiful. It's when you see, like, the Russian military on TV, the big generals and that have got their nice big beautiful coats. He gave me that. I'm going, "Score." Another guy, I think they were Yugoslavian, they gave me one of their combat jackets and it was a nice camouflage jacket and a best friend of mine, I gave it to his nephew because I thought he would like it and he was a growing lad and he seemed like he really like it. My friend tried to steal it, so then I, "No, no, no, it's for your nephew, you just

39:00 can't have this." Yeah, we traded a little bit here and there. Some of the other guys might've done a bit more than I did, but yeah, they were the sort of things I did. Little knick-knacks too, like on the board there I've got some of the money, a Russian rouble and some of the local money, the phone card that I had over there on the tour. I've got the address of one of the

39:30 Russian pilots who said, "When you come to Moscow, come on, we'll party like it's 1999." He wanted me to come to Phnom Penh, "Come on, I'll teach you how to drink vodka." I said, "I don't think my liver could handle it, mate." But I've got an electoral T-shirt, which is too small for me but I didn't care, I was going to frame it anyway. I've got a few other things. I guess I just don't get asked that question on a regular basis, so it's like I actually have to think about what do I have?

40:00 I've probably got a few other things here and there that I don't really remember. They're framed somewhere so I've got a habit of framing things 'cause I looked at it one day and they're all scrunched up and I said, "Why should this be sitting in a bag gathering dust? It should be out on display." So yeah, it's framed, everyone can see it, I can enjoy it and it stays there forever and a day.

You mentioned earlier that by the time you got to come home you were ready to come home. What was, did you know how long you were going to be there for, did you know it was for a year?

They told us a year.

40:30 **So were you counting down towards the end of that year?**

Yeah, but some guys were counting down more than I was, but I wasn't keeping track as much as they were. I was having too good a time. In fact when I got home I was like, "I wanna go back now." It was very hard to get used to society again, very, very rare, 'cause here you go out, I've got my keys, my mobile phone, my wallet. Over there it's like, well I've got my rifle, my walkie-talkie, spare magazine. I'll go to

41:00 the village and buy a loaf of bread, so it's a very different way of life.

Did you have a debrief?

Yeah, it was a group sort of thing. It wasn't done very well. I think because…

Tape 6

00:31 I think it's, I look back on my 20 years and the first half nothing happened, as in like we just trained and trained and the only big action was the Falklands War. So between basically 1980 and 1990 nothing had happened except the Falklands War. So we weren't geared up for that sort of thing. Between 1990 and up to now we've had Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda, the First Gulf War,

01:00 Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and there's a few other ones in between. So we've actually really geared up very quickly. So at that time Cambodia coincided with Somalia and Rwanda, they were all sort of about the same time. So the debrief, I just think wasn't thought of that well. I think it was just one of those things like, "Oops, this is the first thing we've, gonna have to really fix this up." and East Timor, the debriefs were better and

01:30 they're getting better and better. Actually I know one of the colonels who is a psych [psychiatrist] and they're getting more and more established and better at it, but I think they were just caught off guard and didn't realise suddenly with all these deployments we better fix up the debriefs.

Did you notice any sort of public reception as to the peacekeeping mission in Cambodia?

Nothing, didn't even know we were there. One of those things. No, I mean the only ones who really knew we were over there were our families. It was also

02:00 a quiet mission too. There were one or two contacts between Australian soldiers and bandits and Khmer Rouge but that was really about it. It was fairly quiet. When the Blackhawks came over a bit of hoo haa but it wasn't as well known as Somalia or Rwanda especially, or East Timor. East Timor was like the big one. That really sort of established us.

How did that sit with you that it was almost, you know?

02:30 Media is now, the mission went for a year so what do you expect? And it was uneventful compared to, say, like Iraq and Afghanistan and we weren't particularly fazed about it that much, not worried about it, so our families knew we were there, that's all that mattered.

So how was the reception coming home?

I'm really wishing you hadn't asked me that, because no one was there. In fact I even joked about it on the plane. I said to my mate,

03:00 well, we flew into Sydney and they basically whisked us through customs. In fact we didn't even go through customs, so I could've had half a dozen landmines and an AK47 and no one would've known, and we were taken straight to Randwick Barracks and my brother was there to meet me, which was good, and we were given our medals, one of the medals while we were there, so that was nice. But I had phoned my family in Brisbane. I had sent them letters saying, "I'm coming home, here are the times, here are the dates." I'm pretty sure I phoned them from Sydney too. Got

03:30 to the airport and as we were landing I said to my mate, "I bet you my family's not there." I said, "Can I borrow yours?" And I hopped off the plane and there's a big sign, "Welcome Home, blah blah blah." It was for him, not for me, and my family wasn't there. I was pretty pissed about that, like fuck's sake. So I went down to the baggage claim and got my bags and my sister rocked up and she was by herself and I thought, "Thank God someone's here to get me." So yeah, it was, I was pretty disappointed. It was just one of those things. In fact the

04:00 lady on the plane, there was another lady sitting beside us said, "Oh, have you boys been off for exercises, have you?" I said, "No, we've actually been in Cambodia." "Oh, that sounds exciting." So it's funny how the Australian public are in the dark about what we do sometimes, but that's the media's job and Cambodia's old news and that's fair enough. You've got to keep up with things.

In your time in Cambodia did you see anybody from the [Australian] War Memorial or anything like that, the museum, taking photographs or documenting

04:30 **the forces being there?**

Saw a lot of pictures, didn't see anybody though. In the villages we were isolated, nobody came to see us. Occasionally we had a visit from the CO [commanding officer] and squadron commander. Once or twice our sister commander popped out to say "Hi." but pretty much we were left to our own devices. That was about it, we never saw anyone.

And you mentioned earlier about how coming back was

05:00 **almost an anti-climax, you wanted to get back over there?**

As soon as I walked off the plane and realised the family wasn't there it was like, "Fuck it, I may as well go back." and I actually wanted to go home. I was so used to the Cambodian lifestyle, wearing the sarongs and just being a local. I mean, the whole time we were over there we were professional but you sort of got into the local dress as well on your time off. I just wanted to turn around and go back again. I think sometimes it's like when you're there you want to be here and when you're here you want to be there. It's a sort of catch 22.

05:30 Yeah, I was pretty disappointed actually but I can't do much about that now.

So it was almost a culture shock coming back, how did you settle down?

Took me a while to start wearing underwear again. That was the first thing they told us when we got over there. "Got your underwear on?" Whoosh, lose it. The sweat and the tropical disease and the crutch rot and blah blah blah, it's not worth it. So it took me quite a while to get used to wearing underwear. It took me a while to stop wearing sarongs around the house

06:00 and nothing else. Took me a while to get to the city and crowds. Yeah, you just had to slowly establish yourself. You were a bit blown away, it was almost like sort of mild form of post-traumatic stress disorder 'cause, like, one minute you're sort of in the village, the next day you're in Phnom Penh, the next day you're processed and you're back home again.

06:30 The same thing, like, with East Timor, like one minute in a combat zone and the next minute we're back home again. It takes a while to adjust. It took me three or four months to even start to adjust. It took a while.

A lot of Vietnam blokes have spoken of that, going straight from a combat zone to home in a matter of hours, whereas the blokes coming home from World War II spent weeks, often, on ships. Do you think that coming back gradually would've made a difference?

Yeah, yeah. It's sort of funny, it's a catch

07:00 22 because you want to get home as fast as possible, but I think it allows you time to sort of relax a bit, to talk amongst your mates, to spend time with the guys who you've just been on operational service with. It allows you time to talk amongst yourselves, to have some time off. In a way we actually did get that in Cambodia, because once we were brought out of our villages and back to Phnom Penh to be processed to go back home again, we had a few days to sort of do some shopping and go to the restaurants and hang out and

07:30 make idiots of ourselves and just try and unwind a bit. But yeah, that's actually a pretty good idea that you've got time to be amongst the guys you work with on a more relaxed basis. But nowadays, because of the transport systems we have, C130s and the J models, and you're home in an instant.

So was it back up to Oakey from there?

08:00 When I came back from Cambodia, yeah, back to Oakey and I got back in June. I had three months off 'cause of the BRL [basic recreational leave] established in Cambodia. Back to my unit and I went pretty much straight to Brisbane to get a couple of education courses up and brush up on my maths and then the following year in '94, January '94, early Feb '94 I started my loadmaster's

08:30 course down at the Australian Defence Force Helicopter School in Canberra.

Was doing the maths going in that direction, the loadmastering?

Yeah. It's just good to brush up on your maths and get used to calculating, long division, that sort of thing, just brush it up.

So what was that course like?

Really good. I liked every minute of it. It's a culture shock, very high learning curve. You only get one shot, you get two shots at the exams

09:00 and if you blow it you're off the course, you're gone. Very close courses, only usually four of you. We had six. We had six, six guys? Yeah, we had six. Usually the courses are four to six guys. All your studies, you do certain amounts of private study together but you also do a lot of study as a course especially when you're practising helicopter procedures like emergencies

09:30 on the hoist, emergencies on the hook when you're doing the aircraft patter like the talk within the aircraft itself. In fact, one of the biggest training tools we had was a whiteboard and a little Lego helicopter and we actually practised procedures with the helicopter. One guy would fly the helicopter, another guy would call the emergencies and you'd have to respond. That was good, and apparently it's still there to my best knowledge.

And is that loadmaster course, that was all specifically designed for Blackhawks, or are they different for

10:00 **Different…**

We use the AS350B Squirrel helicopter. I think Channel 9 use the same one. It's the one they have at Sea World, the blue ones down there except theirs are air conditioned, ours aren't. It teaches you basic loadmaster skills, but the skills are very detailed. You follow everything to the letter. When you get the Blackhawks they're butchered because you haven't got time to go through that lengthy process or the patter,

10:30 and the calls you use are very cut down because of operational situations, because once you start flying it actually is, you're doing real time work, even if you're on a training mission. You can't afford to be making mistakes because that's when you'll plough into the side of a mountain. So it establishes you on a good footing.

11:00 **So what were the hardest things about the course?**

I suppose remembering all the tabulated data on the aircraft. You had to know every measurement, the rotor diameter, the rotor width, the length of the aircraft, the weights. Because it's a French helicopter it's done in centimetres and kilograms. When you go to Blackhawks it's

11:30 inches and pounds. I think, too, the crew coordination and actually the flying part when you're actually sitting in the back. You've really got to learn. When you're on the ground, like in armour it's like you're on one plane, but up there it's like a three dimensional plane, you've got the sky, you've got the ground, you've got mountains, you've got everything. So you've just got to be looking around everywhere all the time. When you do your job you've got to have a high sense of situational awareness. You've got to be not only looking, but listening to what the pilots

12:00 are saying, listening for what the other loadmasters are saying, processing that and putting it, "OK, they're saying this, should I be doing that?" So you're sort of all over the shop, but you learned. It's a good course, and they take you from the basics and work you up to a good level of confidence, but it's a high level so you've got to learn fast. Once you're off, once you fail, you fail, you get taken off the course. I nearly failed a ride once

12:30 because when I was doing an approach into a pad I kept on missing a tree. Like this small, it wasn't a tree, it was more like this large log that was on the flight path set fairly low, but I'd actually hurt myself prior to that playing soccer, and because I was trying to lean outside the helicopter where I'd actually hurt my leg was playing up, and after the third attempt to get to the pad I said, "Look, can I blow this off? I just can't do it, my leg's killing me." and they said to me, they said, "Look, you're lucky your leg was doing that because we were actually going to fail you." So I would've had another go at it but still it was, like, "Thank

13:00 God, actually, that sort of happened." But I think it was like I couldn't concentrate properly because my leg was just hurting so much. So I went back and they gave me a couple of days off. It fixed it up, went back to the same pad and no problems. When you fly you've got to be fit, 100 percent fit. You don't fly with the flu; you don't fly if you've had an argument with your wife. You know like you see in the movies, the fighter pilots have got pictures of their wife in the cockpits. You never do that. That's stupid, because you lose concentration all of a sudden. If you have an argument with your wife and you go flying,

13:30 then you're putting the whole crew in jeopardy, and we actually get briefings on incidents where people have had arguments with their spouses, girlfriends before flying and crashed into sides of mountains. [UNCLEAR] exercises and killed the whole crew because the mind wasn't on the job.

So how was passing that course? That was what you'd been aiming towards all this time?

I remember we used to stand on top of the, the balcony would overlook the apron

14:00 where the helicopters were and we used to dream of the day when we would be at the terminal across the road hopping in a plane to fly home because we passed the course. So yeah, we were pretty stoked once we passed. Once you get past Squirrels you've got the good tools to sort of, the good basic tools to do the Blackhawks. The Blackhawks are a lot more technical, everything's a lot more faster, but in my opinion when you pass the Squirrel and you do it well, you can pass the Blackhawk. Totally different aircraft but you've got the knowledge to do it. You've just

14:30 got to do the transition. Unfortunately, we had a month between courses, which I didn't really like because you're sort of, you were brushed up to a good standard, you were good to go and then have that month break, it was like, oh man. We had a guy on my course who was panicking, freaking out about it. "Don't worry about it, you'll be fine, just shut up. Stop pissing us off, just relax a bit." But it was actually funny when we left, we dropped off at the airport and we went through the metal detectors. We had our own helmets and we had knives and little Gerbers [brand of knife] stuff like that, and airport

15:00 security are going, "What the hell?" And we explained who we were and, "OK, off you go." Nowadays it just wouldn't happen, after September 11th, but it was good to sort of realise, pass the course, you're out of here. So that was good.

And what did that course mean to you? Did you know where you were going to go from there?

Well we were doing Blackhawks. The Squirrel phase was basically for Blackhawks and there was only two places we could go, the School of Aviation at Oakey or 5 Aviation Regiment. It's fairly rare that they send a

15:30 brand new loadmaster to the school. You always go to the regiment in Townsville so you can get experience. So once we got to Oakey we did our transition to Blackhawks, which was great. It was just the ride of your life, and then from there to Townsville, but when you do, like work with the Squirrels, very relaxed and when you're sort of doing the course you go, "Oh, it's pretty full on." But then you go to Blackhawks, it's like you've gone from a Mini Minor to a Ferrari. I

16:00 remember the first time we were doing an approach into a pad and I said, "OK, you know your call, let's go, let's do it." and they do this on purpose. They sort of say, "This is how you've got to stay ahead of the ball." and they just banked around hard right and slammed into this pad and we're going, sitting in the back, "OK, I'm ready to start now." and you've already landed, but by the end of the course you've learnt to stay ahead of them, ahead of the curve and that, and you'd be doing that. That sort of thing, second nature, but even then once you get to regiment you've still got a long way to go and it takes you a good solid two

16:30 years to sort of really be quite proficient in all aspects of the operations.

So did you give yourself time to, do you have time to enjoy?

Yeah, you do. At first you don't, you're too busy trying to catch up. As in enjoy the flying are you talking about? Oh yeah, once you're qualified and know that you're not going to fail anything here, it's like OK, now I can really

17:00 enjoy it, and then you go off and you can have some fun, and especially with high range training area, there's just so many places you can go to to do your training. So many mountains you can fly around to, waterfalls, that sort of thing. There's so many challenges. You can go out and do things, so then you can have a lot of fun. Even though some of the work is hard and it's challenging you're still having a lot of fun in the

17:30 process because you've got your loadmaster wings and I've passed the course, now I'm part of the team and now OK, I can actually do this for real. So you're not about to sort of get failed and get kicked out of the aircraft, which is good.

So can you just sort of briefly describe the basics of what a loadmaster does in an aircraft?

With a Blackhawk you've got a crew of four, pilot, co-pilot and you've got two loadmasters.

18:00 Generally speaking the right hand loadmaster is the senior loadmaster. Once you've got dressed, you've got your helmet, your flying gear, you go to the aircraft, you do your pre-flight, you check your equipment, be it the external load hook or the rescue hoist, check your seats, check all the equipment you may need for the sortie, whether it be external load gear, rescue equipment, that sort of thing. Then you go through your start up procedures, all the equipment's checked, the engines are checked,

18:30 the rotors are checked, that sort of thing. Then you take off. As soon as you start taxiing you're actually giving clearances to the pilots, because the aircraft's quite long. The overall length is 64 feet 10 inches and the rotor diameter is 53 feet eight inches. So it's quite a large aircraft, and when you're taxiing out you've got the tail kicking out wide, so you're letting the pilots know the tail's clear, right, and you clear the taxi forward left and clear the taxi forward right. Reason being is like you're on a tarmac with other aircraft, so the last thing you want to do,

19:00 is plough into another aircraft while you're taxiing along. When you go to take off you're telling the pilots to clear up left and clear up right so you can actually lift off and roll away, because especially in airports there's always fixed wing aircraft coming in, other helicopters, and in Townsville there's FA18s every now and then. You also do, they've got the, what they call the TOLD Book, T-O-L-D, take off and landing book, and that basically what you're doing

19:30 is, you're doing the weights of the aircraft. With aircraft it's all weights and the fuel ratio. The aircraft weighs a certain amount and that allows you to have performance with the engines at a certain amount. It also allows you to lift a certain amount. The more fuel you burn off the lighter the aircraft becomes, the more you can lift, the higher you climb depending on the temperature and altitude, the faster you can go or the more you can lift or the less you can

20:00 lift. So you have to take things into consideration, like the cooler it is the better it is. Like for every 1,000 feet you're climbing you lose two degrees, so once you're rolling away, doing up new performance charts because you're climbing to a different altitude so you'll have different performances, so the performances you have at sea level will be different at 2,000 feet and different at 4,000 feet. You start a fuel flow rate, so that way you're sort of keeping track of how the fuel's going, make sure everything's in sync. That way if the controls start

20:30 buggering up you can sort of notify the pilots, well we've been going for a while and we've only burnt up 10 pounds, that can't be good. And then when you actually get to the training area, you've already had a briefing about what you're going to do, just tactical flying, navigation work, you're going to go and do some approaches into some tight pads, do some hook work, do some work with the hoist, do some slope landings, that sort of thing. Get at the training area, run through some quick

21:00 safety checks, and then you're into the mission and you go off and do what you need to do. If you're doing some basic work like, say, like a tight pad, the job of the loadmasters is to inform the pilots. What they call the run so when you're approaching into a pad you're telling the pilots, you run through checks at the back, you sit in the back, you say, "Clear and left, clear and right." which means he'll clear into that pad. Then as you get to the area you're actually clear to come straight down, you say, "Clear to the centre left, clear to the centre right." and you're telling

21:30 the pilots the height from the aircraft to the ground or at some stage, you're actually saying, you're calling distances that run heights below, saying, "400 a run, 40 below the aircraft to the ground or aircraft to the trees." and we actually found that in the training area the trees were a standard height of 50 feet, which was good for night vision work because you use them as a reference and then basically just bring the aircraft to the ground. If you're doing a sloped landing you've got to be basically allowing for the fact that the rotor will stay on an even plane,

22:00 but the aircraft will tilt down the slope, especially if you land on some of the sloped landing pads that are on rocks. So you've got the wheels all touching at a different time, so as you come down, you say, "One foot below the left, two feet below the right, four feet below the tail." and you sort of call it down bit by bit, and as long as the pilot's aware you can put the rotors, I think the closest I've put the rotors to the ground is two feet. That's on a sloped landing.

