Australians at War Film Archive

Neville Lewis (The Urchin) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 1st July 2004

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1636

Tape 1

00:30 **Neville, can you give me a summary of your life?**

I was born in Proserpine on the 22nd of May 1921. My family had a small sugar farm at a place called Strathdickie which is a few kilometres north of Proserpine. I went to

01:00 school – at that time there were small district schools manned by one teacher at all the districts around Proserpine. I lived on that farm and played a great deal of tennis and cricket when I was a kid. I worked on the farm and I

01:30 worked at the local sugar mill until the 1st of January 1942 when I joined the army. I was a real country kid and until I joined the army I had never been north of Ayr which is about 100 miles away or south of Mackay which is about 80-odd miles away. I still say miles, I don't say kilometres. As I say, I joined the

02:00 army in 1942 and I was discharged I think it was in 1946 and I came back to Proserpine. I met my wife in Brisbane in 1944 and I married in 1947, and we came to Proserpine and we've lived here ever since.

02:30 **What about children and what sort of work did you do after the war?**

I did every sort of work that brought in a quid. I worked in a shop in Proserpine and I worked on a cane farm in Proserpine and I worked for the shire council and I worked in the sugar mill. For the last fifteen years until I retired I was a storeman/clerk with the local shire council. We had five kids and two of

03:00 them – all are married and I've got fifteen grandkids. One child lives in Brisbane, two in Proserpine and two in Townsville.

Tell us about growing up in Proserpine and what it was like then?

We were very poor, and I mean poor. I don't mean poor

03:30 today. We had a very small farm, about 243 stones to the acre, I think. We had to live very thriftily but our parents looked after us as well as they possibly could. As I say, I went to Strathdickie State School and the school teachers in those days had it

04:00 very hard compared to what they have today. I don't say that in any derogatory fashion, it's just that they had to adapt themselves much more. They had to board with a family in the district and generally take part in the district's activities. As I said, I loved sport. I played tennis and I played cricket with the adults from the

04:30 age of 14 onwards. And that was my recreation in those days. I went to the pictures about once every six months and that was about it. We had very few luxuries of any sort. Our parents would go to town in a buggy and a horse and sulky and stock up on provisions and they'd bring home a packet of boiled lollies,

05:00 a shilling's worth, and that was our treat for the week. We had no fridge. It was 1930 I think before we had a telephone and no TV [television] of course and no wireless. There was nothing like that. No cars and no bike until my brother bought me a bike when I was 13 years old. He'd been doing a bit of cane

05:30 cutting. That's my only brother. I had two sisters and one brother. He bought me this bike and I thought I was made, secondhand it was. We used to go out and at weekends our recreation was either tennis and then it was cricket in the summer. That is what we sort of lived for, you know. I'm still pretty much of a

06:00 fanatic I watch it on the TV. I watched it on the television last night. I won't be able to watch the test match today because I'm doing this.

I'm sorry. What was your father like, Neville?

Physically or all over do you mean? Well, Dad was a terribly hard-working man, but our farm… In those

06:30 days they used to select areas to farm. Ours comprised 160 acres and he selected it. You've heard of 'On our Selection', that sort of thing. And that wasn't as funny as it sounded because a lot of that was so real to life. We lived in a

07:00 perpetual state of indebtedness and, like I say, thrift was our motto. It had to be. And we had a few fruit trees and sold a bit of fruit to the fruiterer in town, and if Mr Nicholas doesn't pay her then wipe the Weetbix [cereal] off the weekly list, we won't get that this week and that sort of thing. They took great…

07:30 Mum and Dad both took a great pride in our family. You know the old story – don't be missing with the Reagans and the Ryans and the rest. They weren't snobs but they did take a pride in our family, in our cleanliness and our behaviour. They demanded a high standard and I've lived to thank them for that because it was a

08:00 great asset in later life.

Were you a religious family?

Yes as much as any family was able to be so in those days. We were Catholics. My brother, my elder brother, became in the church in his early years from 14 years onwards. The sisters, the nuns, used to

08:30 come out and take us for religious instruction occasionally. They came out to the farm. The priests used to come out to the schools and give us religious instruction, Old Father Kelly. From when we were able to do so my brother and I rode our bikes into mass every Sunday at the local church, about eight miles. Yes,

09:00 insofar as we were able we did practise our religion. On the wall over there there is a photo of mass taking place in New Guinea. The chap serving mass in the foreground, that's my brother, and the one right over in the far corner is me. We were involved in the

09:30 church and later on in life we did become very much more involved, and we still are as much as we are able.