22:30 That's in some of the tight pads. There's the combat survival pad up in high range training area and it's fairly tight and in fact it's a pain in the arse to find it because it's amongst all the trees in the jungle, but once you find it you're working fairly hard because you're on the limits. You've got safety limits of 10 feet from the rotors to an obstacle, be it a tree or a rock or whatever, so you're working fairly hard. So you're the eyes and ears of the pilots. If you're doing a hoist, you're operating the rescue hoist and practising

23:00 deploying the sling down. Sometimes we take a jerry can to add weight to the sling itself because otherwise once it sort of comes out of the hoist itself it starts to spool around a bit and sort of fly all

over the place and you may get it hooked in trees. If we're doing external load work we usually using blivets which look like a big fat black marshmallow, weighs 4,000 pounds. It's a fuel blivet and we go and actually hook the load up with some external load strops and then we basically manoeuvre the aircraft, hook it up and then we fly away

23:30 and do a thing from there. So it's all accrued environment. If we're doing external load work we're managing the load, we change the performance figures of the aircraft and let the pilot know what the load is doing. Sometimes loads have a habit of becoming a problem. They did some flight tests on the cargo boxes that they use for the rotors for the Blackhawk to cart them around and they're going, "Like, don't do this. This is not going to be good." and sure

24:00 enough they took off and rolled away and the thing started to come out of control. It was just flying out of place so they just released it and punched it off and basically destroyed a $90,000 rotor. That was the loadmaster's call. He's got a basic appender control and he can release the load at any time if the aircraft comes in danger. Internally it depends on what we're doing. If we're doing a medevac, if we're just picking up normal troops, if we're carrying stores, it's the loadmaster's job to ensure that everything is strapped down

24:30 properly, both forward and aft and laterally. If you've got passengers make sure they're briefed, they're dressed properly, they're seated properly, they know escape procedures, safety procedure on the aircraft, and then it gets more complicated when you start doing work with the SAS or normal combat troops, but especially SAS and counter terrorist work. Pretty much when you put on your helmet and plug into the intercom system you don't shut up from start to finish the whole time, when you're flying along and if you're doing air assaults, that sort of thing, it's just,

25:00 you're just talking all the time, safety checks and formation information and it's like calling the aircraft into the target and it's just blah blah blah blah blah. If you sat in the back you'd think we were speaking Chinese because we were talking so fast.

Are the left loadie and the right loadie talking over each other?

There's a set procedure, but the left loadmaster talks first. So if we were coming into a pad it's clear and left and clear and right. If we go to descend, clear to descent left, clear to descend right. If we were lifting up, clear up

25:30 left and clear up right. It's always left, and then the right guy. When we're approaching a building, or if we're approaching a target, the right loadmaster will do the distances, heights to run distances below. If they're using the hoist the right loadmaster controls the hoist, he also controls the hook. That's always, usually the senior guy, but if a senior guy gets with a junior guy he'll throw the junior guy over there to build up his experience.

There must be times where at the end of doing an exercise you must be completely

26:00 **zapped, are you?**

Yeah. In two hours flying you're tired. When you get four, six, eight hours you're getting pretty shagged, especially in Timor because of the amount of equipment you're carrying. We have flying limits of 10 hours a day, with night vision goggles it's half because of the concentration and the fact that you're looking basically through a pair of optical tubes and

26:30 you've only got, you have no peripheral vision so what you see through those tubes is what you get, and you've got to be looking in a diamond shape the whole time. So you're looking forward, up, down this whole time. If you're doing a hoist it's even worse, because you've got to be watching what's happening on the hoist. You've got to have that really good situational awareness, and what they like to do is when they, when you're doing a hoist and you're out with an instructor he's already pre-arranged with the pilot certain code words to start moving the aircraft while you're sort of

27:00 focusing on something else. So you've got to be watching what the hoist is doing. You've got to have your reference points and all of a sudden so you see like the reference points are moving away or they're getting too close, oops. You've got to realise, you've got to pull these things up. So yeah, you can get quite tired.

What about, do they have door guns?

Yeah. The Blackhawk's an incredible aircraft because it's a multi-roll aircraft. We just use it as a troop carrying aircraft or for medevacs. We just keep it under standard configuration

27:30 and we have two Mag 58 door guns, one either side. In the States they use Blackhawks as a command and control aircraft, which means it's chockers full of radios. They use it as electronic warfare, use it for medevacs, they use it as Special Forces work, they use it for gunships. The gunship's just laden with weapons. They've got, where the loadmaster sits, instead of the mag 58, they've either got a G cal

28:00 50 calibre or a 7.62 mini gun, and they use the external store support systems or like the wing stubs. They generally put rockets or they put 20 mm or 30 mm cannons on the pods itself and then in the cargo doors they put another 50 cal machine gun. So it's like this Flying Fortress, but we just keep it to a basic configuration because I think that's all the government can really afford.

28:30 We do a lot of flying without the door guns. When you've got the door guns there there's a lot more to consider, especially when you're doing your shooting. But even like, when you're just doing normal flying into a pad you've got to really think about your clearances and you've got the door gun to consider and you've got to be looking everywhere else and move it out of the road and do this and do that. So it makes it a bit more challenging but you get used to it, which is always good.

29:00 **And how is life in 5 Aviation?**

Very tiring. It's an element of the army that is flogged. There's not enough aircraft, not enough crews and the boys are just severely whipped and I spoke to, I bumped into one of the wives the other day who was up here and I asked her how things are going and they said, "It's still tired." and they're just trying to do too much with too little,

29:30 and people sort of question about the Blackhawk and is it a really good aircraft because of the crash the other day, but we've got basically 30 Blackhawks, not even that, for the entire Australian Defence Force. The Americans have got bases where they have 1,000 Blackhawks on the base itself. So you just can't imagine that. We expect to have like, and even within the Blackhawks, halve them because half of them are dedicated to the SAS alone. So you've got guys who,

30:00 they want the Blackhawks for infantry work or they want the Blackhawks to go and move artillery pieces or they want the Blackhawks to go and work with the navy or we've got to deploy them to East Timor or whatever. So everyone wants a piece of [UNCLEAR] because of the Blackhawks and where you get tired. I think I've seen the squadron at full strength for one week only and it never happened again, and the reason things happen sometimes is when you get tired.

30:30 The concentration you need when you fly, it's like a tightrope act. You've just got to focus the whole time. As soon as you put the helmet on you're focussing, so when you come back you're tired, you're hungry. When you start doing more than two hours and four hours and six hours, especially in the field, and you've got to do night work at night, you don't have the comfort of a nice air conditioned bed to come to, you've just got to sleep in the field and that's when you sort of sometimes put your hand up and say, "I am too tired to fly. I need a break or I need more time

31:00 off." So the regiment gets flogged fairly badly, but it's just one of those things. There's not much you can do about it.

So is everybody operational at the same time or do they roster blokes on and off to give people that break?

We basically work nine to five. The junior guys or the day guys are only day

31:30 qualified. They do all the day flying, and then we've got, everyone does day flying but the junior guys are trying to get a bit more day flying, and then you've got the senior guys, they do all the night vision work because they're qualified to do that. The squadrons, there's A and B Squadrons within 5 Aviation and C Squadron. A is Blackhawks, B is Blackhawks and C is Chinooks. A squadron is counter terrorist, B is what we call green role, work with infantry, artillery, that

32:00 sort of thing, and C is the heavy lift with the Chinooks. So pretty much we all work at the time, but we allow for the thing, like if you're flying at night you will come into work in the afternoon and if you've flown the night before you come to work later on that day. You'll come into work at lunchtime. There's a formula that you use. I think it's like whatever time, if you finish at midnight flying, you come in 12 hours the next day, so you come in 12 o'clock

32:30 that next day. And that's what tires guys out, the continuous night flying, the continuous day flying and the fact we don't have as many crews as we'd like and everyone wants a piece of us, and when we do counter terrorist flying, that's the hardest and the longest and the most tiring and most dangerous flying you can do because you're flying in tight ship formation and we don't get to do that a lot. So that's the problem with it.

And you spoke earlier how in 5 there was a lot more ex-air force blokes

33:00 **there. How did they fit in with the army blokes?**

They weren't really there that much. When I got there we had one or two guys and that was it, and when the regiment was initially established there were a lot of them there, but when I was there there was only one or two guys and there always seemed to be clashes. I mean, they were pretty good guys and we had no problems flying with them and we liked them, but I think there's just the RAAF/army mentality that went on, which is a bit sad. They were all here to do a job, all here on one team, but still, because we took the

33:30 helicopters away from the RAAF, they were a bit upset and things. They deserved it because they weren't using the Blackhawks properly and they were making silly mistakes and doing dumb things. I thought, like, "Well, the Defence Force needs the Blackhawks to do what they're supposed to do and you guys aren't doing it and you guys are supposed to be supporting the army." and they weren't doing it so that's why they were taken away. The RAAF were just absolutely spewing about it, but it's like, it's your own fault.

So pre the Blackhawk crash and doing night flying with the

34:00 **NVGs, how did you find that?**

Challenging. I was actually concerned about it at first because some of the senior guys, I heard some of the problems they had and some of the things that had happened and I'm going, like, "This is challenging, this is going to be hard." When I did the course, it was like, "Wow, this is just a culture shock." You've gone from, like, day sort of stuff to, like, looking through a pair of toilet rolls, but the course was good and I enjoyed it and when you got to do it on a regular basis you got good at it and you got confident with it, but it's when you had lengthy periods away from it,

34:30 that was the problem. It's like a football team who only trains occasionally. Of course you're going to lose every game because you're not training enough. So found that sometimes you had a few close calls and things didn't go the right way. So it's a Catch 22, 'cause you need to train and get that confidence and experience with it, but in the same process you've got to have that rest and time out as well. But I actually enjoyed that NVG flying. It was good. It was like watching

35:00 life through a video game. It was almost surreal flying along and looking at other aircraft, you go, "Wow, this is just awesome." It looks like something you see when you actually like play Blackhawk Down on the computer or some of the flight sim on the computer. That's what it's like. It looks like that. Very enjoyable, very challenging work. I had a lot of good flights, a lot of good missions and a lot of good fun.

Had you had any close calls prior to the accident?

Yeah, yeah. We'd nearly

35:30 crashed a couple of times. We came in to land one night, we were actually off doing troop training and as we came into land we didn't realise that our sister ship was right behind us and close and we actually moved to the left and we actually heard later they were 10 feet from our tail rotor. They actually pulled off at the last minute. They didn't realise we were going to go left. We were supposed to go for the right side of this clearing and the pilot changed his mind, "I'll go to the left." and the other aircraft was going to the left at the same time.

36:00 One of the counter terrorist exercises, we had a Blackhawk coming straight for us. We'd just deployed the SAS onto the target and they were doing an assault and as we pulled away one of the other aircraft was turning straight into us. I told the pilots to pull break right and they don't question, they just do. So we broke hard right up and away from the target area and an incident report went in about it. I wasn't in trouble, I did the right thing. As far as I was concerned that aircraft was coming

36:30 straight for is. I'm not going to second guess, let's just get the fuck out of here. I think the incident with the Prime Minister, where they chopped off a few trees.

That's fairly sort of regular, isn't it, for Blackhawks to be taking the tops of trees off?

No.

No?

No, it's just a once off. I think it's the only time it's ever really happened. Occasionally you'll clip

37:00 a branch, but the leading edge of the rotor is titanium so it's not going to stop it. There was an incident down where the FA18s are down south of Newcastle. They were taxiing on the tarmac on the apron area, so they were on the apron area, and there were junior loadmasters on board and they actually taxied too close and struck a building, which wasn't exactly a good move. The guy, the right, the loadmaster on the right, he

37:30 made a mistake and paid for it. But, I mean, no one was hurt but it's just not a good thing. Rotors contacting solid object is just never a good thing.

You mentioned that the rotors have a titanium leading edge, what are they made out of otherwise?

Honeycomb nomax. Honeycomb nomax, other composite materials. It's been such a long time since I thought about it.

38:00 Made of composite materials, honeycomb nomax, leading edge is titanium. I've actually got a rotor tip cap here I'll show you later if you like. Each rotor is about $90,000 a pop. Woven Kevlar.

That's full four blade rotor, $90,000, or was that each blade?

Each rotor. Like a Blackhawk has four rotors so each rotor is $90,000. Look, they're incredibly tough. Like we heard stories of them in Grenada when they were actually coming back with bullet holes

38:30 through the rotors and the pilots didn't even know they'd been shot through the rotors. So you can sort of, a Blackhawk will take a lot of damage before they crash in a combat situation. They'll cop a fair beating. The rotors are a two-man lift, two guys can lift a rotor and amazingly they're sort of quite flexible and they have to be for the flying around. You sort of think, "Wow, how do these things stay on." but they do. They're just very well made.

39:00 **I know the Apaches had a lot of problems in the Gulf War with sand and things. Were there any climatic things in Australia that affected the serviceability of the Blackhawks?**

Yeah, the corrosion problems we had. There wasn't a wash program, so to speak, for the Blackhawks, and also when we bought the Blackhawks we bought the Ferrari version. We should've bought the Commodore version. They put too much stuff on it. They spent too much stuff in putting on the fantastic

39:30 toys and gizmos. We should've bought a more basic model and saved more money and bought more aircraft. Being based in Townsville too, close to the ocean we were having problems with corrosion and it's only now they've established hangars for the aircraft. Each aircraft has its own hangar and they've got a wash point and they've got civilian cleaners and one aircraft is washed a day. In fact sometimes they do two a day to keep the aircraft washed. They've got like a, I suppose the best way to describe it is like an Armorall product they use on it to

40:00 sort of put on the aircraft. We actually were doing it ourselves and we had a lot of shiny Blackhawks on the tarmac because we were actually using too much stuff. It wasn't affecting it as in, like, but it was making it, we were just getting a bit carried away with material. So we just sort of had to tone that down a bit. They handle the dust fairly well. Like, we really haven't had the sort of conditions they have over in the desert,

40:30 but dust sort of affects anything, any sort of vehicle, be it Land Rover, tank or helicopter. Especially with the Apache, like it's a very complicated piece of equipment. It's all singing or dancing and you've got your firing rockets, you're firing anti-tank missiles, you're firing guns and the aircraft's just a massive flying computer and even the Blackhawks have computers. You find you get a fair bit of dust in the cockpit, so a lot of the pilots would carry a paint brush and just brush down the console and keep it nice and clean.

41:00 In fact, when you fly at night under night vision goggles, when you come into a landing it's like, you know those little sparklers you put on a cake? That's exactly what it's like, it's sort of all, you can see all the sparks flying and the dust is coming up and hitting the leading edge of the rotors, so you can sort of see it with the naked eye, but under night vision goggles you can really see it. It's like wow, that's a lot of dust. But in normal Australian conditions we haven't had

41:30 too many dramas except for the corrosion. That's all fixed now.

Tape 7

00:32 **When the Blackhawks are flying in formation is their communication between the actual Blackhawks or only internally?**

No, no, you've got communication between all aircraft. There's a set air procedure. When you're flying by yourself it's not so much of a big problem. You're basically just talking back to the tower and maybe talking to a few others, like civilian aircraft in the area. When you're flying with another Blackhawk there's a set procedure about talking to each other about what's going on. There's also, in the briefing,

01:00 a plan of, like, where we're going, the formation we're flying, where's the lead aircraft going to be, who's going to do what and when do you take over, that sort of thing, and that ties in with the internal talk amongst the crew itself because while the pilots are talking to each other via the radio from aircraft to aircraft you don't want to be saying a word. You've got to let them have their communication, because if you talk on the intercom you'll override what they say. So that's where the crew environment comes in, to know sort of when to shut up and when not to say things and

01:30 such like.

And how is that determined which aircraft will be the lead?

Usually it's like, it's not a big thing. Sometimes they'll throw the junior guy up the front and say, "OK, you've got to get experience, so this is how you're gonna do it." but it's always, like, the junior guy will go with a senior pilot. Sometimes you get guys with some experience and they'll say, "Well, I'll lead this time, you can lead next time." or they swap over. So one guy will lead out from the airport and hit the training area and halfway

02:00 through the mission they'll swap over or they'll swap over constantly. Sometimes you'll get, and to that experience too, because you have to have the captain of the aircraft, be it a lieutenant, you're still considered the captain of the aircraft because you're in charge. So if something happens it's your fault because you're the boss. And also then you have like those in charge of flight lead, so it can change between aircraft but as long as it's pre-planned of how it's gonna run it's not a big deal. Plus you get like

02:30 the senior pilots will say, "Well, OK, we're going to go out and do some formation flying, and young Lieutenant Bloggs over there, he's going to be doing all the planning, all the flying and he'll be flight lead the whole time." You've got to get them experienced, but he goes with the senior pilot who helps him with the planning, helps him with the briefings and then helps him flying along, helps him out as

much as possible.

What was it that you enjoyed most in the Blackhawk?

Flying, flying. I loved flying. I really enjoyed

03:00 it, and my helmet, I really liked my helmet. I just really enjoyed the work, just being in the squadron. I used to get to work early. I loved wearing my flight suit, being with the guys, going off and doing missions. I just really enjoyed flying 24/7, and especially when I got to do night vision goggle work, you got a lot better at day flying because your concentration at night was hyped up, more so than the day.

03:30 You just become more aware of everything at night, so during the day, you're more aware, you become a better crewman. When we did the difficult stuff, like doing slope landings or doing a pinnacle landing where you basically bring the aircraft down and you've got to, say, touchdown on the top of a rock formation with one wheel, using the hoist, doing external load work. I just enjoyed every aspect, I suppose,

04:00 working with our customers like the infantry or the artillery, that sort of thing. When we did, like, open days when the families would come in or the public would come in, I was always put with the Blackhawk to sort of explain to people how things ran and stuff. So yeah, just every aspect, it was really good. Search and rescue work was good as well. I only did one mission in Australia. I did a few in

04:30 Timor but I think I was in the regiment for three or four months and they said, "We've got to do a search and rescue out on the reef." So they sent along a senior sergeant and he came along to ride in the back but it was myself and another loadmaster, he's a fairly junior loadmaster, Stu Bailey, or he's more senior than I was, but compared to the senior sergeant he was very junior and we went out and we acted as the loadmasters and, sorry, hang on, no, I've got that wrong.

05:00 I was the left hand loadmaster, the sergeant was the right hand loadmaster. Stu Bailey was the wireman. He went down the hoist to do the rescue, and that was good experience. It was really good that they had the confidence and said, "Well, you've got to do it some time. Now's the time to do it." They put you with a senior guy and off you go. We had a medic in the back as well, and it was a good mission, very good mission.

What was that mission, you were?