What about your mum, what was she like?

Mum was an absolutely wonderful person. She never had any amenities and she had to make do. She was terribly hard working. She was a shortish pretty blunt woman and she was very highly

10:00 regarded by everyone, particularly by us. I can't speak too highly of her. She had a lot to put up with and a bit of sickness in her life and she looked after us terribly well. Later on, after the war probably more than before it, I used to love to go and sit down and talk to Mum. She came to

10:30 Proserpine in 1895 and she had so much knowledge of the other people. And when things used to be printed in the paper she used to shake her head and say, "Neville, I've lived too long. I know too much about these people." She was a very lovely woman, yes. She was very much loved by all

11:00 my children. They thought she was wonderful. That was Mum.

What about your brother, were you close in age? I know you went on to be in the war together but when you were growing up what sorts of things did you do together?

Yes. We were close together. We played cricket and tennis together and we were very close together, but we were always very careful that we didn't

11:30 intrude too much on each other's private lives. We wouldn't have appreciated that. Our lieutenant in the army said to us one day when we applied for a weekend leave to go to visit some relatives a couple of hundred miles away, we were in Brisbane at the time, Jimmy Kemp said, he said, "I don't know what's wrong with you two.

12:00 You want to go away together. It's not very convenient to give you leave on one weekend together. Can't you be like other brothers and just hate the sight of each other?" We weren't like that. We did a lot of things in the army together and I relied on him a lot too. He was a steadying influence.

How difference is he in character to you?

Very different. He kept his own

12:30 counsel a lot. I was more extroverted I think than he was. He took part in public life more than I was. I was involved in a great many things but I didn't take too much part in public life. He has been on the local shire council and he has been a director of

13:00 the mill here. They elect their directors every year and he has been involved in that. We are both politically minded and he was more involved that way. I was never much inclined that way, but in that respect he was.

13:30 He was much more of a loner than I was. He wasn't a loner, but he was much more of a loner than I was.

How much older than you is he?

He is four years older than I am. He will be 87 in August.

Can you tell us a little bit about school and what you did at school and what the teachers were like?

School

14:00 was a small one-roomed place. It became a pig farm later. One teacher was there for a number of years and she married a chap and lived in Proserpine. She boarded at our place. She was an English girl and a very good teacher and a very understanding teacher. She took a great

14:30 part in local life and played for the local tennis team and married a local. I particularly remember one thing about her because when I was at school, I was about 10 years old I suppose, an Italian family came to live in our district and none of them could speak any English. There were two children and they're still alive now and still live here.

15:00 I remember them coming to school, Defaro their name was. They were brought to the school by another Italian lady who had lived there for a while and she had a smattering of English. And she brought them and introduced them to Miss Atkin, our teacher. I can remember those poor kids sitting down there looking scared to death and they didn't speak a word of English. Life could have been very

15:30 hard for them, but the teacher, as I say, was a most understanding sort of person and they've got a lot to thank her for. They quickly became assimilated and they learned English, but I remember that day particularly. I only had three teachers and they were all ladies. We never had too many men teachers in the small schools in those days. In what we'd call the

16:00 town schools, the larger schools, there the headmaster would almost invariably be a man and their were male teachers, but the teachers all around the district all seemed to be ladies. There didn't seem to be any men, but later there were. I had three teachers during my school years. And it's rather coincidental when we were camped at Petrie later on,

16:30 and we were going away this weekend as I told you to see these relatives, we were picking up the train at Petrie and we went into a small store there to have a soft drink. While we were waiting we were standing and talking and there was a lady sitting there at the end doing some bookwork. She hadn't served us she was just sitting there. After a while she came down and she said, "Are you Bernie and Nev Lewis from Proserpine?" And we looked at her and said, "Yes." "Yes,

17:00 I know," she said. She said, "I'm Mrs Cook, but I was Miss Kenway and I taught you at school 15 years ago at Strathdickie." So she was one that was there. It must have been rather difficult for them because they had six classes. We averaged 18 to 25 kids at our school, which was about par for the course, and they would have six classes in those

17:30 schools, which meant a considerable amount of work and they must have found it pretty hard going. We used to make our own games and played a bit of tennis and a bit of cricket and generally mucked about. We had a bit of a garden which we used to spend half an hour in each week. The inspector came once a year to see how the school was getting on. It was a matter of great apprehension for the poor old teacher and

18:00 us, too, I think. Yes, I imagine it must have been very hard for the teacher because some of the kids were nearly as big as her, you know, and there used to be fights and fisticuffs.

Did you ever get into a fight yourself?

Yes I did and I got beaten too. It's funny how things happen. One chap and I for no

18:30 reason at all we sort of took a skunner to each other and we used to fight a bit. We got over it later on in life. He was in the army too, but he's dead now. I had a few skirmishes, yes.

What did you fight about as kids?

Anything that cropped up. I don't really remember. I don't think it was anything.

19:00 I don't really know, maybe because I thought he cheated at marbles or something. I can't remember.

Did you ever get a serious injury from a fight at school?

No.

What was the worst kind of thing you'd get?

The first injury I ever got I think was I was tossed off a horse and fell on a railway line and injured my leg. I got a bad gash in one

19:30 leg. And one day I was standing beside – we used to ride horses to school – one day I was standing by a horse, another boy's horse, and he flung his saddle on from the other side and they had stirrup irons and the stirrup iron came right over the thing and it whacked me on the head. That was about the limit of my

20:00 injuries in the early years.

You said you played cricket, was there an organised game in the community?

We had and still have the Proserpine Cricket Association and we have the Proserpine Tennis Association. And in those days the districts used to put in teams. There'd be a team from the banana pocket and a team from Cannonvale and a team from Strathdickie, and

20:30 we played competition games between ourselves and we played inter-town competitions between us and Bowen and Ayr and Home Hill, and the same in cricket. In tennis we had what we called the Hanson Shield, a chap called Hanson inaugurated the shield and six men and I played a lot in that against Bowen and Ayr and Home Hill and so on.

21:00 We had a memorable occasion when four fairly high-class tennis players came through. Two of them were Davis Cup squad then. Ian Ayr, he came from Brisbane, and a chap called Jack Arkinstall who came from Brisbane and Rex Hartwig. They came up here and they came in and played a few games. I played against them

21:30 and we realised how far distant our game was from theirs, but we did make our presence felt against one of them. There was a chap here, a school teacher at that time, called Jack Chisholm – that must have been after the war – and Jack was a very good player. He and I played together lots of times. And there was an occasion when a chap called Ives, Bill Ives, in an effort to spread the

22:00 knowledge of cricket he used to bring teams through to the provincial areas. He brought the team to Mackay and we applied to Mackay to get one day of that team for them to come up and play in Proserpine, which they did. I remember we had to guarantee forty pounds. It was a truly representative team. I don't know if you know cricket that much. Bill O'Reilly was in it and Stan McCabe and Sidney Barnesmmy and

22:30 Donny Watt from Brisbane and Colin McCool – a lot of test players and shield players – and we played them for a one day match here. I was selected in the team to play against them. We realised just how far they were removed from us, although we only had the only honour on that tour that dismissed them entirely, the whole lot of them. We did get them all out.

23:00 **What were they like? Did you get to talk to them much?**

Yes, very good, particularly McCabe, Stan McCabe, he was very, very good. Chegwin, the captain, he was very good. The only fellow we found a bit off was Sidney Barnes. I think that Sid was very poor. I read his book and you read of his

23:30 childhood when he used to catch sparrows and paint them yellow and sell them as canaries and this sort of thing. He also sold cricket bats on the tour. I think he was a bit paranoid about being like this. He was a bit hard to get on with, but the rest were really good fellows. It was a great game.

What position did you play?

24:00 I was what was called an all rounder. I was a slow bowler and a batsman. I used to bat at about number 4 or 5 and I got a bowl. The captain said to me, our captain, he said before they came, "This team is out of our league, but at least look like a cricketer. Don't poke around." I went in and there was a chap called

24:30 Walsh bowling, he was a slow left-hand bowler, and he pitched up the ball and I thought, "A seal before mid on and you," and I went down the wicket and the ball disappeared. I looked around and I was about two yards down the wicket, and Ronnie Sagus was the keeper and he had the ball in his hand, and he shook his head at me and he threw the ball back to the bowler. I thought, "Oh well, that can happen to anyone."