There were three guys who sailed their yacht onto a reef and they were stuck and they'd been there for

05:30 24 hours and we were the only aircraft around with the legs to get out there. We had the range to get out there. So we flew out there, it was actually funny because we flew out there, we got set to go, we did a couple of, a bit of a reconnaissance to come in and then once we got established as Stu was going down on the hoist I hung out the window and just waving to him and he's going, "You jackass." and then when he got down he said, "OK fellows, don't rush, just form a line and we'll sell you some tickets." They were pretty tired and cranky. They were sort of going, "Oh yeah, just get us up there." and then

06:00 yeah, we just basically hoisted them up and took them back. But the thing is though, in that situation the reason we use a wireman, because if you put weight on the wire, on the hoist to go down so it's fairly stable, you also carry a little kit with a rope in it so that when you're sending someone up on the hoist you've got this rope attached to it. It helps sort of steady it, but also when the sling comes down

06:30 empty it's not being flung around by the wash. You can just basically reel it back in, put someone on. When you're the last person to hop in the sling, well you've got the weight on it, the hoist, anyway, so that will make it stable and bring it back up. So Stu went down and had a bit of a swim in the ocean and got the guys on the slings and away we went.

When you're rescuing someone like that, is he, when you're bringing the civilian up, is he on there with them or are they on the sling by themself?

We did a double hoist. There were three

07:00 guys. We put them on the slings by themselves but he went down and basically said, "OK, this is what we're going to do. This is how you do it. This is what we want you to do." When you've got someone on a sling they don't do anything, they just sit there and hang. We don't want them trying to climb into the cabin themselves. We do that. We're basically, it's sort of like the friendly spear tackle to get them in. You don't want them falling off the sling. That's just a nightmare. So he goes down and tells them what's going to go on, 'cause what we'll do, we'll come in over the

07:30 top of the boat, send the wireman down and we'll back away and we'll run out, pay out cable. I think we've got 425 feet of cable, I think, if memory serves, and that way he can sort of, "OK guys, this is the deal." and then we can come back in and as we come in we retrieve the cable up to the hoist and then we bring them up. Single hoisting is always the easiest. The double hoist is a pain in the arse, but sometimes you've just got to do it. You don't have much of a choice. And Stu came up with the last

08:00 guy. So it was a good day, good experience, got a face on TV and everything. I got a bit of ribbing because when the guys were taken out of the aircraft and sent towards the tarmac we were sort of joking, I had them in a headlock to make sure they didn't wander off and I never saw the footage but apparently it looks like I had them in headlock, "Come on, go this way." So, it was quite funny.

Doing a mission like that must be pretty rewarding after all the training that you put in?

Yeah, yeah. It's like when people ask me about

08:30 the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and say, "Would you have liked to have gone?" "Oh yeah, of course I would have." "But why?" "Well, I'm a soldier." and basically a soldier is a football player that trains and trains and never gets to play a game, so when we get to do operational service we're at the Gabba [sportsground], we're actually playing the game, so to speak. So yeah, it's good when we actually get to do that sort of thing, and that's the beauty of flying the Blackhawks, you can do operational work within Australia, so if there was a terrorist situation and we were called in we'd be doing our job for real regardless of

09:00 being on home territory, which is actually what happened when they had the CHOGM [Commonwealth Heads of Government] meeting down the Gold Coast. There were Blackhawks flying around full of SAS guys and they were down there for real, and the same at the Olympics as well. So it's good that we can do operational work within our own borders.

How did you find interacting with the SAS and combat troops?

Great, especially the SAS, very professional. They don't wear rank on their uniforms so you don't know who you're talking to, so I'm having a chat with guys and realising, calling this guy mate

09:30 and, "How ya goin' ." and blah blah blah, and one's a major, one's a captain and they don't care. They're there to do a job, very professional, very good at what they do, best in the world as far as I'm concerned. British SAS are on equal par, and even working with their own infantry. They're very good at what they do. We're treated differently to everyone else. Like, we had to do some work one day with an artillery unit

10:00 and we actually weren't part of the exercise, we just went out there for the day to support them and move their guns around and we flew out there and artillery are very, very strict. I think they're more regimented than infantry, and we flew out there and we landed and shut down and their battalion, sorry, their battery sergeant major was yelling orders and making guys run around and making them jump through hoops and stuff and we wandered

10:30 over, "G'day sir, how ya goin'? J.J. Fraser." very relaxed, and he knew we were professionals and do a job and support them, and it was later on, I actually ran into the same battery sergeant major on a deployment and I was doing ground liaison work and I had to go along and brief these guys to fly Blackhawks and I met a sergeant who walked up and introduced me to him as J.J. Fraser, said, "G'day sir, I'm Sergeant So and so, this is J.J. Fraser." and the battery sergeant major barked at the

11:00 sergeant, "We use rank in the army, sergeant, get the fuck out of here." and off he goes and I go, "G'day sir, J.J. Fraser, remember me?" "Oh JJ, how are you going mate, how are you buddy?" So it's like poor old sergeant got a kick in the arse, but sort of I'm this guy's best friend, so we're treated differently to everybody else. I think because it's not so much the rank as the position we hold as a loadmaster on a Blackhawk and the responsibilities that we have.

Did you have a favourite type of mission or exercise?

11:30 I guess I just, I guess tactical flying's a lot of fun. That's pretty full on, but I like tight pads, when you had to go into a tight pad and the whole crew was working together. Doing hoist work was good, but pretty much tight pads was always my favourite, or just spotting a pad and charging in straight over it, not sort of much time or warning.

12:00 That was always pretty good. Yeah, pretty much that, tight pads and tactical flying. That was always good fun.

How realistic would you say a lot of those training missions are?

Well, they're extremely realistic because if you make a mistake you die, and in fact it's like the way we do a tight pad in high range training area is exactly the same way we do

12:30 a tight pad in East Timor. It's exactly the same, except you're wearing a bit more equipment. You've usually got, the guys in the back usually don't carry live ammunition. All the procedures you do on a Blackhawk are exactly the same. What you do in Townsville you do in East Timor, except you actually carry live ammunition. Your refuelling procedures, your hoist procedures, if you do external loads it's all the same. You've just got to consider that you've got a weapon with live ammunition.

13:00 It's pretty much all the same. So that's with the Blackhawk, the training is quite realistic and it has to be, 'cause like on the ground if an infantry soldier makes a mistake, he gets lost or he trips over and hurts an ankle, up in the sky we chop off a tree or we take out a rotor or we kill someone on the hoist, so we can't afford to dick around and lose concentration and make mistakes.

What would you say the proportion would've been amongst the Blackhawk guys of single guys

13:30 **versus married?**

There are more married guys than single guys, yeah. Probably 60-40, 70-30, about that, yeah.

Did you have a girlfriend at that time?

On and off I did, but pretty much most of the time I was just pretty much single. I was just having too much fun. I just had the best job on the planet and a relationship really wasn't a priority at the time. I had a couple of girlfriends while I was in Townsville but was quite happy

14:00 sort of just doing my job.

Did they worry about you?

I don't know. I never, I hope they cared for me, but I think it's just like a job. People just think you just get dressed and go off to work and it's just considered a nine to five job. I suppose they did, I don't know. It was just considered a nine to five job.

14:30 I suppose you'd have to talk to them about that one.

Can we talk about the accident?

Sure.

I guess maybe if we start with if you sort of talk us through the day?

We'd been doing some lead up training with the SAS for our biannual counter terrorist exercise, and prior to the SAS we spent a week or two doing lead up training,

15:00 formation flying, doing time on target, doing assaults to building, that sort of thing, without the SAS, getting our calls down pat, and then when the SAS rock up we then started from scratch again and just work up and do it bit by bit and work up the training. On the day itself I remember just going to work, being a normal day. We'd, yeah, everyone was quite relaxed and my crew, Kel Hales, John Berrigan and Michael Baker, we

15:30 were very slick at what we were doing. The crew coordination was excellent. We were a very high standard. We were reading each other's thoughts, we were reacting to everyone instantly, there were no problems whatsoever. In fact Michael Baker was on a high because he just got promoted to corporal. I'd actually spoken to our troop sergeant, Mick Allen, and he said, "Look, what are we going to about Mick, he's not a happy camper at the moment." And I said, "Look, promote the guy, make him a corporal. It will beef him up." I think Michael was looking for

16:00 some direction and he wasn't very happy about the way things were going. He felt like he was just behind the eight ball with promotions. Make the guy a corporal and he'll really improve, and he did. In fact he became quite competitive in a good way, which is a good thing, but as a crew we were like, very lickety-split. We did the –

Sorry, can I just interrupt, did you always work with the same crew?

No. No, it was always, on counter terrorist exercises, yes. You were put into a crew,

16:30 you don't change, but when you're off doing normal flights you usually fly within your troop, but it's known that sometimes you'll fly with other guys. But on a counter-terror exercise the crews are picked at the beginning and that's who you stick with. There's always good crew coordination when you fly normally, but counter terror exercises, you've got to be above the board. You've got to be above average with crew co-ord. So that's why they keep the same crews and use the same equipment. You always use the same night vision goggles. See, that way you've already adjusted

17:00 and they're focused to the way you want them to your eyes, because everyone's eyes are different, and your helmets are customised, as in, like, the fitting and the shaping of them and they're checked regularly and you always fly with the same helmet. You don't swap helmets and stuff like that because everyone has a different shaped head so the helmets can be different sizes. And they usually fly in the same aircraft too, which is a good thing. So they try to keep everything the same, so there's

17:30 very few changes. We planned for the training mission that afternoon to do a practice run onto the target and everything went fairly well. A difficult target, because it was like a big open plain surrounded by trees and the targets were revetments for artillery pieces, so there was nothing that was really standing out, that was a good reference point. So that made it

18:00 hard, but still we got through OK and everything went according to plan. That night, we then flew back to Townsville in the afternoon.

And in that afternoon run were there SAS troops on board then?

Yeah, yeah. We flew back and

18:30 had a final briefing and we got some hot box meals and then we refuelled the aircraft, flew back up to the high range training area and we had dinner with the SAS, had a final briefing and at the last minute, we were actually sitting there turning and burning ready to go, they put on two additional SAS guys to act as snipers. So basically as the guys were going down they'd basically have extra fire support from myself and Michael Baker, but also from the two

19:00 SAS snipers. Took off, everything was just procedure, nothing out of the ordinary. We flew around and…

Actually, just before we go on, can you just explain turning and burning?

You're sitting there with rotors turning, engines running and you're just waiting. Your rotors are turning and you're burning fuel.

19:30 So it's like, let's kick the tyres and light the fires. So yeah, they put these two guys on at the last minute, which was a tragedy because they both died, and it was just a last second thing. If they'd been left out of the aircraft they would've survived or maybe the accident wouldn't have happened at all. In fact the aircraft was that full that a guy by the name of John Church, or Jonathan Church, was actually leaning against

20:00 me 'cause we sit in a seat and they sit on the floor. His whole body was leaning against me the whole time and I met his parents later on and it was just really quite sad that I was the last point of contact for their son, and he was put on the aircraft at the last minute. We took off and adopted the formation. We had six Blackhawks and we adopted a box formation so

20:30 Black 1, Black 2, Black 3, Black 4 and Black 5 and Black 6 which are the sniper ships, they were outside the box. Went through our normal procedures, because as we approached the target we give the SAS guys a 10 minute call, so that way if they're using demolitions, say, if they've got to assault a building they've got to have demolitions to blow up the doors and that, or they can then prepare the demolitions and prepare the weapons and load their weapons.

21:00 The cargo doors are opened and pulled back and locked into position and the arms or the FRAD are extended out the aircraft. The FRAD is the fast roping and rappelling device which is the ropes on the pictures over there, you can see. They're extended and locked out and checked. We then go through some more checks, and then we basically roll into attack formation and attack speed and we usually fly about 145 knots towards the target. We can't fly any faster than that because the cargo doors are back

21:30 and that's the VNE, velocity not to be exceeded. When they're forward we can fly a lot faster but when they're open and locked back that's as fast as we can go. As we were approaching the target we gave the two minute call which means, "OK, we're close to the target now so get ready to deploy." The SAS guys have got their ropes ready to go, the fast ropes which are quite large ropes and they're all coiled up like a snake. They just kick them out and they just drop straight down and they deploy. It was at that stage that I noticed that Black 2

22:00 was closing in on us, and when we fly we fly at a distance of two rotors from each other. So the rotor on the Blackhawk, the diameter is 53 feet eight inches, so you're looking at basically 106 feet, 107 feet four inches. When you're flying along at just under 250, 300 kilometres an hour and you're only 107 feet apart there's not much room for error. I got Kel Hales to move to the left, move the aircraft to the left, because we were closing in

22:30 on Black 2 or they were closing in us. It looked like they were closing in on us from what I could tell. We got things settled in the formation, we settled up again. I called, "30 seconds." which means, "OK, we're close to the target, about to deploy." I scanned the formation three times to make sure. I was looking at the sniper aircraft and I was looking at Black 4. Sorry, I've led you astray there. We weren't in box formation, we had three Blackhawks line abreast and Black 4 was behind us, so it was 1, 2, 3

23:00 and then we had Black 4 behind us and the sniper ships were on the outside. So I'm using the box formation from armour. Scan information, and then I had to look forward to the target because I actually had to call the pilots in to the target doing the heights to run distances below towards the target. When I looked forward I couldn't really see much because we were going that fast and I couldn't really get my head out further enough. So I just quickly put my head back to look through the cockpit windows, which is a practice I've done before

23:30 and it's quite a common practice. A lot of other guys use it. Identified the target, and then I heard this grounding screaming noise and I looked back and all I could see was sparks flying everywhere. I thought, "This can't be good." but it just happened in the blink of an eye. Next thing you know the aircraft was just flipped upside down and I could just feel this falling sensation and then this almighty bang, I suppose, for

24:00 lack of a better word, and that was pretty much it. I don't remember anything after that. I do remember waking up briefly in ICU [intensive care unit] while they were cleaning up my face but that was about it. They just got me on, they had these, like, little whistles they give you and when you suck on them you're actually taking in anaesthetic

24:30 to sort of make you feel pain free. So they were giving me one of those on the way in, so they told me, when they were doing the medevac and that's all I remember. But it was later on, when I was in hospital I just had this dream one night that I'd been pulled out of the aircraft and these four guys are carrying me away and I started to stir and get really unsettled and everything and they put me down

25:00 and it was like, I was like, an outer body experience, and I came down and said, "It's OK, you'll be fine." and I settled and then picked me up and took me off to where the medics were and I did it again, and I said, "No, no, you'll be fine, the medics are just there." and they took me up, and there was a medic by

the name of Stevo, Corporal Stevenson, and he was actually a medic in 5 Aviation but he'd been transferred to the SAS and he looked after me and he said to me,

25:30 he said, "Who are you, what's your name?" Because it was pitch black, there was aircraft on fire, there was ammunition going off, and he'd actually lost his trauma scissors so he couldn't actually cut my equipment off me, but I was renowned for having knives in my boots. I always had like a boot knife. He said, "Who are you?" I said, "It's J.J. Fraser." He said, "He always carries a boot knife." So sure enough there they were, so he pulled it off and cut all the equipment off me and bandaged me up and got me prepped for a medevac straight back to Townsville. I spoke to Stevo later on and asked him about that

26:00 night and he said, "Yeah, that's exactly what happened." He said the guys who carried me said that that's exactly what happened so it was a bit freaky but it just actually happened. I asked him to write down exactly what happened and I've got it on paper somewhere, but yeah, that's exactly what happened, so he told me, and there's a few other things that happened that I can't quite recall now. Yeah, I was just medevaced

26:30 back to Townsville and what they were doing was actually redlining the engines. Within the Blackhawk cockpit they don't actually work in numbers, they actually work in colours, so you've got green, yellow, red. Green's operational, yellow is like pay attention, red is like what the fuck are you doing? And basically from

27:00 what I can tell they got approval to do it and they basically just pushed the engine to the max and red lined it all the way back to Townsville because there were guys dying as they were flying back and I remember talking to Danny McReedy, who was our RSM at the time and he was at home and he heard the Blackhawks fly over his house and he said, "That can't be good." You can tell the speed of a Blackhawk, what it's like. I mean, he's been in aviation for a long time. He's an ex-Kiowa observer and he knew that can't be good and no sooner he'd said that then the phone rang

27:30 and said, "There's been an accident." Yeah, and then basically it was like, I'm not too sure how long a period but I remember just waking up in hospital and I woke up and saw my family and the girlfriend I was dating at the time, she was there, and I woke up said, "I'm not feeling very well, can you get a bucket?" And these two nurses came up with a little kidney dish and I'm going like,

28:00 "You're going to pay for that." and I projectile vomited and just covered them in vomit at six feet. So it was a pretty good shot, I thought, and that sort of freaked everybody out because they thought I had brain damage, but I was just vomiting because I was sick as a dog and probably full of medication and they were just trying to bomb me out. So I went back to sleep and woke up a day or so later. But apparently people had been coming in to talk to me the whole time and I can't recall a thing. It was probably three days afterwards I actually started to remember stuff. But

28:30 yeah, and that's what happened. We lost 18 guys that night. On my aircraft all my guys were killed except for one of the SAS guys, Gerry Bampton, he's in a wheel chair. And on the other aircraft I think they lost four guys, four or five, no, six guys, I think. We landed upside down in flames and nose down, which is just the worst way to go. They landed wheels down. If you can land wheels down in a Blackhawk your

29:00 chances of survival are, the percentage is raised dramatically. But upside down, no rotors, you're screwed. So that's why we lost the men.

That would've been pure luck though, who landed what way, wouldn't it, in that kind of...

It was the damage that was caused, because as we collided our rotors chewed through Black 2's side panel through their fuel tank and their fuel spewed all over us, but because we lost our rotors

29:30 we had no way to continue flying so we just flipped upside down, and also having the fuel flow onto the hot engines, that's just, that's going to ignite them straight away. So yeah, so we just didn't stand a chance, but because they landed wheels up and they weren't lucky to land wheels up, it was because of Captain Dave Burke and his flying skills and Lieutenant Simon Edwards that they landed wheels up. So he's a damn good pilot,

30:00 but with my guys, well we didn't have the equipment to do it. We had no rotors. Superman couldn't have done it, so we just didn't stand a chance and that's why you had such a loss of life. Michael Baker, who was the other loadmaster, his five point harness, which is the harness we attach ourselves with, basically it's a body harness. When you attach it to the roof, so if we're working at the back we don't fall out of the aircraft and if we do we're not going to fall a long way.

30:30 He actually attached his harness to the floor and it was pretty loose, which is not a safety problem, it's just the way he liked it. I was attached to the roof and quite tight, and unfortunately when the aircraft hit the ground he was flung outside and was decapitated. As to the other guys I'm not too sure what happened to them. Yeah, it was just,

31:00 don't know why.

When you regained consciousness in the hospital were you aware straight away that you had, that the Blackhawk had gone down or were unaware?