25:00 I did the same on the second ball – the same thing. I looked around and Sagus was standing there with the ball in his hand and he said, "Son, if you do that again we'll have to stop you." That made me realise just exactly what the distance was. It was a good day.

What about [Donald] Bradman? Were you hearing much of him at the time?

He was it and still is. When you talk about

25:30 cricket you talk about Bradman and then you talk about the rest. His average is 99 point something of an innings and the highest of every other test average is about 60. He was a freak, was Bradman.

At the time you were hearing this about him in Proserpine?

Yes. We heard a lot about him. We used to sit up

26:00 and somebody would have a wireless. When they were playing in England we'd sit up until 2 or 3 in the morning listening to the commentary by wireless. There was no TV of course. There would be static on it. You'd hear about half of it and they used to tap it. A pencil on the thing in front of it that denoted when the ball hit the bat. And Bradman of course was in the '30s and '40s – he was the man.

26:30 I had a great respect for Bradman. Some of the media thought that he was a bit aloof, but I didn't think so. I thought a man had a right to his private life. I respected him greatly.

Do you think the game of cricket has changed much then when you watch it now?

Yes.

Is it for the better?

Some is. The quality of cricket is better than it was.

27:00 **Also there's the one day cricket which came in which changed the whole atmosphere. There is the thing called sledging, have you heard of that? It consists of making remarks – the keeper might make them in a low voice while the bloke is bowling to try and upset the batsman, and they might vent their displeasure in other ways and that would never have been tolerated in**

27:30 **the early days. Bradman, when he was captain, he would not have tolerated that one.**

Is it bad sportsmanship, do you think?

It's hard for me to say that, but in my opinion, yes. I think bad sportsmanship is far more evident today than it was then. They've curbed it a lot in the last few years, but

28:00 before 15 years ago and just before that there was an awful lot of antics and so on on the court which would never have been tolerated early on.

So who are the contemporary players that you think are worth watching?

Now?

Yes.

I think Warne is worth watching, but I have no great respect for his

28:30 attitude to the game. I acknowledge he's one of the greatest slow bowlers we've ever had, but I don't like his… Being a Queenslander, I like Hayden. 'The bat' they call him, and he's a great cricketer and I respect him. The keeper, Gilchrist, he's flamboyant and always worth watching. McGrath is a great fast bowler.

29:00 There are some good players in cricket nowadays, yes. And the Waughs, I have great respect for the two Waugh brothers. And the Chappells, of course, although I didn't see eye to eye with some of Ian's comments sometimes.

Or the great underarm bowl?

My opinion is that that was

29:30 overplayed. Yes, I wouldn't have done it, but it was well within the laws of cricket and it was the last ball of the day. If they hit a six we would lose the match. I think Greg Chappell had the right to tell his brother to bowl it underarm when it would be almost impossible to hit it for six and thus avoid the possibility of a defeat. I wouldn't have done it

30:00 but I think they overplayed it. I don't think it was such bad sportsmanship as they made out.

Yes. I know what you're saying. I remember seeing that when it happened. When you were growing up, Neville, did you hear much about World War I?

Yes I did. I had a grandfather who was in World War I and I had a cousin who was in World War I.

30:30 Some of the men I knew, the older men, were in World War I. We heard a good deal about it, yes.

What sort of things did you hear?

We heard of the conditions in the trenches and that must have been primitive and all the rest of it. My grandfather didn't talk much about the [First] World War, but he did talk a little bit. He

31:00 spent a good deal of time in France under battle conditions. And I remember one time he was telling us while he was on leave in a town he saw some 'bananas' he called them. He saw some bananas in a shop and he said, "'I haven't tasted bananas since I left Australia.'" He said, "'I'm going to have some of them. They'll be dear, but I'm going to have some of them.' I walked into the shop and I asked the

31:30 how much they were. And they said, 'They are two and six a dozen.'" That's 25 cents. He couldn't afford that so he had to go without them. He did tell of one other time when he was guarding, he and some other chaps were guarding some German prisoners and one of the other chaps was taunting them a bit.

"What do you think of this now Jerry? It's not so good now, is it?" And he said,

32:00 "They never said anything except all of a sudden one spoke up and said in faultless English, 'What do you think we think about it? Just exactly what you'd think about it if you were in the same position.'" He said, "It gave us a bit of a shock." We did read about it a good deal and listen to it and so on.

How did you read about it?

Well there were

32:30 books published and that was about all. It was in some books and also we heard a lot from mouth to mouth. There were people who'd been in the air force and so on and the army and they talked about it a good deal.

What was your concept of war, growing up?

Well. It was something that happened and it hadn't concerned me very much so I wasn't terribly interested in it. We didn't conceive that we would experience it ourselves so we didn't think about it until of course it happened, and then it

33:00 became far away. My brother always took a very serious view of it. He and two others were the first three to enlist from Proserpine. They enlisted in November 1939 and they were the first three. I was not so much concerned about it until the Japanese entered the war. Then I started to think about it a bit more and then I decided

33:30 that things looked bad and it was about time I joined up too, and I did.

Do you remember the day that war broke out?

I remember, yes, vaguely. I remember Chamberlain [Neville Chamberlain, prime minister of Great Britain] going across to the continent and conferring with Hitler and coming back to announce that they'd come to an agreement that Hitler was

34:00 supposed to be given some rights to an ex part of Austria. And the motto in those days was 'Better jaw than war' – better to talk about it than enter it. And I remember reading or listening to our politicians saying how unprepared England was for it as she was. Of course Hitler didn't stop there and he invaded Poland and that involved

34:30 us in the war, but it was a long way away and for a while nothing much happened. We didn't view it terribly seriously, although people like my brother did and he had more insight than most into it.

Why do you think he took it really seriously?

I don't know. He was that type of fellow. He had a mind which delved into things a

35:00 little and he was interested in international politics and international happenings and so on, and he saw it more seriously than lots of others did. We had practically no defences then. We had the Militia, which was a sort of a weekend army. I never joined that. A few of the people did, but we

35:30 had practically nothing, but it built up very quickly after the war started. And we became as I say, very much involved when the Japanese entered the conflict and they just surged really – they didn't fight their way, they just surged right down to New Guinea. It was very much a part of our lives then.

36:00 **What did you think when your brother joined?**

Not much. That was his decision and he was going and he enlisted and that was just something he did. I wrote him letters and so on and he came home on leave – not much.

When he came home do you think he'd changed much?

No.

36:30 That was before he went overseas to England and he was there for a while. Then he went to the Middle East and he fought in the Middle East in the unpopular part of our war. It was unfortunate that we had to fight the French, the Vichy French, I don't know if you remember that term. That was the term for the people who collaborated with Hitler after the fall of France. They were much maligned I think. I never ever thought that way because they had no choice, did they? We had to engage them in the

37:00 war in Syria because circumstances ordained as such. And it was a very fierce little action which lasted about four weeks and he fought in that. And then later on there was quite an altercation between Churchill [Winston Churchill, British prime minister] and the Australian prime minister, John Curtin I think at that time.

37:30 Churchill wanted to keep them over there and Curtin said they'd have to come home. Curtin got his way and they were sent home, except for the 9th Division – they stayed a little longer and got involved in the Tobruk show. And it was while my brother and the 7th Division were on the way home that the

38:00 unmentionable happened. Our impregnable fortress fell – Singapore. Nobody thought that was possible. It was terrible. They came home and that was when I joined his battalion.

How did your mum and dad react to him going to war?

They didn't like it and they refused to give me my consent.

38:30 He was over 21 so he said he was going and that was more or less all there was to it. They didn't object, but they didn't like it. When I wanted to join up I wasn't 21 and they stood out for quite some time and wouldn't give their consent. I was to be 21

39:00 in 1942, in May '42, and I said to Mum, "Well, it's only five months away. I'll be joining up then anyway so you might as well give your consent now," which she did. They did it very reluctantly and they didn't like the idea at all. I remember Mum saying, "I don't mind Bernie going so much because he never gets into trouble, but if there's any trouble, you'll find it."

39:30 And I did later on in New Guinea. I was pleased to join his battalion.