I'd been conscious for a couple of days but I didn't know. I was just so drugged up out of my eyeballs. I fractured my spine, my pelvis, my left knee, my right hip. I'd lost six litres of blood. My ribs were fractured. My face was like I'd been beaten up by

31:30 Mike Tyson, 'cause the night vision goggles had been thrown back in my face or my helmet. I just wasn't aware of it. I mean, I was aware of it in a sort of drugged up state because I'd been talking to my commanding officer and, but yeah, it's sort of funny in a drugged up state. I knew, but it wasn't until I actually came out of that that I realised, "Oh, this is not good." So

32:00 it was sort of a weird thing. It was yes, I did know but no, I didn't know. They just had me drugged up fairly heavily, lots of morphine and all those good drugs, which I highly recommend. But yeah, it's a hard thing to explain I suppose.

So with fairly horrific injuries like that what kind of recovery process was there for you?

Normally with a fractured pelvis they actually operated on you and

32:30 they pin you. They put bolts and pins through your body to stabilise your pelvis. I was actually exceedingly fit. I was always in the gym always running, always swimming so I had like the washboard abs sort of thing and all that sort of good stuff, so I was very very fit and that played a big part in my recovery. I spent two weeks at Townsville General Hospital, never got operated on, was never pinned and I spent three months or so at

33:00 Parkhaven Private Hospital, where I just basically lay there, watched television and rested. But my body was in full recovery mode, so I spent a lot of time sleeping. In fact I had a habit of falling asleep in front of people when they were there to see me. I used to warn people, "If I fall asleep, you're not boring, I'm just tired." When they would come in in the mornings to give me breakfast and for me to have a shave and have a wash and stuff and get the nurses to bathe me and that sort of stuff, by

33:30 the time I'd had breakfast, had a shave, they'd changed the sheets on the bed, because what they actually had to do was they had to put this frame around the outside of me, slide these slats underneath me, lift me up, change all the sheets, let me go to the toilet, lower me back down, let me get cleaned up, clean my teeth and that sort of stuff, I was hammered, absolutely wasted. I felt like I'd run a marathon, so I'd go back to sleep. Wake up at lunchtime, have lunch, go "OK." stay awake for a couple of hours in the afternoon and come dinner time, have dinner, watch TV,

34:00 until eight o'clock, nine o'clock and out for the count again. My body was just in mass recovery mode and I just needed all that time and energy to get better. And, like, I was eating well but I lost 30 kilos in weight, just muscle wastage. But hospital was interesting, like my commanding officer, Tony Fraser,

34:30 brought in a TV so I had TV and video, so I could watch movies because I had nothing else to do, and the nurses were pretty cool. They'd come in and look after me. I had burns on my legs which I had to get operated on later, I had to get skin grafts. But at the time I was not in a psychological state to deal with an operation. So I said, "Look, can you cut the dead skin off and hope for the best?" And there was a major by the name of Carmel Van Der Rijt from Laverack Base Medical Centre. She watched over me like an angel

35:00 and she said, "Look, OK, we'll just see what we can do." She'd come over and hold my hand while they cut off the dead skin. That's right, I met her at Townsville General Hospital the first time. "I'm Carmel Van Der Rijt, what can I do for you?" I said, "Get me the fuck out of this joint." Townsville General Hospital's a very depressing place, especially when you're looking at a brick wall as a view. Then they took me to Parkhaven and I thought, room with a view, room with a view, nice meals, more nice meals, room with a view. They wheeled into this room, had a view of the gardens, they brought me in lasagne with salad

35:30 and I had pavlova for lunch. It was like, whoo, thank God. So that was a big psychological boost, I needed that. But like, even in that bad state a couple of funny things did happen to me. I remember one time I was flat on my back, I can't do anything so I'm totally reliant on everyone else. I had a little buzzer and I think, "What is it?" I could go

36:00 to the toilet in a bottle but if I had to do number 2s they had to take me up on a rack, which I really had no choice, there was no hole in the bed, and I went to the toilet once and I put down the bottle and then I knocked my buzzer down. I'm like, "Shit, I'm screwed, what do I do?" Then I got my little pick up stick, my little scratcher, and I dropped that. OK, well I'm well and truly screwed now. So I phoned my father in Brisbane and said, "Can you please call the nursing station." which was 20 feet away from me, "and ask them to come in. I've dropped everything." So he phoned from Brisbane

36:30 and phoned the nursing station in Townsville and they walked in and said, "A few problems, have you?" So they picked everything up and took the bottle away and I was fine. That was quite funny, I just couldn't believe that one. What else happened? I had mates come in to see me. I've had a mate, Peter Cox, a funny bastard, he came in one night with his wife and they brought in Subway for dinner and we had some munchies and stuff and it was great, and he was just, he got me laughing and when you've

37:00 got a fractured pelvis you don't want to laugh, but I just couldn't stop it. He was cracking all these dumb jokes and he promised me we'd go shopping one day in a Batman and Robin outfit afterwards and go, "Holy hole in the doughnut Batman." and get some special doughnuts and I was just in tears in

laughing. “You’ve got to shut up, I don’t know if this is worth the pain you’re putting me through.” but it was a good night. It was just funny. I actually needed a break because I was going a little bit bananas. I mean, three and a half months on your back and you do go a little bit loopy. But I mean, the Olympics were on so I had to watch all that and I was giving the nurses the updates of who’s got how many medals

37:30 and stuff and that was pretty cool, and Friends had just started too, the television show, so I got to see that, and then after three months I was sent Laverack Base Medical Centre where I was looked after very well by the staff there and Carmel Van Der Rijt watched over me like a hawk and said I was basically her patient and don’t fuck with this guy. If I had any problems I saw her direct. I was then taken down to the physio department within the hospital itself

38:00 and I had three of the best physios, John Kirwan, Janet Donnelly and Andy Horricks who worked on me all the time. In fact when they looked at me and looked at the X-rays for the first time they said, “We don’t know where to start.” But they just worked on me bit by bit by bit. In fact it was interesting. With my left knee with all the fractures, all the scar tissue had built up so I couldn’t bend it. So what they had to do, they would sit me on the table once I was able to actually sit up, because

38:30 spending so much time, you’ve got no balance. So they actually started to sit me up higher and higher and when I actually sat up for the first time it was like, whoa, like a roulette wheel, place your bets, place your bets, and I’m breaking out in a sweat and I’m going, “Jesus Christ, I don’t feel too good. I think I’ll lie down again.” and actually they used to wheel me out on the weekends, out into this, sort of like a side car park area so I could get a bit of sun and everything else and people would come and say, “How the hell have you got a suntan?”

39:00 “Oh, they wheel me out in the car park.” and I used to do some light exercises like this, you know those handles you have on your beds? I used to like pull myself up and do some chin ups and stuff. I had nothing else to do. Yeah, they worked on me really well and when I first started to sit up, and when I actually sat up for the first time and they got me into a chair, whoa, the body was just going into mass overload. I was about to puke everywhere. I said,

39:30 “Whoa.” I was soaked in sweat and I was going to vomit. I said, “You’ve got to get me back down again.” So I got back down on the bed and I felt better. I said, “Don’t do that again.” but I had to get used it, and then eventually when I could sit up they put me on, like, the tables they have in the physio department and they put 100 kilos of sandbag weights on my leg. They’d wrap a strap around my ankle, run it underneath the bed and then Janet would sit in front of me,

40:00 push my leg towards the bed. Andy would be behind me pulling me on the strap and John would be leaning down, so I basically had, like, 160 kilos of weight on my leg trying to get the scar tissue to basically loosen up. It worked bit by bit, so it just took a while. There’s another way you can do it, where actually they do it under anaesthetic, but I thought, “No, I’ll just do it this way.” That doesn’t sound like much fun. It took a while and eventually I started walking very slowly. In fact at night I would cut laps

40:30 around the hospital on my crutches. I used to do it in the wheelchair to build up my shoulders again and then I, when I actually started walking I used to do it with crutches and walking sticks and then bit by bit by bit just built up. Yeah, I was just putting myself back together bit by bit by bit.

Tape 8

00:34 Pretty well. The physios basically said they’d never seen someone recover so fast with such bad injuries. It was just due to my fitness level and also my experience of weight training. I’d been training in the gym for about 10 years and your muscles basically have a memory so they were able to re-establish themselves fairly well. Just with my spine and my pelvis and that sort of area, that’s been really, I’m still working on that at the moment. I’ve had a few problems with it so I’m just

01:00 getting there. But basically I was able to get myself back to flying fitness. In fact I was able to pass the basic fitness assessments within the military, able to go for the runs and stuff. Did a couple of backpack marches, which I sort of paid for but I thought, “I’ll just suck it up and do it.” But within hospital, having the experience of weight training beforehand was a big plus.

01:30 In fact I remember the whole time I was horizontal on my back, flat on my back and they took me to a hydrotherapy pool and I went there in a wheel chair and for the first time in like three and a half months I was actually able to stand up, but in a pool, but it was just bliss and I had the freedom and I could swim around a little bit and it was like, this is the best thing ever. Just things like that that made the world of difference.

02:00 But I still totally depended on the nurses at the hospital. Like, they had to come in and stand there when I had a shower in the chair and I couldn’t dry myself down. I couldn’t reach my toes. They had to clip my toenails. I hadn’t had a haircut in three and a half months. I was starting to look like something out of the Partridge Family, so I got a haircut and everything. I had a pretty good set up. I had, like, one of the suites at Laverack Barracks. It’s a really a very good set up hospital. They’ve got, like, four rooms which are set up as suites so you’ve got your own

02:30 private room and private shower and everything which I needed, and I had video and TV and stuff. In fact, when I went to leave hospital it took two and half car loads. I just had so much stuff, videos and TV, just so much stuff there, clothes and books and magazines and what not and during that time actually I did some study. I did my Year 12 maths to keep myself busy. It was good, I'm glad I did it, but I actually wish I'd done a computer course instead.

03:00 It would've been more beneficial. Yes, I just tried to keep myself entertained and just basically try and keep busy. And then halfway between that there was the Board of Inquiry which I had to attend for the accident, and probably one of the hardest things was meeting the families. When I was at

03:30 Parkhaven Hospital I met Leah Rose who was Kel Hales' fiancee at that time. They'd only just got engaged. In fact they weren't too far off getting married and I'd met her once or twice before, but not really had a good decent chat with her, and she came in. She came in with my psych, Marie Reilly, who was an army major, a fabulous lady, and we sat down and we started talking. She wanted to know exactly what happened so I took her from

04:00 the very start of the accident and she was just in tears. She was very very upset and then I sort of kicked into another gear and said, "OK." and I started telling funny stories and when she left the room she had a smile on her face and she was laughing. So I told her some funny stories about Kel and she was there for three hours and I was pretty wasted, but then Leanne Bigold came in and she was Michael Baker's girlfriend. She just appeared out of nowhere and she popped in to have a chat as well. I'm going, "Oh God." so I had a chat with her for

04:30 an hour and a half or so, and then I slept pretty well for two days. But I think it was just important that the families found out what happened and they found out that their loved ones died without really feeling anything. When I met Kel's father it was like looking at a ghost. The similarities were just unbelievable, and I held it together the whole time he was there and we were talking, and when he left he

05:00 said, "Don't blame yourself." and that was hard to take. It was like, ooh, 'cause I did blame myself, that's the thing. I was the senior loadmaster on the lead aircraft and an accident's happened that wasn't my fault. It took me about four years to stop blaming myself, and to this day I still ask questions of why.

So what effect did him saying that have on you?

I burst into tears. I just lost it. I held it the hold time and then when he said that it was just too much. I met Kel's

05:30 Mum as well. She was a fabulous lady, Fay Hales, and, but Kel's father was an RSM from the RAAF and a very strong man, very steady man. So yeah, but that really hurt. I met John Berrigan's wife. She was a very angry lady, just angry at the whole sort of thing and actually blamed me for the accident. She accused me

06:00 of murder, but you know, she's just angry. So your husband's just been taken away, the father of your child's been killed and you've got to point your finger at someone and I copped it. I met Michael Baker's parents and his sister and they were very good. Actually, I still see them. The live up at Goodna short of Ipswich. I actually popped up to see them the other day after the Blackhawk accident that happened out near the RAAF base at Amberley just to make

06:30 sure they were OK, and they were good. They're sort of dealing with things a lot better and Mrs Baker was actually really stacking on the beef and she's gone on a big exercise program and got a good doctor and some medication, so she's a lot more, lost a lot of weight and looking really good, a lot more mobile. But meeting the family, it's hard, it's really hard. One of the SAS guys whose sister is in Brisbane, and I pop out to see her and the kids every now and then and say "Hi." and they appreciate a

07:00 chat and everything, and I had a chat with Caitlin about it and I told her everything that happened with the accident and the same as I did with Leah, and she had a lot of questions that had never been answered so I was able to answer all those questions which I think gives them closure. It hurts, 'cause all the guys' parents you're talking to are dead and you're the only one left, and the other guy is a paraplegic, so you feel exceedingly guilty. You go through a lot of survivor guilt.

07:30 **And what sort of help did you get from the army in dealing with those with psychologists and psychiatrists and things?**

They have the army psychs. I got an army psych straight away, Marie Reilly, and fabulous lady. I'm still in contact with her now. She's a colonel now, great lady, and I owe her a lot. Carmel Van Der Rijt, who's now a colonel as well, they're like my two angels. They watched over me the whole time,

08:00 and Marie got me through the initial stage of trying to figure things out and get through the hard parts and Carmel just watched over me with the operations they did on my legs and she would ride her bike over at night, ten o'clock at night she'd pop out to see me and make sure I'm OK and how things are going. She was just fabulous and I just love them both to death for what they did.

08:30 And then I had, unfortunately Marie had to return to Brisbane. I was actually pretty pissed at her for that because I really, I got so dependent on her, and they brought me a nice lady called Jan Scott and she was just too airy fairy. So they gave me another guy called Robert Zamatis and he was what I

needed. He was a good guy. We used to do counselling sessions in his car. We'd drive around Townsville, he'd give me a diet coke and we'd cruise around and that and that's how we had our sessions, which was good 'cause he'd get me out of the hospital and get me away and talked about certain

09:00 things and he was a really good guy. I had a psychiatrist who I saw lately called Michael Likely, very nice chap. His father actually served in World War II, flying aircraft, so he had an understanding. Met a psychiatrist by the name of Richard Green, pretty harsh chap, didn't like him very much at all. I've been through a fair few psychs; you just see them for different reasons. I had a psychotherapist,

09:30 Fraser de Groot, fabulous guy. Looked like Captain Pugwash with earings and everything and shorts and stuff. But got on well with him, very well, really got me through a lot of difficult stages. Tony Fraser, the commanding officer, watched over me and made sure I was comfortable, and a couple of my best mates, Ben Stanford, he was always there for me. Peter Cox would always pop in and say "Hi" and see how things were going

10:00 and stuff, and just the nurses, the nurses were really good. They'd come and have a chat with you, see how things were going, and I had my favourite nurses so the senior nurse would make sure that they were rostered on with me all the time. A couple of nurses I just thought, I didn't like very much. There wasn't a connection there so I said, "Please don't give them to me, I just really don't like them." So I got my favourite nurses and that was good.

10:30 If I needed anything for the regiment I got it. They actually brought in a laptop computer for me, but I found it too hard to use so I sent it back, because the regimental quartermaster was actually one of the first people I met in aviation, so he said, "Whatever you want, you've got it." So the support system's pretty good. They

11:00 looked after the families and brought them up and flew them around when they needed to, got them accommodation. I think the disappointing part is like we were treated as a political football by the politicians, which is just quite sad. I loathe politicians. I just think they're the scum of the earth. They just, especially like with the way they're treating the troops in Iraq now. It's like, give them a break. But in general, yeah, I was looked after pretty good,

11:30 especially when I had my private room. We had a couple of civilian doctors at Laverack Base Medical Centre and Dr John Simpson was one of them and there were two army nurses there, two lieutenants, who were trying to use their own psychotherapy on me and they were just pissing me off and getting under my skin and I spoke to him and he pulled them aside and said basically, "Fuck off and leave him alone, stay away from him." and I never saw them again after that. But yeah, in general I was treated pretty well,

12:00 looked after pretty well.

Did you personally have any of that political hanger-on-ering, media trying to get interviews, things like that?

When I got to Parkhaven Hospital the administrator came in to see me and asked if there was anything I wanted, stuff like that. I said, "Don't allow any media in here at all." and they've never come near me. I think I just slipped under the radar and avoided it all time.

12:30 There's an officer by the name of Lieutenant Marion Phillips who's actually my squadron sergeant major's wife. She worked for army PR [public relations] and she organised it for me to go to Channel 10 and look at some of the footage they had and they did, like, a big compilation of the videos and stuff. So that's really the only involvement. They asked if I'd like to make a statement. I said, "I'm fine, thanks." That's

13:00 really the only contact I've had with the media.

This section of transcript is embargoed until 1 January 2034.

13:58 **So how did you find it during**

14:00 **the inquiry when all of a sudden the pieces of the puzzle started to be put together?**

It was bullshit. Their reason for the accident was crap. I mean, they talked about, "Captain Kelvin Hales was a junior pilot and his planning was poor." Well, actually he was a senior pilot and he was specifically brought into the squadron because of his experience with counter-terrorist flying. So I don't know where they came up with that conclusion.

14:30 And now at the moment we've got a case running against the makers of the night vision goggles, to find

that the night vision goggles were at fault, not so much my crew. And the army has a habit, in fact the Defence Force has a habit of always blaming the dead soldier. So because my crew's dead, they can't defend themselves, and I did my best to the Board of Inquiry, but yeah, they just seem to make up their own sort of results, and they even ignored the testimony from the crew from

15:00 Black 4 who said that Black 2 flew into us. They said, "No, no, no, that can't happen." They gave their reasons and it's like yeah, whatever.

Because certainly in the media at the time night vision goggles were the main culprit? What was your opinion on that?

At the time I basically thought it was just an accident, that we've just flew into each other, that we've identified the same target and that's what we went for, but when it came out that, they had like their computer generated sort of image of what happened, they said we basically banked right. My last

15:30 memory was the aircraft was flying straight and level. I don't know where they got that from, and the thing is too, in formation flying if Black 1 turns left, everyone turns left. It we turn right, everyone turns right. If we stop, we climb, everyone does what we do. So if we're turning right why the hell isn't Black 2 turning right? But my conclusion I thought was we've identified the same target but now it's come down to the night vision goggles, and the board of inquiry seemed a bit of

16:00 a farce actually.

So when things like the accident out at Mount Walker happen recently, what does that do when you hear something like that?

You're pretty stressed, you're pretty wound up. I got extra counselling over those periods. I booked in extra sessions with my psychs. I've got a psychologist and a psychiatrist I see at the moment still, and it throws you out of kilter. I reach out to my friends. I spend a lot more time with my girlfriend. My dog sleeps with me.

16:30 You're going for the comfort things to keep you cool and calm. I watch endless re-runs of Friends, because I find it funny. You've got to keep the comedy going, you've got to try and distract yourself away from that stuff, especially because a good mate was on board, Nathan Burns, who's now at Enoggera Barracks. I'll pop out to see him a couple of times a week to see how he's going. Basically I'm trying to just give my experiences of what to do, what not to do, how to handle things, how to deal with things and that sort of stuff,

17:00 which makes it easy I think on him.