Tape 2

00:33 **Neville, can you tell me about joining the army and what led you to do that?**

Well what led me to do that was that even with my shallow nature I realised that Australia was in great danger and it was either fight or be taken. So I just thought, "Oh well I should join." I suppose I was attracted by the

01:00 for want of a better word you might call it the romance of the army. And like I say, I was a raw country boy. I went to Brisbane into training camp there and I had no idea. I thought if you wanted to go anywhere in Brisbane you got on the tram and said, "I want to go out to Indooroopilly." You know,

01:30 I was raw. I remember one incident which will reveal how raw I was. In those days in public telephones they had these telephones and you had local calls for twopence. You used to dial your number and when they answered you used to insert your coins in and that connected you up and you used to speak.

02:00 The phone we had at home was on the wall and you used to reel the handle like this and lift the received and all that sort of thing. I thought that all phones in Brisbane were like this one. Bernie, my brother, met his wife in Brisbane, she lived out at Sherwood.

Sorry, you said there was an unusual

02:30 **incident?**

I was out at Bardon on this day. When I went to Brisbane I went to the Exhibition Ground and had various needles and things and went out to Redbank for training. This day I was at Bardon and I wanted to ring my brother's fiancée. Bernie was still overseas at that time. I wanted to ring my brother's fiancée at Sherwood and there were no public phones

03:00 anywhere near. So I went to a shop and asked if I could use the phone and I had my two pennies ready. They said, "Yes," and pointed to the phone. It was over in the corer and I went over to the corner and I'm poking around trying to find some place to put the two pennies. I know it sounds silly, but that's the way it was. And I couldn't find anywhere to put it. So I thought, "Oh well,

03:30 blow it," so I took my two pennies and I went to walk out. And the shopkeeper said, "Did you get your call?" And I wasn't going to admit that I was too stupid to know how to work a phone. I said, "Yes." She said, "How about paying for it?" I said, "All right, how much?" She said, "Threepence." So I gave her my threepence and walked out. Threepence worth of pride it was.

04:00 I went up to my sister-in-law's place – it wasn't my sister in law then – I went over to their place at Sherwood. And there was their phone sitting on the thing. And I said to Mary, "How do you work this thing?" She looked at me as if I came out of the ark. She said, "It's a telephone." I said, "Yes, but how do I get a number?" She said, "You dial it."

04:30 I said, "Where's the dial?" She said, "Here." I said, "How do you do it?" and she showed me. I said, "But how do you pay for it?" She said, "They send you a bill." That was how I was.

Did you like Brisbane city?

No, not the city part of it.

05:00 It was too big and too noisy and too alien. I didn't like it very much at all. And of course the town was blacked out, which meant that you couldn't go anywhere after dark sort of thing, and I was pretty lonely in those first days at Redbank. After we'd been at Redbank a while we got needles and we had lectures

05:30 and we did this, that and the other.

Can you tell us a bit about that initial training and what you did when you first got to Redbank?

Drill. We drilled and went out on route marches and manoeuvres and little stunts as we called them and so on. And we'd all been a bit apprehensive because we thought the sergeants were monsters from Mars. But they weren't – they were good.

06:00 It was all so alien to our way of life. You had to get used to sleeping in a big long hall on the floor with a mattress filled with straw and so on. And you were waking up at half past 5 and going out on parade. And the food wasn't the same as we'd had at home.

What sort of food did you have?

We had good food actually. Stew, a lot of

06:30 stew. Quite good food compared to what I had later on in New Guinea. The food was quite good. And the food must have been good too and the life must have been good too because I was 9 stone 10 in the old language when I joined the army and in May when I left training or later on when I got weighed I was 11 stone.

07:00 I went to New Guinea, I joined the 13th Battalion, and we went to New Guinea in August 1942 and I came home from New Guinea and I got weighed and I was 7 stone 6. I say this – the food and the training must have been healthy because we thrived on it.

Were there some blokes that

07:30 **didn't do so well in the training?**

Yes. They used to threaten us. Some of the people that couldn't drill, they used to threaten to put them in what they called 'an awkward squad'. We all got on pretty well. There were the usual bits of discord and the occasional officer that we didn't like very much, but it was all pretty strange. But when I'd been at

08:00 Redbank about six weeks, I suppose, we were out on a march one day and the lieutenant in charge of our platoon came up beside me and said, "I've got to take a detachment away from training camp next week." He said, "They told me I can form my own platoon and I'll be going to what's called a

08:30 battle station and there will be some possibility of action." Those were great words. He said, "Would you like to come?" And I didn't think much of training anyway and I said, "Yes." So I thought we were going up to Cape York or Horn Island or somewhere and this would be good.

09:00 So he formed his battalion and we marched out of Redbank and we got into a little boat and I thought, "Gee, we can't be going far." And we went out to Moreton Island. It was during the big scare and it was just before the Coral Sea Battle and invasion was a distinct possibility. And we were to guard the south passage between Stradbroke and Moreton Island.

09:30 Do you know where that is? You would, I guess. And what the heck we would have done if any Japanese had hove in sight and any ships I don't know because we had an eighteen pounder gun – not a 25, I think the 18 pounder was a relic from the last war. And we only had a limited number of shells, so they couldn't fire any shells, they had to just practise with it. We had two Tommy guns – that was before the day of the Owen [submachine] gun,

10:00 we'll come to that later. I think there were two companies, six platoons of us, with rifles, Tommy guns, and this 18 pounder. I think there were some machine guns there somewhere, but we didn't see it. We got busy there putting up wire netting and digging underground shelters. What on earth we would have done if

10:30 any Jap ship came in sight I don't know. Anyway, that was a pretty drab show because we had no recreation and no nothing. The food was very bad and rightly or wrongly we blamed our quartermaster for that because we reckoned he must have been making a quid on the side. That was very poor. It was a

11:00 thoroughly miserable time. But after I'd been there about, I suppose, a month or so, salvation came, because that was when Bernie claimed me into his battalion.

Before you go on to that, could you tell me a little bit about what you'd do on a daily basis on Moreton?

We did a bit of drill and a bit of arms practice, and

11:30 cut down miles and miles of pine and built these underground things, and did guard duty at night and that was about it. That was about all we did. I left there and packed up and went into Brisbane and reported to headquarters there and told them what I was about to do. They asked me where the battalion was that I was to go to and I said I didn't know, which I didn't.

12:00 They said, “Oh.” I spent a couple of days there while they found out where the battalion was, and it was still in Casino. I travelled south to Casino and joined the army there with my brother’s battalion.

Did you want to be claimed?

Yes. I would have done anything to get away from Moreton Island. I hated that place. I don’t know what happened to the blokes that were there – they might be still there for all I know. I suppose they had to do

12:30 it but it was just a futile gesture. We could see no sense in it. And fights broke out because the chaps were so bored with life, and it was generally quite distasteful. I didn’t enjoy that part of my army career at all. So then I went to Casino and joined the army, and that was the first time that I’d ever

13:00 had anything to do with an actual battalion, a fighting unit. That was the 2/33rd Battalion, with which I stayed for the whole of my army career and made some very good friends. As far as I was able I enjoyed life in the army because there was a great spirit in the battalion as there was in all battalions. There were

13:30 some good fellows. It has always been – something which I didn’t like – there was some conception in Australia that when the Australians went overseas or went up to the [Pacific] Islands that it was sort of a free for all and they generally misbehaved themselves whenever there were any girls around and this sort of thing.

14:00 It wasn’t that way at all. I’m not denying that there were a few of the chaps that did use their freedom loosely, but I know all the married chaps and many of the single fellows they stayed very faithful to their wives. I know that personally. And most of the single chaps did. It was only a few of the others who

14:30 used to get about a bit and enjoy themselves. I always thought that wasn’t fair, the image that was present of us by the media.

Did you leave a girlfriend when you came from Proserpine?

Yes I did. There were a couple of episodes early on in life and then one girl that I became very friendly with, but she moved out to

15:00 some west Queensland town as a governess. And I carried a torch for her for quite a while and still was very friendly with her, but later on I met Joan and that was that. Yes, I did have a couple of girlfriends in Proserpine but nothing of any serious nature at all.

15:30 **You said before that they gave you lectures. We’ve heard before about VD [venereal disease] lectures. Did they give you that?**

Yes, and I wondered what the hell they were talking about. I told you, I was young and raw and innocent. Gradually I assimilated the information on that subject and they gave us some very serious speeches on that one. Leaving that aside, there was one lecture which

16:00 always remained in my memory and I could never understand it. There was a chap called Julius and he was a communist, and of course we were very much on side with the commos [communists] at that point because Russia was fighting on our side. I was violently anti-communist and have been all my life and still am. He came out to give us a lecture and he

16:30 preached personal hatred of the Japanese. You know, we had to hate them. We had to do this and we had to do that. And I distinctly remember his last words when he finished up, “Get out and fight them and shoot them down as much as you can. And if you haven’t got a rifle, take a knife and cut their bloody throats.” Those were the words he used. And everybody cheered and clapped and I’m sitting there looking

17:00 sideways and thinking, “What good will that do?”