I've met his wife, who's five months pregnant, but I've only met her once. But I just go there and have a chat with Nathan to see how things are going and it's actually good to go out to Enoggera too because I spent time at Enoggera Barracks. When I came back from East Timor after my second term my body just shut down and I was back in a wheelchair

17:30 again. So I've seen some of the physio staff and a couple of the doctors out there I knew and it's good to catch up with people again.

And it interested me before when you mentioned you watched Blackhawk Down. How does, after going through what you went through, watching a film like that, how does that affect you?

People questioned why I watched it but I worked with my psychs first and I said, "Do you think I should watch this movie? What benefit will I get?" And sometimes it's like facing a fear, sort of facing your demons, and when I watched it it was like,

18:00 it was sort of funny, it was like I was actually flying again, because a lot of the footage in Somalia is similar to East Timor, the run-down huts and building, the militia running around with weapons. The place was on fire, that sort of thing. Blackhawk helicopters flying through smoke like we did in East Timor, so Special Forces work. I mean in Somalia they had 18 killed, so did we.

18:30 In the instance of Super 64, which was Michael Durant's aircraft, he was shot down, he survived, his crew didn't. He was saved by Special Forces guys, so was I. So yeah, and I watched it a few times and you go, "Yeah." I guess I'm just trying to de-sensitise myself so I can sort of deal with that sort of thing.

19:00 But there are certain movies, that have got nothing to do with the army, I don't watch anyway. I just think I don't think I'd get any benefit out of that movie, horror movies and things like that or certain movies. I go, "I don't need to watch that, I can do without it."

And you've had some contact with Michael Durant?

Yeah. We're just basically chatting by e-mail. He wrote a book, In the Company of Heroes, and it's basically about his time in the military, and it's actually good because it goes back and says about what he was

19:30 doing in the military and how he's flying, how he flew in Korea, how he flew in the Gulf and what actually happened in the accident and his time in captivity with the Somalians. A lot of things I can actually relate to, especially when he talks about pain, and then he's actually agreed to sign my book

which is really nice, and then thanks to a friend of a friend I've actually got Eric Bana to sign my copy of Blackhawk Down. So it's not that I'm an autograph hunter, it's just these books mean a lot to me

20:00 and these people mean a lot to me too, like Michael Durant and I have similar sort of circumstances and Eric Bana has been in the movie where they've portrayed an incident that actually happened and they did a very good job of portraying that.

So was there a thing where you just spoke about getting back on the horse? How was that, were you horse shy?

I was, I really had no idea what my body was going through. I'm flat on my back in Parkhaven Private Hospital,

20:30 fractured spine, fractured pelvis, post traumatic stress disorder, scars, and the accident was in June and I'm saying to the squadron commander of B, or B Squadron commander came in and I said, "I'll come back flying in September." I don't think I was even walking in September. So I had no idea that I was going to be there for that long, but no, I wanted to go back to flying. I didn't give it a second thought really

21:00 I just worked very hard at physio to do it and as far as I was concerned I was going back flying, and I remember the day I went for my first flight in a Blackhawk, was actually the regiment's anniversary and it was the 10th anniversary I think, and I flew in the lead

21:30 aircraft with Tony Fraser. I wasn't current with the flying. I was qualified but I wasn't current, so an instructor flew with me, but it was just the best thing ever. I had a really good day and it was nice to fly. Like everyone's standing around and like we took all the cooks flying and all the [U room? UNCLEAR] staff. We had all the Blackhawks and all the Chinooks up and a couple of Kiowas, and everyone was just standing around. I've walked out with my flight suit and my helmet and harness and everything else and they go, people just didn't know I was going flying that day. They had no

22:00 idea, and when they found out that I'd got back and I was clear to fly again as I passed my examination with the medical doctor, yeah, a lot of people were very proud of me and said that was a great thing. A few of the sergeants didn't even know in the regiment. They said, "We actually had bets that you were gonna make it. We knew you would." It was hard. Like the day flying was easy. Night flying was very hard.

22:30 It just sort of threw me off, so they gave me some time, said, "Look, you know, I need some more time with this night stuff." but over that period of time it was sort of, the warning signs were there that I shouldn't be flying. I wasn't a danger to the crew. I wasn't doing anything stupid, but I had a couple of breakdowns and it just kept on coming back to plague me. But I worked hard, I got my night vision goggle qualification back. I did it very well. I was very happy with it,

23:00 but it did cause a lot of problems. I think I just pushed myself too hard with the night flying. I did an exercise in Sydney with the SAS and they had me doing evaluations on new equipment, so that was good. So I was introduced back into night flying in a good steady manner, I wasn't thrown into it, but after that it was just like it was a little bit too much so I took some more time off. Then I came back to flying again, got my qualifications back and then I was deployed to East Timor after that.

What did your family first think about you returning to flying?

I think they thought I was pretty insane. My friends were going,

23:30 "What the hell are you doing?" but nobody said anything to me. They just thought, "He knows what's he doing." I'd convinced my psychs it's what I should do and they were happy to support me and I had a lot of top cover. There were a couple of colonels in aviation who watched over me and I had certain waivers to avoid certain things. Like I was given special, like I could do my own PT. I didn't have to do

24:00 it with the squadron staff, or if I wanted to I could drop out whenever I liked and I pretty much had, sort of like diplomatic immunity. But when I flew I flew safely and when I was tested I was tested harshly, which is a good thing because it's pointless going up there if I'm going to be a danger, if I can't do the job properly. They pushed me and basically in the training they flogged my arse, so when I actually went back for my flying tests I was able to

24:30 pass with confidence and with ease, so to speak. It's not easy, but it's like the old sort of saying, train hard, fight easy. I was able to do that. The fact that one of the instructors, Clyde Payne, who was a loadmaster instructor, prick of an instructor, great guy, but he really, he pushes you to the limits and he had me out in the training area doing hoist after hoist after hoist, doing external load after external load and confined area after confined area, and this is all at night and had me lower an external load

25:00 into a creek and maintain the distance from the rotors to the trees on the side of the creek and he gave me three missions in a row and really flogged me severely, but when I actually did the final handling test to get back my qualification with the regimental standards loadmaster, I actually found it easy because Clyde had pushed me so hard. So that was a good thing.

25:30 I think the family thought I was totally insane when I went to East Timor. "[UNCLEAR] what the fuck are you doing?" But once again, "He's a big boy, he can make his own decisions."

How often do you think about the accident?

On a daily basis. You don't forget that sort of thing. It just doesn't go away. I generally have pretty good days but sometimes I have panic attacks and anxiety attacks and you just, I shut down or I

26:00 lose focus. I get angry, frustrated, I get the shits. Panic attacks are the worst. They really drain on you. You're just totally losing it. You're panicking, you're lost, you don't know what's going on. You're teary, you're upset. You're just sort of really out of control. My way to deal with that, some people will go off and drink a carton of beer and grab a pizza or some guys will take drugs. I

26:30 basically grab an ice breaker and have a really good hot shower, sit in air conditioned comfort and watch "Friends." That's my combat for it, or I'll go downstairs and have a work out in the gym downstairs. So I talk to my girlfriend a lot. I talk to her about my pain levels and how things are going and she realises sometimes when the pain kicks in it gets fairly bad. I actually forget to take pain medication. It just shuts me down, I stop thinking, logic doesn't exist. So she reminds me, "You need to

27:00 take some pain medication, have something to eat, have a shower and go lie down, and put on "Friends" in the air conditioning." So, especially things like when you have the Blackhawk accident two months ago and you've got friends on board as well. When I went to see Michael Baker's parents it's very hard. It actually stresses me a lot. I said I'd go back and see them. I just haven't seen them yet. I've had the flu and it's a pretty good excuse. I just don't like seeing them because I feel very guilty that

27:30 I survived and their son didn't. But you have to deal with it. These are the cards I've been dealt with and so you move on. So I just try and make the best out of life.

And of all things, once you're up flying again initially after you're rehabilitated, you're doing CT [counter-terrorism] work straight away for the Olympics?

Not straight away, but it was later on down the track, but once again I was watched over by John Phillips. He was the standard

28:00 loadmaster instructor for the regiment and he watched over me and he had no problems with me whatsoever. We did a lot of special op stuff like trying new equipment with the SAS and that was really good, and also I was given special duties to go down to Nowra Naval Base and we went down there stymieing with the SAS. So that was good, that was just go down and be able to use the door guns and they just do some sniping. That was

28:30 challenging work, but probably just a little bit easier than flying into a building in the middle of Sydney Harbour at night at around 300 kilometres an hour. So yeah, I was watched over and given an easy task.

And how did you find that, you know, quite a unique situation to be in to be flying around Sydney like that?

It's the first time we'd done it, and normally when you do an assault, we do assaults to buildings, they're like buildings on the ground as in, like, ground level, but when you're flying towards a skyscraper there's no visual

29:00 references. There's no, nothing you can use to say, "OK, I'm this far away from the building." but experience will come into play. You can say, "Well, OK, this is the distance I am." and John was very happy with the performances I was doing within the aircraft. And also with night vision goggles the reason you could see at night is all the ambient light, which basically

29:30 automates the goggles, but you're in the middle of the city so you've got a zillion other lights as well, and also you tend to lose the other aircraft because they get lost in the back clutter of the lights. So you're really working very hard, plus I don't think a lot of the Sydney people liked us being there, we were making too much noise, but they can just deal with it. We also upset a lot of people at the zoo because apparently they've got these special birds that they've trained and apparently we upset them and they flew into trees and have never come back down again.

30:00 So I think we also freaked out the elephants a bit too, because that was our holding pattern before our runs into the city. So yeah, we sort of upset a few people, but what can you do? You're doing your job. But it was good, we went to Centrepoint Tower with our helmets and night vision goggles, sort of to get an experience of what it's like to look into the city and we realised this is going to be really challenging. You've just got lights everywhere so you've got to adapt. The good thing is we have peripheral vision. We went out in the field and the whole place was lit up so you actually

30:30 could use your peripheral vision this time which made it a bit easier.

Were these the same NVGs you had during your crash?

Same model, not the same actual NVGs themselves. Everything I had in the accident was pretty much destroyed.

Same model?

Same model, yeah. Actually they were slightly different. The NVGs that we had, there's basically like a little knob on the NVGs that makes them come in and out. This one had knobs you could actually individually adjust them to sort of suit.

31:00 Some people, bit of a funny nose or whatever or, so that made it a little bit easier and also they had, you could tilt them and have then come backwards and forwards so it made it a lot easier to adjust them and once again we kept the same night vision goggles, so you use the same models.

Does that individual eye adjustment help with depth field or is it just zero depth field?

You've got no depth perception but you learn to adjust to it. So you actually pick up a certain amount of depth perception, but to someone who go for the first time would be going no

31:30 idea, but with experience you actually can adapt to it. But yeah, that makes all the difference in the world because you've got to focus them, otherwise basically you're just looking through, it's just like a pair of binoculars. If you don't focus them properly to your eyes, to the certain distances away to adjusting for the width of your head and the distances away, basically you're using your tools incorrectly.

So what sort of standby would you guys have been on during the Olympics?

32:00 I actually wasn't able to go because after East Timor, which was in '99, I think it was February 2000 I had to go back to hospital because my body just shut down and psychologically I just couldn't deal with it anymore, it was just too much, but for the guys apparently it was like five minutes' notice to move, not even that probably.

So the whole Timor thing, was that something that just appeared out of the blue or did you see it sort of starting to

32:30 **happen?**

Pretty much out of the blue. We'd actually come back from Sydney and we'd done some excellent training and I think we were back for three or four days and I was out on a walk with a mate just doing PT and one of the guys from work drove past, pulled over and said, "Hey, everyone's to be at work at seven o'clock." I went, "OK." I went to work and they said, "Pack your bags, you're going to East Timor." We deployed to RAAF Base Tindall. We spent a month there training, which is actually good because it gave me time to actually build up my fitness and get ready for it,

33:00 and it allowed me to sort of get my confidence back with the air again because we were doing some fairly good work. So when we deployed I was ready, I was good to go.

So what sort of preparation, you spoke of the preparations they gave you going to Cambodia, like language and culture and that sort of thing, was it a similar thing with East Timor?

Not really. I mean, we didn't do much language. I mean, the hearts and minds work wasn't really going to be there this time with the Blackhawks. We did a lot of medevacs for kids and pregnant ladies and stuff like that, but

33:30 basically the hearts and minds work is for the ground troops. We didn't sort of get much involvement with the locals. We got briefings on terrain, on the problems we were going to have, on what Indonesia had for their helicopters, their jets, their sort of air defence and that sort of thing we may come up against and we also did a lot of training with the F111s. They would actually act as spotters using their pave tack bombing system and they would actually basically sort of let us know when we were doing an operation

34:00 they could basically pinpoint a vehicle coming in if we had to do a snatch and grab. They could do advance reconnaissance for us, that sort of thing. So we got a few of the, a lot of medic staff, we got them qualified on fast roping. So that way if it had to be done, there's going to be a lot of fast roping done on East Timor which we did a lot of. So just basically really gearing up to get going. Within the hangars at RAAF Base Tindall, the SAS were in one and we were in the other

34:30 and we also had a lot of infantry there as well. I think it was the, I'm not sure what battalion it was now. I can't remember which one was there now, but we did a lot of training with the infantry too, just getting them up to speed with the way you compact load a Blackhawk with backpacks and everything, because we actually took all the seats of the aircraft so there had to be a special loading for the aircraft.

Had you done joint exercises

35:00 **before with Indonesia?**

No. I've done exercises with the Ghurkhas [Nepalese troops in British service], with the British, with the Americans, but that's about it.

How did you, like, how did it feel going in where basically you've got to watch out for these guys that are, you sort of don't know which side of the fence they're on?

Similar to Cambodia. You just don't know who's on what side over there.

35:30 But we had an established base pretty quick and we had fairly good defences. We had LAV [light armoured vehicle] 25s and armoured personnel carriers cruising around. They brought in the RAAF Air Defence Guards, which were really good. They were good guys to have around, and we also shared our

base with the SAS and plus, we weren't on the streets. We were basically up in the air, but still had to watch our backs. But

36:00 yeah, we just did the job. I think because we trained, our training's so realistic and we trained so well, yeah, you're well prepared for it. Really, the only difference between flying in Townsville and flying in Timor is someone might shoot at you, and more equipment and your adrenaline is probably pumping a little bit more, but pretty much the training is as realistic as you can get.

How did you guys get across there?

We flew, flew in Blackhawks. We put on long range fuel tanks and away we went and when we got there we dropped the tanks and started operational flying straightaway.

36:30 **And was there a sort of, when you initially got there was there a big show of force?**

We got established. We were supposed to stay at the airport, but actually we went to the heliport which was good. It got us away from everybody else and that allows us to establish our own base and be a bit more comfortable. I think it was the second or third day we launched every Blackhawk we had mounted up with snipers

37:00 from the commando units and from the SAS and basically flew around the city and made a lot of noise and said, "We're in town, so don't fuck with us." Then all the Blackhawks bar my aircraft and another one stayed on station and we just basically watched over the soldiers' backs on the ground and we had snipers on board with the new snipers' rifles they had, and yeah, basically cleared the city and you could actually see the militia leaving the city because they were burning

37:30 everything on the way out, chicken shits that they are. So I think they were very good against children and women who can't defend themselves but when they came up against us they realised that they'd be copping an arse kicking so they thought they'd just leave town.

So how different was it going into Timor as opposed to Cambodia?

Timor was the Australian Army. Cambodia was just a small portion. We had everyone in Timor,

38:00 the support was there, we had the back up. It was infantry, SAS, armour, artillery, Blackhawks, transport, medics, everyone was there, and Cambodia was just basically signals and that's it. Our air support was by the Russians in Cambodia. In East Timor we were the air support and we flew 24/7 and we could go anywhere anytime. We had the legs to fly all over the country. We'd basically, they're both

38:30 peacekeeping but Timor was a war as in, like, on a smaller scale, but we were basically going out and confronting the enemy, where in Cambodia we were out there for hearts and minds work. We did hearts and minds in Timor but we had to basically show the militia we're here to stay so give it away as a bad joke.

And a lot of people speak about the difference between sort of being in Australia in peacetime army and the Australian Army

39:00 **when it's on operations, deployed, is a different kettle of fish altogether?**

Yeah. It's just like a [UNCLEAR]. When you're in barracks you're basically working nine to five. You do your PT, you do your training, you go to lectures, you have some time off, but when you go on operations you're on operations 24/7. You sleep with your rifle; you're ready to go at the drop of a hat. We were basically the ready

39:30 five Blackhawks so we flew 24 hours a day. So if a mission came up we'd launch straightaway regardless of what it was. We'd do all the medevacs, we did SAS insertions. In fact, I remember timing myself one night from a dead sleep to at the Blackhawk turning and burning with all the equipment on, ready to go, night vision goggles, light and took us 14 minutes and we were fully armed, fully kitted up. We were good to go as is, and

40:00 yeah, that was about the average, 14 or 15 minutes to get up and running. It's just like the Spitfire crews from World War II would sit around and just wait and wait and that's what we did, but we were kept fairly busy.

And on top of your night vision goggles do you also use infrared?

No. No, the night vision goggles are image intensifier and basically everything's green. Infrared's a red thing and goes more off by heat

40:30 It wouldn't really work very well with Blackhawks.

Tape 9

00:33 **When you were in Timor were you in the same UN uniform that you had in Cambodia?**

No. It was all Australian issued gear, no blue berets at all. It was all, everything was green and camouflaged. The flags we wore on the back of the helmets were camouflaged. We used to like, what they call a low visual flag, it was basically the Australian flag but in black and green. But everything was tactical.

In the training before you went what was your brief

01:00 **about what sort of work you'd be doing there?**

The same as what we do in Australia, fast roping, rappelling, insertion of troops, deploying of troops, retrieval of troops, medevacs, deploying battalions, that sort of thing. We actually deployed the entire 2nd Battalion into Balibo, which was a fair distance from East Timor, on an exercise. We

01:30 actually do deploy entire battalions. We deploy artillery regiments around the countryside. There's a fly base in Townsville, the only way to get there is by Blackhawk so we've got to take everything up there holus bolus via under sling in a Blackhawk, so what we're doing in Australia we're basically doing in East Timor, just more live ammunition.

What was your briefing on what the political situation was?

02:00 We got a few briefings from the RAAF but I don't really recall them. You get so many briefings after a while they all become a bit of a blur. I think we were just told we're waiting for sort of clearance for us to go in there through the Indonesians, which I thought was ironic considering they were running the militia. So I thought that was very strange, and they had something like 10,000 Indonesian soldiers in East Timor and Dili and yet they couldn't control the militia. We got there and in three or four days' time

02:30 we basically secured Dili and we started to secure the country. Within the month we got the country back and the Indonesians were there with thousands of troops. They had double what we had and they couldn't do anything. So to me it was just total political bullshit. Indonesians were running the show. We knew they were running the show, but it's all politics.

We've sort of been through when you went back flying, like that day you went out and you sort of got a great reception by the sounds of it. How was it though on a day-to-day basis fitting back in

03:00 **with all the guys?**

I never really fitted back in. I never really got accepted again. Even though I went back to flying the guys were sort of, you know, they treated me well but I could just tell, there was just something there, especially on some of the deployments around the country we did I just got a feeling I just didn't fit back in again. Not much you can do about it. You don't go through something like that and everything's hunky-

03:30 dory when you come back to work. So just one of those things. I tried very hard to fit back in and be part of the team. My bosses were happy with my performance, my troop sergeant was happy, but the guys, they were just a bit funny. A couple of guys were really good but in general the guys were just a little bit stand-offish and a bit iffy, a bit funny, but I flew with them. It really surprised me, some of the guys who I thought would really stand by me who normally said they would, didn't, and that was a bit disappointing. It's human nature, so –

04:00 **Was there a flip side to that, that some people surprised you by standing by you?**

The ones who stood by me I expected them to, and they were there. The ones who didn't surprised me even more because I thought, "I've flown with these guys, I've been on exercises, we've gone and had dinner, that sort of thing, and now when the chips are down where are they?" They always say that the test of a true man is not when the times are good, it's when the times

04:30 are bad. A bit disappointed in a few guys.

Was that lack of acceptance unspoken?

Yeah. Some of the guys came over to visit me one day in hospital and I said, "How come you guys – ?" and the only reason they'd come over, 'cause basically it was their turn to go to the board of inquiry. I said, "How come you guys don't come and see me that often?" "We're busy doing this and this." "Come on, guys, I work in the same crew, I know you've got time off. I'm sure if you went and saw the SSM [squadron sergeant major] he'd say 'Go off and take some time and go', and come

05:00 and see me." So I don't know what their reason was, but my true friends stuck by me and that's all that matters.

Are they the ones that had, like the other Blackhawks that were in that formation on the night, are they the ones that rescued you?

No, no. I was rescued by a couple of SAS guys, Mick Williams was one of the guys, but I was pulled out by the SAS. It seemed to be the hierarchy accepted me more than

05:30 anything else. I seemed to be more closer to the hierarchy of the regiment than the guys that actually

should've been my mates, so that was quite funny. I don't understand that one but it's good that they were, better than not. Yeah, the army's not geared up for this sort of thing. They're just not used to it.

Did that kind of situation make you have any second thoughts about going overseas?

No.

06:00 No, I, yeah, because things had changed a bit. We got a couple of new guys in the squadron and I'd worked well with them and our group, the two, the four sets of crews we had to do the operational work were the SAS and the ready five crews. We were all a lot tighter and a few new guys had come in so we were all a lot better.

06:30 I think the other guys were just, I don't know what their problem was. But the guys in Timor I worked with closely, the guys in the photo, a very tight bunch and we all worked really well together so there were no dramas.

What were the accommodations like for you in Timor?

That's a funny one. The ground, but that's normal. Even though we were at the heliport the place had been trashed a bit, basically just grab a piece of ground near the building somewhere and set up

07:00 and that's it. We had a bit of cover from some awnings and eventually we were able to move a bit of furniture around and occupy a few of the offices, but the offices were open and you still slept on the ground anyway. But it was better than the infantry sleeping in the dirt, and we had cover and stuff and we had some chairs, so to us it was just like the Sheraton.

And can you detail some of the operations that you were flying in Timor?

When we first got there

07:30 we were basically just doing like a show of force to say look, you know, we are here in town. I think there's nothing more scary than Blackhawks and Lav 25s cruising around. So you've got Blackhawks flying in the skies, you've got Lav 25s in the streets, you've got infantry following up the Lav 25s, you've got armoured personnel carriers. So basically when you sort of get there you sort of like we're the new sheriff and sort of best behave yourselves, and from there we started

08:00 slowly deploying out. We did a lot of medevacs. They were everywhere, it was almost a daily occurrence at one stage.

What sort of medevacs were you doing?

Some of them were almost retrievals as in like there was a, I think it was up it Baucau, we got information, got some intelligence that the militia was coming in to get the local priest and some his nuns. So we thought we can't have

08:30 this, because they'd already done it a couple of times, they'd killed the local priests and nuns. So we flew up there and pulled them out. We got told one day we had to go to Baucau to get a pregnant woman who was in strife, having problems with the pregnancy. Flew up there, no pregnant woman, but two militia guys who'd had a disagreement with each other. One of them said, "We should hand ourselves in now." Other guy said, "No, I don't think we should." "Yes, we should." "No, we shouldn't." and the next thing you know they've pulled out pistols and machetes and gone to down on each other. So they'd basically shot each other in the feet and the legs and hacked each other across the chest and the arms

09:00 with machetes, and when we got there they'd been bandaged up for a few days looking very sore and sorry, so we picked them up in the Blackhawk and took them back to Dili and put them in hospital, so it was very funny. But their bandages had been on for quite a while so when they were actually cut off the stench was pretty bad as it was dead flesh, but just part of the job. But we were deploying the SAS at certain points around the countryside, on the border,

09:30 and we deployed the 2nd Battalion, everything from bullets and beans to their vehicles and that down to Balibo. That took an entire day. In fact we overflew our flying hours that day. You were only allowed 10. I think we flew 11 or 12, but the whole battalion needed to be put in place straight away. In fact they recaptured Balibo in 45 minutes, so no sooner we dropped guys on the ground, by the time we'd come back they'd

10:00 captured the town and re-established things and when we got back there the second time there was all militia lying face down in the dirt with the zip ties on and they'd sort of met their match. At first we were just taking small steps and deploying out bit by bit. Flew General Cosgrove around a bit because he wanted to see what was going on, wanted to be deployed to certain areas.

What

10:30 **was that like?**

Good. He's a good guy. Do as you're told otherwise. The only guy I've seen who can make colonels run and scream and cry, but in fact we had to take him flying one day and we're sitting there turning and burning with him on board and we're waiting for the colonel of one of the battalions to come and he

said, “Where is this colonel? Fuck it, let’s go.” “OK, you’re the boss, whatever you say.” So we just lifted and launched and the colonel didn’t come along. I’m sure he got an arse kicking later. But he’s a good guy, he’s a soldier’s

11:00 soldier. The problem with the back of a Blackhawk is it’s all high tensile steel and heavy material and he banged his head a few times on the roof and so we got him his own Alpha helmet, which is the helmet we use, so when he came flying he could actually talk to the crew properly and not hit his head on the roof so much, ‘cause all the pain, and a bit embarrassing when the task force commander’s got stitches in his head from one of his own aircraft. But that was good; we did a lot of deployments and that with him.

11:30 So you’re just basically deploying infantry around certain parts, deploying the recon units, the SAS around. We had to actually, we went hunting one night within Dili itself. There was a, I think a Dutch journalist, someone wandered off and was killed and we were trying to find him and no matter how we, eventually we found him. He was dead, he’d been carved up like Swiss cheese, so that was pretty sad. A young boy fell out of a tree, like a fairly high tree

12:00 and fractured his skull and was just bleeding everywhere and we did the medevac for him and we just couldn’t save him. We knew we were just wasting our time but we kept on going. The sad part was we had to wash the blood out of the aircraft afterwards. Like, this is the last of this little child’s life and all the millions of dollars of equipment and training couldn’t make any difference. But the guys were pretty, it hit the guys pretty hard that night, but the next day we had a job to do and we kept on going. So it’s just a thing you’ve got to deal with

12:30 **Numerous World War II guys that we’ve spoken to have sometimes not had a very high regard for guys like Blamey who weren’t out visiting the guys in the frontline. Do you think Cosgrove is held in much higher opinion because of his – ?**

Yeah, he’s in the field. He’s amongst the guys. He was eating what we were eating; he was living the way we were living

13:00 and that’s what you want to see. You want to see your commanders living the same way that you do. In fact we had a more high regard than we did for him than we did some of our own senior officers. But he was amongst it, he was always, he was at the heliport quite a fair bit. Well, that’s where the Blackhawks were and he was using them, but he’d come and have a chat with us. He’d sit down and have a chat with us before we flew him around and that was always really good,

13:30 especially like when the concert people came out like Kylie Minogue and Roy and HG [comedians] and John Farnham and Doc Neeson [lead singer of The Angels] came out, that was really good. They’d sort of come out and Cosgrove was there and everything so he was amongst the troops, amongst the boys and amongst everything and that’s the way to do it. You’ve got to be amongst the guys. You can’t leave them behind. He sort of set the example of, this is the way to do it and everyone thought he was great.

14:00 **Did you get to attend the entertainment concert?**

No, I had to go pick up some murderers that day. Just one of those things, I was on standby. These very brave military guys had murdered a couple of priests and a nun and we thought, “You’re very brave, aren’t you?” So we went down there and made sure they were securely seated in the back of the Blackhawk and made sure their harness was just that extra little bit tight, which basically cuts off the circulation and makes it hard for them to breath, stiff shit.

14:30 And one of them accidentally bumped his head on the roof. That happens sometimes, you know. I tried to stop it but just couldn’t do it. We flew over the concert, which looked pretty cool, but no, I didn’t get to see it. I got to see the video footage of it later and we actually got a copy of it on video later. We got the uncensored version which was really really good. Seeing Kylie Minogue singing along with Doc Neeson and John Farnham: “Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?” – “No way, get fucked, fuck off!” [traditional crowd chant at Angels concerts during this song] That’s pretty cool, that was good and like

15:00 and they were both, John Farnham and Kylie Minogue were really getting into it. So yeah, it’s just good to see that they were there for the boys, and the girls too, and the female soldiers did a good job in Timor. We had one female Blackhawk pilot, Ivana Gorlan, and she did a good job. I did a couple of missions with her, challenging missions, and she did a good job. She made good decisions. She was the captain of the aircraft and flew soundly, make some very solid decisions,

15:30 overrode the co-pilot’s ideas for a few silly things and actually did a good job. So the women of the Australian Army, they do a really good job.

How were they generally received being over there?

The females? Fine. Greeted just as well as the guys. Probably they’ve got that feminine touch so the kids probably like them a bit more, but I find, like in Cambodia the kids

16:00 loved us. We’d give them toys and balloons and tennis balls and stuff like that and play with them, and in East Timor it was the same thing. We used to go around, once things got a bit more established we’d go around in a Land Rover and we’d basically hand out books and colouring pencils and toys and this and that and it was well received by all the kids. And I think too, especially with the medics we had, like

having the females, they did a really good job. Once again it's that feminine touch

16:30 but also they're there to do a job as a soldier. So they've got the feminine touch but they've got no problems with putting a couple of rounds in your chest if you basically go to attack what they're defending. So they do a very good job. We had a couple of female cooks who were excellent and they worked just as hard as the guys. In fact we had the best food in East Timor. In fact we had pretty much the best food I've had in the army, which is quite strange. When we got there we were on rations but once the fresh food kicked in, I think because we're based with the SAS

17:00 I think we're on a different ration scale. But our food was just fabulous, couldn't fault it. It was just always really good.

By the time you went to Timor the internet was well underway, did that sort of – ?

There was nothing there when we got there. When you see the footage on the news you see a few buildings burnt down. You've actually got to be there and go, "Whoa, they have trashed this country." They would go out of their way to get to a village on the side of a mountain at 10,000 feet in altitude.

17:30 Why the fuck would you do that? It's a grass hut. They'd fly down towards the enclave, which is actually in West Timor which is an Indonesian country, and there were just entire villages laid to waste. Why, what's the point? I just didn't get it. So there was zero infrastructure, no running water and no one anyway because they were all up in the mountains, but once we got established and things sort of settled down they would come down. But it wasn't until somewhere in the fourth or fifth month that

18:00 those sort of things were established.

Just to back track, what was it like flying over the concert?

Awesome. I don't think we really impressed any people because they wanted to watch the concert, not hear a Blackhawk flying over. Blackhawks are really loud. But it was like, "Wow, there's a lot of people down there. Hello, Kylie, hello, Johnny [Farnham]." That was the end of that, some of the guys took their handicams so we got to see it afterwards. But it was just, the support we got from the Australian community was fabulous

18:30 and that's the sort of thing you want to see. Like we're paid a wage, but we're paid a wage to die and if I'd have died in East Timor I would've died with a smile on my face because this is the job I do and I'm dying for a cause that I believe in. So the support we had was fabulous. When people would write, strangers would write to us and send us parcels of lollies and stuff. In fact we had so much mail coming in from people sending us who didn't know us, just like, what is it? Adopt a soldier program, it was just

19:00 ridiculous, just boxes and boxes of stuff. It was great, so we used to reply back and everything, but the support we got was fabulous. As usual we're treated like the political football by the politicians, but what do you expect? But in general the support from Australia was very very good.

With those letters and care packages that you were getting from strangers, are there any that stand out in your memory?

19:30 I wrote to a school, for the life of me I just can't remember, but they sent me some Vegemite and some peanuts and stuff and there was a card they signed and it was just really really nice, and I wrote back to them. Basically like when the school kids support you that makes a big difference. In fact when I was in hospital my niece got all of her classmates to sign this big card for me

20:00 and it was just really touching that kids, even kids know what's going on at that age. So she's 17, so she was only 11 at the time so that's really nice that they've got an idea what's going on. All the kids supported me and I hope you get better soon, that sort of thing. So even like on operational experience, like it's off in some other country but the kids know what's going on. They're educated by the parents and the media sort of are there telling them news,

20:30 and even the teachers at school let them know what's going on, so that's a really good thing.

In circumstances like the one that you were flying in to evacuate the priest and the nuns when you had word that the militia were headed for them, how were you received?

Very well. When you're not carrying a weapon you don't fuck with a Blackhawk with door guns and SAS snipers.

21:00 You just come off on the wrong end of the stick, but we came in and landed, got them and then got out. We didn't hang around. In fact I think they were actually conducting a sermon at the time and we said, "Time for you to go guys." and we pulled them out. Unfortunately we weren't quick enough for the ones that were down towards the enclave. We can't be everywhere and anywhere at the same time. But everywhere we went we were well received. They knew what we were there for and they were so happy that we were there.

21:30 In fact when the Indonesians were leaving they were just abused and had stuff thrown at them by the locals, 'cause it was obvious like the Indonesians were running the militia, especially when we were capturing militia patrols with the special forces from the Indonesians in that patrol itself leading it, and a lot of the established buildings within Dili and around the countryside that seemed to be under

Indonesia's control were not touched. Everything else was burnt to the ground but the

22:00 big petroleum station wasn't touched, some of the buildings weren't touched and they were under Indonesian control, so that's why they weren't burnt down. So Indonesia was controlling them, easy, they had to be.

Were there times ever that you met with resistance from people who didn't want to be evacuated?

No. We only did a few of those missions where we were just pulling out individuals. Everything else was just medevacs or just insertion of troops. There were

22:30 a few military we put on board, I don't think they really wanted to go, but other than that, no, they were the only ones who didn't seemed that thrilled about it.

What was your regard for the militia?

Treated them as POWs [prisoners of war]. We have our rules of engagements, the rules of the UN and the rules of war and that so we just basically, you know, we didn't starve them; we didn't sort of keep them thirsty. We gave them rations, we gave them water,

23:00 but we also let them know, "Well, you know, you're prisoners now. We'll treat you fairly but be good boys." So basically we had, we just absolutely loathed them but we're professionals, we had a job to do and all those rumours about the SAS going off and killing them and doing that sort of stuff is just bullshit. I mean, we work with the SAS all the time. We would've known about it. So I think someone's just

23:30 jerking, there's a politician who's doing an investigation I think. Someone's just jerking his chain for some unknown reason. That sort of thing doesn't escape when you're next door to the SAS, and I knew the intelligence officer of the SAS and he would've told me about it and I never heard about it. Basically we didn't have a real great liking for the militia or the Indonesians but we were there to do a job. We have our rules and we stick to them.

Were there any times for you in

24:00 **Timor when you felt like your life was under direct threat?**

Yeah, a few instances. Some of them had nothing to do with the militia or the Indonesians. We actually did a medevac one night and whenever you did missions or wherever you flew on missions there were always two Blackhawks. One could follow the other and back each other up. While one went into the landing

24:30 site to deploy the troops or to pick people up, the other one'd basically fly top cover around in a circle. We landed in this big soccer field and we got into the habit of, basically everyone seemed to charge at a Blackhawk. They'd all come running into the Blackhawk and it was a dangerous practice because of the rotors and they just, it's what we call rotor wash panic. When the rotors are engaged everyone seems to disengage their brain. They just don't think, and I was trying to get out of my seat and out of harness and out the door as fast as

25:00 possible because there was an ambulance racing towards the Blackhawk and I had my torch out waving and the ambulance stopped a foot from the rotors and that really threw me. I was about to be turned into sushi, and the other guy, the other loadmaster, Dan Minton, or Door Gun Dan as we called him, he was absolutely livid. He wanted to pull his gun out and cap the driver for being stupid. I said, "No no, we've got a job to do, let's just do it." and so we got the guy in and flew him back, but the whole time in my heart was

25:30 just pounding and I was just really way exceedingly stressed. I got back and I had a chat to a friend and got it all out of my system and I was fine, but it really didn't do me the world of good. On a training mission, we actually had to do a training mission around the airport. We were just doing laps around the airport and one of the pilots, we'd actually done a mission, done an insertion prior and we just had to run a pilot through some emergency procedures

26:00 just to get his currency up, and we banked out, we turned left and out over the ocean and as we were banking towards the runway the instructor pulled an emergency on the pilot and they were both looking in the cockpit, looking out, and we descended from 300 feet to 125 over the ocean basically at a 30 degree angle, and when you're trying to stop 10 tons of aircraft in a hurry

26:30 it doesn't work, and we were lucky not to fly into the ocean. I handled that one pretty good actually. When we got back the pilot said, "You're just cool as a cucumber, JJ." but these things were starting to take its toll on me. We extracted the SAS twice off the border after contacts, they'd been contacted. Those things didn't bug me actually. I suppose I enjoyed them.

27:00 We sort of actually really got to do the real deal this time. Didn't get to fire my weapon but the opportunity was almost there. But really, flying in under fire, the SAS was shooting back and the guys were shooting at us. I couldn't see them so I couldn't engage them, but we could put the guys on board and then we actually went hunting for them and try and find out where they were. Then the other aircraft flew back in to get the dead

27:30 bodies that they'd killed of the militia and then we flew out and flew away. Another mission where we flew down on the border once again, we actually snuck down through the valleys and we had SAS on board and an SAS patrol had been compromised and they were basically fighting their way back, but there weren't any casualties on our side, but we snuck down the coast and basically at the last minute pulled out over the border where there was like a road at the end of a bridge and as we pulled out the militia was just running and you could see

28:00 them throwing their weapons up in the air and running across the border. Once across the border we can't touch them, and I had my weapon trained on them. I thought, "Oh great, I can rack up a few kills here." but they basically were just being chicken shits and threw their weapons up and ran. We were told there were two militias somewhere around the area so we went hunting for them and we basically, it was an afternoon mission which went to a night mission so we had to fly back to one of the local towns which wasn't far away,

28:30 do a refuel, but while we were sitting there turning and burning doing a hot refuel we had to actually don our night vision equipment and get ready to do some more work and went off and completed the mission and it was good. We were sort of hunting for these militia guys. We couldn't find them but we pulled up an SAS patrol and we took no casualties so it was a successful mission, so it was good.

How do you go hunting?

Same way as you hunt an animal. Walk around with your weapon, when you see them, when you basically hunt an animal you just kill it outright. When we

29:00 go hunting we have rules of engagement. We can't just shoot them on sight. We usually try and capture them, but if they break the rules of engagement then we're allowed to engage and we don't shoot to wound, we shoot to kill. You're not going to sort of give a guy a second chance to get you. If you shoot him in the legs he can still fire back. No, take him down regardless. So basically we just flew around tree top level, weapons at the ready.

29:30 In fact while we were doing that these two guys on a motorbike crossed the bridge and crossed the border into our territory and we were just going like, "What, are you stupid?" They realised what was going on. They knew we were there, and basically we just came along and flew parallel to them down the road and we had two SAS snipers watching them. I had my door gun ready, basically just ready to turn them into clouds of pink mist, and they ran into 11 SAS guys waiting for them. Next thing you know they're on the ground in some

30:00 very uncomfortable position and getting questions of, "What the fuck are you doing here?" They didn't have any weapons, so, and they didn't do anything dangerous, so we couldn't do anything. So it was just the way it went. But, like, hunting may sound a bit clinical but we hunt within the rules of the game, and it's like when the infantry patrol are on the streets, they're patrolling but they're actually hunting.

What was that like, landing under

30:30 **fire?**

It seemed normal. Just doing my job, just do your job. Adrenaline was sort of flowing a bit. Basically it's like, just do it a bit faster. A lot of our training, you do tactical flying and you do tactical landing and it's very like, in, boom, down on the ground

31:00 fast as possible. So it's the same sort of thing. All we did, once again the only difference was we had live ammunition, but once we got in we got the guys on board and then we were out of there. But then we started cruising around trying to find out where these guys were and we could actually see the border off in the distance and a truckload of guys were coming our way, and then realised there were two Blackhawks and some of their mates had already been shot dead, they thought, "We'll turn around and go back." So there was a truck of about 20 guys coming our way. I thought,

31:30 "This is going to get interesting." but they turned around and, "No, we'll give it away as a bad joke." But really, I remember the day very clearly. It was in the afternoon about four o'clock or so and yeah, we just, I was with Dan Minton again, good guy. He was on the right, I was on the left and we just came in there and landed. The landing was difficult because there was a road there but it was also really, the

32:00 terrain was very undulating all over the joint, but you got in, got the guys on board and we were gone. So wasn't a big deal. Yeah, we couldn't see who was shooting us anyway. So it didn't sort of phase us that much. I was concentrating on my job of getting their aircraft on the ground, not worried about who's shooting at me at the time, and we had

32:30 SAS on the ground and they were taking care of them. So we were sort of pretty safe.

Being put in a situation like that in Timor, what was your opinion of your training that you had?

To do that and not really break into a sweat, the training's very good. Come short of actually shooting bullets at you while you're doing training, I don't think they can make it any more realistic. I suppose what they could do is

33:00 do simulators, because with the simulator training they actually can shoot at you and give you an idea what it's like, but the training we do is as realistic as they can make it, so you're well prepared.

What news were you getting from home while you were over there?

Not much, because there wasn't any mail at the time. Like, it took a while for the mail to get there. But, like,

33:30 my family and friends were keeping news clippings and stuff like that so I was able to read them when I came home, but other than that, really, we were the news. So we were amongst the news guys so we didn't have to actually see any news because we were living the news at the particular time. But a lot of stuff was kept for us, or my family and friends kept a lot of the footage and that, and my brother's actually chasing up the video footage

34:00 for me.

Apart from the mission where you were looking for the missing reporter, were you having any interaction with the media over there?

Not really, no.

Were you aware of their presence?

Yeah, we could see them on the streets. When we actually did the show of force we could see them running behind the infantry. Very weird people. Yeah, they're basically just combat correspondents, they call them,

34:30 and yeah, they were sort of running amongst and everything. I'm going like, but I suppose when you've got a couple of armoured vehicles, Lav 25 and a platoon of infantry in front of you you're feeling pretty safe, but they were amongst it. Yeah, I actually spoke to a guy from Channel 7 and I asked about the combat correspondents and he said they're freelancers and they basically take their footage and that and they sell it to the highest bidder. So then again, they can be killed,

35:00 which does happen, one of those unfortunate things, but that's just the way they were.

So how long was your first mission in Timor?

Two months.

And so that two months finished and you came back to Townsville?

I came back to Townsville. I was back there for a month, did a little bit of training and I realised I was pretty tired and I just didn't feel like flying, so I need more time off. So I took more time off but that was just within the month period and I went back again.

35:30 I actually traded positions because a friend of mine was getting married. I was supposed to do three months in Timor but he asked if he could swap positions because he was going to do two months, go back for a month and come back for another two months, but he wanted to get married so I swapped, which I was more than happy to. In fact I asked him if he would swap and he said, "Yeah, 'cause I want to get married." I said, "Go for it." So he got three months and I got four months which I was more happy with.

Compared to when you came back from Cambodia,

36:00 **how was that month when you were back after your first tour of Timor?**

Really good, really good. Very well received. I've never seen fat army wives move so fast on the tarmac. It's a frightening scene actually, 'cause we came back by C130, the ramp went down and I was one of the first ones off and, like, when you're in uniform and it's a bit dark everyone looks the same. These wives come running towards us, "Hey, I'm not married, get away from me and your husband's down the line there somewhere." but the media were there and the well-wishers and the wives and families and the kids were there

36:30 and I had a few friends there. So it was really well received. It was good, it was nice, but I was tired. We were all very, very tired, and I went home and had a nice long hot shower and my friends brought me some dinner around and I just basically spent that time eating a lot of food. Just relaxing a bit and catching up with a few movies and stuff, going to the beach, just trying to unwind and relax a bit. Did a couple of training missions and said to the boss, "I need more time off. I've got to take more time off."

37:00 and then I went back again.

So it was your decision to go back again?

Yeah, I was happy to. My mate asked me. We sort of asked each other at the same time and I loved doing operational experience. I thought it was the opportunity for me to get more time so I'll stay. I was redeployed back to Timor on December 20, right before Christmas, but he's married and I wasn't so it seemed fair.

What was different for you the second time around?

37:30 It was more established. Things were settling down. Shops and restaurants, I suppose you'd call them that, were starting to open up. The people were returning, the markets were coming back, life was getting normal. We had like an Everyman's club where we could get ice creams and drinks and the internet was kicking in. We had a mobile phone service.

Did that make a big difference, having internet and mobile phone?

I didn't use the internet that much.

38:00 We were just too busy. Usually didn't have the time to go and spend hours at the Everyman [Everyman's Welfare Service], but mobile phones were good, sort of talked to home and stuff. Just that contact, that was probably always good. It does make a difference when you've got that communication back to home because if you need something you can call home and say, "Hey, I need this." and they can send it to you straight away. The mail service was free, which was really, really good.

Did you have any concession on your phone bill?

No,

38:30 I don't think so, not that I'm aware of. Maybe there was, I don't remember it though. But the support we were getting was very very good.

And what sort of missions were you doing on that second tour?

Still doing medevacs, and we were establishing ourselves down in the enclave which is basically like a patch of land. It's East Timor but for some unknown reason it's deployed,

39:00 basically situated in West Timor, so it's in Indonesian country. So we were establishing ourselves down there and we had to rely in the navy for our refuelling because basically we were so far from Dili our time on station would be limited so we had navy ships down there, HMAS Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, they were down there. Working with the navy is great, they're so professional. They're just the best guys ever and we were treated really well on the ships.

39:30 Like, the food on the ships is very good. We were able to get quite a few good meals on the ships, and when we were doing the hot refuels they'd come out and they'd bring out little snack bags and have like a sandwich and a can of coke and a Mars bar and a bickie and 'Fly Navy' stickers all over it. And they've got their sea legs, like they'd stand on the ship, deck of the ship was just rolling and I'm hanging onto the side of my Blackhawk trying not to fall over, and they're going, and they're just laughing at us. But they were good guys.

40:00 Very professional, and they really looked after us well and because we could refuel just off the coast of the enclave it made it a lot easier.

I just wanted to ask you when you were telling me about the ambulance coming in and stopping within a foot of the rotor, when the Blackhawk is on the ground like that how low is the rotor?

It's about 11 feet. Like, one of those military ambulances, they're quite high. It's

40:30 between, I've just got to remember now. It's around about nine to ten feet, about that, so yeah.

Tape 10

00:31 **So, the portaloo story? Was it during the second tour?**

Second tour. We got these portaloos in, or RAMs as we called them. Stood for rapid acclimatisation modules. So basically spending a matter of a few minutes and it would acclimatise you to the heat over there and lose three or four kilos of weight. We'd hired some local lads to come and work on the base. They'd sort of go around and do maintenance around the place, keep the place clean,

01:00 clean the toilets, that sort of stuff, and they got a bit overzealous with cleaning the toilets and basically broke one of the valves which let all the crap spray out the back of it. Of course the wind changed direction and it came straight towards us. So there was just shit everywhere. So I took a photo of it, had to take a photo of it. Bit of a bummer, pardon the pun. But yes, we had to get the medics over there with petrol to burn it all up because it was spreading disease with

01:30 the greatest of ease, but these guys were just a little bit too overzealous and I didn't realise things exploded like that.

So, I mean, two months must go pretty quick, does it, on tour like that?

Yeah, when you're busy like that, you're on the go, yeah. It sort of goes fairly fast, yeah.

So

02:00 **can you talk about coming home the second time?**

I was actually sent home early. I developed combat post-traumatic stress disorder. My post-traumatic stress disorder was in remission, but due to the incidents in Timor the body was just shutting me down because I wasn't stopping. I did a night mission which started at twelve o'clock midnight and we finished at seven o'clock the next morning and I just felt really tired afterwards and I was tired for two days straight. I couldn't get back on

02:30 the horse, and Carmel Van Der Rijt was actually over in Timor. She was our medical doctor for the medevacs, and she decided that I had a virus and it was time for me to go home. I was due to go home anyway but I went home about five days early. So they flew me home and I actually had combat post traumatic stress disorder or combat fatigue. So I went home and had a couple of weeks off and I just met,

03:00 in between tours I'd met a girlfriend and just sort of started dating but things didn't go really well, but I went down to Melbourne to do some dunker training at East Sale where you do the helicopter underwater escape training, the dunk, where they drop the dunker in the water and they spin it upside down and you've got to escape, and basically using some new equipment, your body armour, gas masks and helmets, that sort of thing and I remember feeling a couple of times in the last couple of runs I started to feel panicky.

03:30 It was just a warning signal saying, "Look, man, you've got to stop this crap, stop it." But I came home and I got back on a Monday, Tuesday, went to work Thursday and I was feeling really stressed and wound up and very panicky and we were doing flight planning for next weeks, counter-terrorist sort of stuff. On Friday afternoon I saw my psychotherapist, Fraser de Groot, and man, I'm just not, I said, "I'm really starting to lose the plot here. I'm just constantly stressed and not feeling good." and I saw him

04:00 Sunday morning. We organised a session for Sunday morning and I just broke down and said, "I can't do this anymore, I've had enough." I was just so stressed, I'm tired and I'm just really upset. I went back to my girlfriend, said, "I've just quit flying. I can't do any more." It was really the worst day for me, but I rang up my boss, my immediate boss. Spoke to Matty Hayes, Matty Hughes, told him. He said, "Look, no one's going to hold it against you. We're amazed you got as far as you did." So they gave me some more time off

04:30 and I was having a lot of back problems. The medication was high. I was taking Valium and painkillers to try and deal with my back pain and they sent me down to Brisbane to a back pain clinic but I never attended it, because I actually got admitted back into hospital. The body just shut down, it was just basically all over red rover. My body was saying, "If you're not going to do it, I'll do it for you." So I spent another few months back in bed

05:00 and had to slowly rebuild myself again for about the third or fourth time.

That day you made the decision to stop flying, how hard was that for you?

Very hard. I love flying. I live for it. If I'd died in the accident I would've died happy doing the job I love. If I'd been killed in East Timor, I would've died happy because I died doing something important. I was doing a job I loved and I was doing it to help other people.

05:30 So it really tore me up. I think it was probably the hardest decision I've ever had to make, to really give away something I love so much was just very, very hard.

Despite that, did there come a time where you felt like a weight had been lifted off your shoulders?

Yeah, I think because flying was actually killing me. It was slowly torturing my body. So what I loved was actually killing me. So a couple of days later it was like, that's actually really good because

06:00 I know I don't have to worry about going back and do flying again. So it was sort of funny. I loved it but I had to stop because it was destroying me bit by bit.

And how have you missed your flying?

I miss it all the time. I miss the military a bit, not so much the crap, but I just really miss the flying. You miss the guys, you miss wearing the equipment, the helmet, and I just really miss the flying.

06:30 Some guys, they just did it as a job. I did it as a lifestyle. I just really enjoyed it that much. So yeah, I really do miss the flying and in fact I took my girlfriend flying the other day for Christmas. I took her down to Sea World and took her flying in one of the helicopters down there just so she could experience what I used to go through and it was great. It was a nice day. I didn't

07:00 feel stressed, I just enjoyed it and a nice air conditioned Squirrel, comfy seats and little headsets and she really enjoyed it. She really though it was great, so she got an idea of what I felt like, but yeah, you do miss the flying.

Was there any question of staying in the army, not flying, but staying in the army?

No. My body had totally shut down. I actually collapsed in front of the doctors when they were examining me. I thought, “This is not good.” “We’ll send you back to hospital.” So no, the psychs basically said, “Yeah, OK, well I think you’ve conned us for the last

07:30 time and yeah, you’re not going to go back to the army.”

So how have you found your post-army care, the way you’ve been looked after?

Very poor. Military Compensation is a joke. I don’t know why they exist. They seem to go out of their way to take away everything that you’ve got. The way the system runs is poor. If you’re given a Veterans’ Affairs pension and you’re given

08:00 a lump sum payment from Military Compensation, but then deduct that from your pension, so they give with one hand and take with the other. I don’t get that. It’s not like the lump sum payouts are huge. The most you can get is $110,000. I got $70,000, not even that. I think I served my country fairly faithfully. I think I gave up a lot. It’s got to the point now where I’ve

08:30 actually had to engage my solicitors to deal with Military Compensation and we’re fighting over a bed, of all things, and a whole range of other things, but it’s just like they don’t seem to care. And we had a teleconference a while ago and Military Comp have been fucking me over for three or four years now, saying no to this and no to that. I thought, “You guys are not going to win this time. I just refuse to lay down and die here.” At the teleconference was myself and my solicitor,

09:00 a delegate from Military Compensation and their solicitor and the conference registrar, and my solicitor just spat them up, chewed them up and spat them out, and the medical reports were basically embarrassing themselves in front of us and the conference registrar. Basically my solicitor just tore them to shreds, so within half an hour we got things, I achieved more

09:30 in half an hour with my solicitor than I’d been battling for the last three years. I’d actually had to engage the help of Arch Bevis, the Federal Member from Brisbane. I’ve written to Ms Danna Vale, the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, hasn’t written back. I’m going to write to General Cosgrove. I’m going to write to the Defence Minister, because the thing is, Arch Bevis put it pretty well. He looked at my request of items I need. He said, “Look, you’re not asking for a plasma screen TV here and a new DVD. You just want to be comfortable and try to be pain-

10:00 free.” And they withheld a lot of things from me. They’ve done a lot of lying, a lot of coverups just so they don’t have to spend money on me, which I find sad considering [Archbishop] Peter Hollingworth [former Governor General]screwed up the church pretty good and yet he gets $180,000 a year. They spent just under a quarter of a million dollars on doing up his office. They pay $83,000 a year for his rent. He gets a secretary, a free chauffeur and free first class travel, and all I’m asking

10:30 for is a new bed and a few other items. So I’ve got to fight for that, but my solicitor’s on the job and there’s a few other things I’m going to go for. So while I’ve got him now I’m going to go for the gold card and everything else I should require. I just found out about a place called Morris Surgical which has all occupational therapy aids, which I should’ve been told about three years ago which I’ve just found out. So things I’ve been buying myself that I should’ve been told about, I can now actually get them through my doctor which is good.

11:00 So it’s been fairly poor. In fact they closed my case pretty quick. They gave me a new pair of sandshoes; they gave me vouchers for 10 massages, like a massage clinic down the road, a 10 day gym pass and a pension. That’s it, see you later. I’ve been requesting things left right and centre. I’ve written to doctors who’ve written reports for me. I sent them a request of things with an occupational therapist report, a

11:30 physiotherapist report and a letter from Dr Peter Jackson who’s a muscular skeletal specialist who’s treating me at the moment, and it went in one ear and out the other, and they basically relied on their occupational therapist report of the assessment situation, which was good because when it came to the teleconference it really bit them in the arse. The conference registrar asked about why the actual overlay in my bed had not been replaced. They said, “That’s supposed to be replaced every 12 months.” She said,

12:00 “This report is 18 months old, why hasn’t it been replaced? We’ll get instructions, OK. What about the shower stall, that’s supposed to be fixed up?” “Well, we’re getting an orthopaedic surgeon’s report.” “That was 18 months ago too, what is going on? Why are you taking so much time?” So basically their own reports are killing them, and the fact that Wayne Hampton, who works for Quinn and Scattini in the city, he just had an absolute field day with them. So

12:30 it seems to be the politicians are very happy to be there when they send you off to war or to wherever they want you to go, but when it’s time to pick up the pieces for the ones they break they’re nowhere to be seen and when you’ve got to call in a solicitor to fight for what rightfully should be yours, that’s pretty sad, so we’re treated like crap. I’ve done group therapy classes at Toowong Private and you talk to the other veterans and they are treated exactly the same. You’ve got to fight for everything through Military Compensation

13:00 and it’s just like why do we bother to have these guys? All they ever do is ever say no, so what’s the point?

Before the accident had you ever heard of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]?

No, not at all. Didn't even know what stress was.

And how have you come to terms with that?

It's very hard. I feel sorry for my girlfriend. Sometimes I torture her so much. We've been together for 10 months and it's only once or twice she's

13:30 been in the firing line for my anger. I don't abuse her or hit her or anything like that, but I just take my frustrations out on Natalie and it's really unfair. She just wants to love and support me. We actually just had a spat the other day and it had nothing to do with her at all, but she just got in the firing line, so we're going to see my counsellor and see my psych and get a strategy to deal with that because I love her very much. She loves me, and it's just so unfair and it's,

14:00 like, not her fault and it's not my fault. But yeah, it's a thing you've got to manage 24/7, and for the work I do with my counsellors, with my psychs, having PTSD is bad enough but I've got to deal with chronic back pain. I've got my left knee, my pelvis, my spine and my right hip and then PTSD, so you sort of, I've got the shitty end of both ends of the stick

14:30 here, and plus they play off each other as well. There's a book out called The Body Keeps Count and what will happen is if you start to have panic attacks and anxiety attacks or your PTSD kicks in or your anger kicks in, the pain's going to follow because you'll basically be going, "Well, why are you having this panic attack? Why are you angry? Why are you doing this? Because you've got a fractured spine, because you were in an accident, because you're getting shafted by Military Compensation, so we'll throw some pain in to make it worse." If I'm in pain it's the same thing. Why are you in pain?

15:00 Why is your back hurting? Why is your knee hurting? Why are you physically shutting down and not thinking logically? Because you've got PTSD as well, so we'll kick that in as well. So my strategy there is to basically whatever I'm doing is stop, get home as fast as possible, shower, a really good hot shower, a cup of tea, some pain medication, kick on the air con and watch a comedy movie with some friends or watch something funny. So I've learned to deal with it pretty well. I've never had a drink in my life. I've never taken illegal

15:30 drugs, and my best way to deal with it is usually like a vanilla slice and an ice breaker as well. They're my favourite, it's my comfort food. I try and follow a diet as best as I can and I exercise as much as I can. Lately it hasn't worked, but now I've got my gym set up I can really get stuck back into things and also having my dog makes the world of difference. If I'm having a really bad day he's having a sleep with me, he's up there. He knows when I'm down. He can

16:00 read it, that's the thing. He says, "Are you OK?" And he's got his head in my lap. "I'll just hang around you a little bit." He gets more clingy. He knows when I'm stressed from the pain, because he sleeps beside my bed and he's got his head on the bed, "Up you come." So he jumps up and actually he actually takes a bit of pain away because he'll basically nuzzle up to my back and his body heat will actually heat up my back for me so that sort of

16:30 helps take the pain away, plus having the comfort of him here makes all the difference.

So how do you look back on your military career?

Oh, I really enjoyed it. Even though I had the accident, I thought it was quite successful, quite a good career and to me, like, the accident was just a big challenge which I like to feel I tackled quite well.

17:00 I mean, they say there are people who are worse off than me. There are people who are better off than me, but these are the cards I've been dealt with, these are the decisions that I made so I'll deal with it as best as I can, and I like to feel I do. Some days I drop the ball, but people drop the ball and they don't have my problem.

Have you joined the RSL?

Trying to. Every time I call up they're not there. That's not a

17:30 bad thing. I just seem to be calling at the wrong time. So I actually went to join the RSL out towards Indooroopilly, but by the time I actually realised where they were and drove all the way out there it was like this is too far. So I'm just trying to get in contact with The Gap RSL. But lately I've just had a lot of dealing with solicitors, then I got the flu and I just haven't had a chance to get around to it.

What are your thoughts on Anzac Day?

I always go. I always go to the dawn service.

18:00 A good friend of mine I've known for years, she normally comes along with me but now I have Natalie, Natalie will come along. But yeah, I think it's a good day. It's a day we remember what we do because that's why I like the War Archives, because have no idea what we do. They sort of see the Australian soldiers in Iraq patrolling through the streets. They don't realise the danger those guys are in and the reason we haven't lost a single Australian soldier is, I don't think luck has played any part of it, it's because they're just professional. Everything is well planned.

18:30 The sacrifices that Australian service people make is phenomenal and the work we do, we're not baby killers. We don't go off and rape women and do all that sort of bullshit. We put ourselves amongst the community. We establish ourselves, we do hearts and minds and if yes, we have to go off and engage in battle we do it very well, but we do it within the rules of engagement.

19:00 So we're not just uncontrollable killing machines. We're very well trained, very well restrained, we do our job well and we have compassion and even when we've defeated the enemy we still look after them. So I think Australian people get their money's worth with their tax dollars spent on defence because our soldiers, sailors and airmen are very, very good, and the women, they do a very good job as well, a very good job.

And

19:30 **I'd be guessing that the anniversary of the accident has special significance for you?**

Yeah, it's always a difficult day but now that Natalie's there we actually spend the day together. So we go off and have a fun day, get the dogs and go to movies and try and make it an enjoyable day. It almost stressed the hell out of me but now I've got Natalie it makes a difference.

Did you ever get a chance to go back up to the Fire Support Base Barbara?

Yeah, I did. They put on a special flight for me. It was way after and

20:00 I got to wander around, grabbed a few souvenirs as all soldiers do. I'll get them mounted and framed one day in a glass cabinet. But just to have a look around and to see my aircraft, I actually found a magnifying glass that I carried in my survival kit. I found my harness buckle. I took the rescue hoist rescue hook as well, and something else I grabbed? Oh, the scope from my Steyr rifle that I found on the ground as well.

20:30 **Actually I was going to ask you, ages ago when you told me that you were actually in the trials for the Steyr, what were the other weapons that were being trialled?**

There was the M1602 which basically was the updated version of the M16, a heavier barrel but a siding system. It was a more robust weapon. That was the only competitor actually. The other weapon we used was the Minimi

21:00 light machine gun. It was just 4.56 which looked at being replaced with the M60 because what they're doing is actually they're making 5.56 the calibre across the borders as the standard use. It used to be 7.62 but now it's just 5.56.

And what were your own impressions of those trials between the two weapons?

Great, really really good. You get to play with new toys so that's always good fun. I thought the A2 was a little better than the Steyr and the Steyr's a bit problematic.

21:30 It's had something like 100 unauthorised discharges in East Timor, the weapons going off and it's just because it's a bit of a funny weapon because normally with a weapon, when you unload it, you check safe, you take the magazine off, you tilt it to the right, you cock the weapon, you lock the working parts and you look in. With the Steyr you actually take the barrel out. The barrel disengages from the whole weapon itself. So it's a bit strange like that, and that's sort of getting people into

22:00 trouble, but I've never had a problem with it. I think people just need to train better or do something, but they kept on changing the goal posts with the training in the Steyrs which is very odd. But I think it's like the standard weapons in the military, they should go by what the SAS use. They're basically the best of the best, they're the elite, and they don't use the Steyr at all. They used to use it for a while but [UNCLEAR] it sucked. It's the same with even the British SAS. They don't use the

22:30 SA80, they prefer the M16. So what does that say? Our commandos use the M16 now, or should say they use the CAR 15, which is the cut down version. So what is that saying? We've obviously bought the wrong rifle again.

Now you had some stories. You had a few stories that you were going to regale us with?

Oh yeah.

23:00 When I was in Cambodia there was a set of steps that went from the Mekong River. It's like the local port and it had, like, a pontoon, so to speak, and a set of steps led up from there and I used to, for fitness we used to run around the village and that and we had like paved streets everywhere which was good. I'd run around and do a bit of fitness and stay fit and do push ups and chin ups and then I'd run up and down the stairs and sort of build up my cardiovascular, work the legs a bit harder because it's all flat everywhere, and I sort of you know,

23:30 at the peak of my fitness, very fit and so, sorry.

So you're doing the stairs to build up your cardio?

Yeah, just sort of to stay fit, and the locals would have like a bamboo pole and they'd get these bike tyres and wrap them around a 44 gallon drum and carry them up the stairs like one either side. I've got

to have a go at this, I mean how hard can it be? So one of the locals hopped on his end

24:00 and I hopped on mine and away we went and carried it up. That was pretty easy, you know, and then one of them challenged me to a race. They'd seen me run up and down the stairs, "Come on, I'll give you a go." Said, "You're on." I beat the bastard by six inches. He's in thongs, I'm in Nike runners at my peak of physical fitness and this little bastard, I've only beaten him by six inches. It's like, "Oh God." and these guys are like muscly little vegemites, wash board abs and bulging biceps 'cause they're carting

24:30 44 gallon drums up and down all day, that would do that, and I was taking, I had a foot and a half on him and I was taking three steps at a time and it's pretty bad when you're almost beaten by a guy in flip flops. That's embarrassing. So there's the naked story out in the field. It's one of the big Kangaroo exercises and we were doing a lot of long distance driving the vehicles and it was taking its toll on the vehicles. So

25:00 my section commander's vehicle broke down. One of the other section commander's vehicle, his broke down. The troop sergeant's vehicle broke down and another section commander's vehicle broke down, so it was basically the Alpha and Bravo call scientific section and the troop commander were left and we were off in the middle of nowhere in all around defence and I was the section commander. There were only two vehicles but someone had to take charge, so that was just the normal thing. So it was eleven o'clock, midnight, or something

25:30 like that, eleven, twelve o'clock and I was called up to see the boss and get some orders for the next day and the other section commanders would do the same, or the acting section commanders would do the same, so I thought, "I feel like being a bit different." so I put on my boots, grabbed my map, grabbed my weapon and nothing else and trotted across stark naked. So we got the orders and sitting there and the boss asked a few questions and any questions of us, and, "No, everything's fine." He actually gave them by torch light, by red torch, and then we were sort of just sitting around, we were just

26:00 talking. He said sort of says to me, he says, "Fraser, have you got any clothes on?" "No, Sir." "What, you're fucking naked?" "Yes, Sir." "You poof, get out of here." They were throwing cups of canteen and water bottles at me and I think a few weapons were thrown at me as well. So I was racing back around the compound. My driver's there, Graham Cooper, he's going, like, "You didn't go to the meeting naked, did youse?" "Of course I did." "You're a freak, mate." So a very worrisome boy.

26:30 What was the other story? What was the other one I was going to tell?

As a 39-year-old you've done so much, you've accomplished such a lot in a short amount of time, besides looking after your health what plans do you have for the future?

At the moment I thought about

27:00 getting into the IT industry but sitting at a computer all day is too boring and my body couldn't tolerate that anyway. So I started doing dog obedience with my dog, 'cause I refuse to have a stupid dog, and I actually found I enjoy it that much, I've got a knack for it and I actually found that, like, at the classes I tend to be basically like the top three or four amongst the whole school

27:30 and I thought, "This is what I want to do." I got invited to do demonstrations at a Japanese training camp and help instruct there even though I'd never instructed before. So I went along and was teaching Japanese students how to train a dog, 'cause they didn't speak very good English so that made it hard, but we did it and we did it very successfully, and then I've now started my studies to be a dog obedience instructor which goes well because also, Ben, my dog and I are a Delta

28:00 team with the pet therapy program, so we go through the Royal Children's Hospital and go to Rosalie Nursing Home and visit the elderly and visit the kids. So it's really rewarding, because you see the kids with their little broken arms and they've got their drips and stuff and Ben just loves kids and you do tricks with them and they get to play with the dog and have a bit of a chat and they all ask about Ben and he's got his little red bandanna on. So, see, that's where I want to go, in that sort of direction, because when you're doing dog obedience you're actually out on the park and you're moving so

28:30 it's a form of exercise, whereas with IT, you're sort of sitting at a table all day at a computer. It's a very stressful sort of work, so I do one-on-one teaching for Bardon Community Association and the money I make from that goes to charities. I go to the blood bank and donate blood. So one more donation and I've made number 40, and I don't think I need any more challenges because I don't think my body can keep up that much. So

29:00 I'm trying to maintain a relationship, maintain my house and catch up with friends so that's where I'm sort of going, and dog obedience is what I'm really enjoying.

Back into army, with all the time you were in aviation did you still have an affinity with APCs and the buckets?

We used to catch up with the guys every now and again. We used to see them out in the field. In fact I served with a few of them in Cambodia, which was good, and caught up with a few of the guys in East Timor

29:30 and I'm still in contact with a few of the guys nowadays. I caught up with an old mate of mine who's in

the police via the internet so that's good. There's a few other guys I've tracked down. In fact there's one guy who I've, Buck McKenzie, who I'm still in contact with via e-mail and occasionally go down to Sydney to catch up. We catch up and have a bit of a chat and see his family of seven, which is three kids and four dogs. So occasionally I catch up with the guys and I actually bumped into an old mate of mine the other day. He's an ambulance driver now. So yeah, there's quite a few of the buys in Brisbane

30:00 all doing all walks of life.

And you mentioned that you probably wouldn't want to go back to Cambodia, what about East Timor?

I'd like to go back to both and see the changes but physically I couldn't do it. I have enough trouble getting around Brisbane with my back nowadays. Getting to the Gold Coast is logistically a pain in the arse, literally. Even though my car's got heated seats it still takes its toll on me and wears me out, and I've just got to take

30:30 all the pain medication and I don't like doing that. So basically I'm pretty much Brisbane bound and if I have to fly anywhere it has to go business class because I can't deal with economy. I'd like to see what's happening over there. I hear East Timor is quite established now and they've got gyms and everything over there and all sort of amenities which is really really good. But physically I think it would really destroy me, so I've just got to stay within Brisbane.

31:00 **How often, have you been able to speak of your experiences to anyone before?**

Well I discuss it with my counsellors obviously. I had to tell Natalie about the past because the back pain was going to obviously come out

31:30 at some stage and I think it was our seventh day that we'd actually been dating and we'd gone off and seen the movie How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days. Probably not a good movie to see. No, no, actually it was really good. I actually said to Natalie halfway through the movie, "I've got another 20 ways to actually piss a guy off if you want to find out." but no, we went down to Kangaroo Point and I said, "Look, I've got to tell you this because I'm really enjoying being with you and this could

32:00 make or break the relationship right now." So I told her about my past and she said, "OK, whatever." Didn't really care. "I don't care; I want to be with you." So I said, "Whoo whoo." So that was good. Occasionally I talk to my friends about it, certain things come up. But no, I don't talk to total strangers. I change the subject or change the topic if it comes up. I went to a wedding a while

32:30 ago and we were outside of the church standing there and a guy came up and we got chatting and, "What do you do?" "I'm ex-military." "Oh, what did you do?" "I was with the Blackhawk helicopters." "What about that accident." blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and, "Did you know anybody?" And I said, "No, no." changed topics and changed tactics and got away from it. They're not interested in being polite and asking curious questions. They're just asking morbid questions because unfortunately humans are inherently morbid. So only those who actually respect the

33:00 situation I'll discuss it with. In fact when the accident happened, the one that recently happened, a few of my girlfriend's friends were asking after me making sure that I was OK. So it's nice to know that my girlfriend's friends are checking on me too. So that's really nice, and my closest friends called me up and said, "Are you OK, everything fine?" My solicitor's secretary called up to make sure I was OK. So that was really good. So the people

33:30 who sort of know me in the community sort of were checking on me which was good.

Going back to Timor, the aid workers that were there, how did they carry on?

Never saw them. We pulled a few out, but pretty much once we were there they were sort of, the ones that were there from my best knowledge were basically sort of stayed under house arrest. Not that they were under arrest, but they

34:00 sort of stayed within the confines. They didn't want to come out on the streets quite yet.

Because one of the smiling blokes we spoke to said that the non-government organisations that were there really put the army at risk sometimes with their behaviour.

I think some of the aid organisations are a wasted space. The ones that advertise on TV, I've seen them in action and they just do nothing. In fact, when I was discussing before how we'd cruise around the streets in the Land Rovers and hand out stuff,

34:30 we were told to stop doing that because we were embarrassing World Vision, I think, who were there, because they weren't doing anything. We were making them look bad. So when people say, "Do you want to give to World Vision?" Or do you want to do this, whatever. I go, "No, because you don't do your job. I've seen you guys in action." I've seen them in Cambodia; I've seen them in East Timor, wasted space. So they're there basically just to get paid a lot of money for doing sweet fuck all. And I actually find sometimes,

35:00 occasionally civilian aid workers are pretty stupid people. They don't listen to the soldiers and in combat situations they just seem to, they do put you at risk by doing silly things. Instead of staying

behind the blue line they've got to go off and, "She'll be right mate." and then of course they get in trouble and we've got to go off and risk our life to rescue them and so aid agencies don't really thrill me that much. I have very little faith in them.

Because the

35:30 **topic of how the Defence Force should be used in civil aid sort of programs, what are your opinions on that?**

Within Australia?

Well, both within Australian and within our neighbouring countries?

I think we're good to get in there and establish the peace. Aid agencies shouldn't even come into play. Get the military in there first, because we just don't go in there with guns. We have infantry to make the area secure. We've got

36:00 armoured vehicles to basically act as strong points. We've got Blackhawks to do the medevacs. We've got the medics to do the first aid stuff and even within the infantry battalions and armoured squadrons, they've got medics so they can do work within there. So get the army in their first, get the place safe and secure and then bring the aid agencies in if you want to bring them in. I think trying to get them to work together at the same time

36:30 just doesn't seem to work. You've got to establish peace and get the place safe and then bring them in.

So when you look back on your army career how do you break it all up? Is it all just one big thing or is it chapters of different things that you've done?

The first 10 years was quiet, because the first 10 years was in armour. The last 10 years was just go go go, especially transferring to Blackhawks and flying around all of Australia, going to Cambodia, East Timor, the accident,

37:00 being able to say that, "Yes, I've saved lives." That sort of thing. So the first 10 years was very quiet and the second 10 years I can sort of break it. OK, I transferred to aviation, did Cambodia, come back, I've become a loadmaster, we had the accident, I got back in the horse, I did East Timor regardless of my injuries and that and then called it a day and I'm

37:30 quite happy. I've been decorated five times, so to me it's a good way to end a career. I mean the accident is obviously the low point but you've got to deal with the cards you're dealt and you soldier on.

Would there be a high point?

Cambodia and Timor I suppose would be. Yeah. Especially in part of East Timor. Cambodia was

38:00 very, very good but they're different missions. But being part of the strife that went over there, being able to restore peace to a place that had just gone to hell in a handbag, that was really good. It made the world of difference because it was obviously, you saw the footage, a guy's getting hacked to death in the middle of the street. That sort of thing there we were able to stop. They should've done exactly the same thing in Somalia, but we didn't. So

38:30 I think the UN's a bit of a paper tiger.

Have you got a poem for us?

Yeah, my father's quite the poet and he's written a bit of poetry and I think I've just picked up the knack as well. So, the picture there I've got, the big large picture, the sketch drawings of East Timor surrounded with pictures, I wrote my own poem. So I actually wrote it on the way home. So it goes, I just called it "Timor."

39:00 and it goes:

\n[Verse follows]\n "With clouds so white and skies so blue the rising smoke seems out of place,\n The Aussie troops have come to Timor to free a tortured race,\n Infantry patrol the streets while Blackhawks fill the sky,\n Little children see my soldiers and often wonder why,\n We've come to free them from the evil that has been here for so long\n And hope one day." sorry, my back's playing up,\n "And hope one day the kids will smile and sing a happy song.\n Why do people cause such pain by hurting someone who can't defend?\n

39:30 The militia's [UNCLEAR] will stop on that you can depend.\n

The killing has stopped in pieces here, a country brought to its knees\n And now it's safe to roam the streets and be East Timorese.\n The time will come to return back home."\n

Can we just stop for a tick?

Are you right?

Yep.

40:00 \n[Verse follows]\n “The time will come to return back home to see what’s on in my life,\n

And I will be proud to say I helped to end the Timor strife.”\n

I wrote that on my way back home in a C130. It seemed good.

40:30 **Are there any last messages you’d like to say to future generations?**

I guess just be proud of what we do, and then people don’t realise we give up

41:00 being away from our families and that, so that’s the hard part and we sacrifice our lives and risk our lives for other people. So just appreciate and respect what we do. That’s it.

INTERVIEW ENDS