So you didn’t agree with that level of personal hatred?

No. I never personally hated the Japanese. Personally is man to man. I hated the fact that they threatened our freedom and livelihood

17:30 and certainly in my book they committed one of the greatest acts of treachery in history when they attacked Pearl Harbor and certain things like that. I found later on in life and the time when we got them up in Borneo and we were in reach of their radio propaganda, we listened to a lady called Tokyo Rose [Radio Tokyo propaganda host]. She used to tell us

18:00 how we were such fools we Australian soldiers up here fighting the peace-loving Japanese and the Americans were back home seducing our wives and sweethearts and so on and so on. And we reckoned she was always worth a giggle. As far as hating the Japanese personally, no, I never did, I never could.

So what happened when you first went to the battalion? How were you welcomed and what did you have to do?

18:30 We were in what we call a Signals Platoon, that is we were responsible for all communications within the battalion – phone, wireless, runner, whatever – particularly in action, but also when we were in training. My welcome to the platoon was tremendous. They welcomed me very warmly and we had a good officer,

19:00 Brian Mann, good NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers], good blokes, good privates and a couple of whom I made very firm friends with. My brother was there too, and as far as they were concerned they were a very closely knit crowd of fellows. There were about 21 or 25 of us and I always had a great affection for them with one or two exceptions. The whole period of time I was very proud of our

19:30 platoon. We were number one platoon in the army and we reckoned that was because we were the best – which we weren't, of course.

You said it was a warm welcome, do you remember that first day and what happened?

Actually I remember that because communications not being as good as they were when I joined the army at 16 and I was sent to a battalion. I was sent to a rifle company. Now are you familiar with a battalion's format? An infantry battalion consisted of four rifle companies, A Company,

20:00 B Company, C Company and Don Company, and they are formed of riflemen with their NCOs and officers. They are the men who do the actual fighting. And there's a Headquarter Company. The Headquarter Company consists of a Signal Platoon, a Machine Gun Platoon – which had Vickers Guns, a Mortar Platoon which handles the mortars, a Pioneer

20:30 Platoon which built bridges and all the rest of it and an Intelligence Section. And all our officers and our battalion and orderly rooms and all the rest of it. And that was the composition of the battalion. I just got sent to Don Company and I was pretty

21:00 shy and didn't know what to say. I wasn't meant to go here. Anyway I was put on guard duty the second day I was there, and each company was much below strength because when our battalion came back from the Middle East it went to Adelaide first to a place called Woodside. A lot of the blokes didn't get home leave and a lot of them were

21:30 married men and a lot of them were single men. And they didn't get home leave as quickly as they thought and 167 went AWOL [Absent Without Leave]. It is supposed to be an all-time record. I don't know whether it is or not, but don't quote me. Anyway, each company was undermanned and they were all pleased to get anybody. I'm in Don Company and I'm on

22:00 guard with my rifle and I saw my brother walked past. That was the first time I had seen him. "Hey," and he looked over and he said, "You!" and he came over. And he wasn't supposed to talk to me while I was on guard, but he did. "What are you doing here? What are you doing on guard?" He said, "Sigs [Signals] don't to do guard." I said, "Well I'm not with the Sigs, I'm with Don Company." "We'll see about that," he said.

22:30 Anyway he went and saw his lieutenant and they got me moved from Don Company into the Signals Company and I started to learn all the morse code and how to handle a wireless set and telephones and how to make reef knots and all the rest of it.

Can you tell us a little bit about what signals do as a unit and

23:00 **more about that training?**

Broadly speaking the signals are responsible for all communications within the battalion and from the battalion to the brigade. A division consists of three brigades. Each brigade consists of three battalions and each battalion consists of

23:30 what I just told you. And we were responsible for all communication from brigade to battalion and from battalion to company and from company to platoon. We had phones out at all the different places. This is when we were static in Australia and in training. And we had a signals office and there was a signals

24:00 clerk in charge of that and a man on a 10-line exchange, UC, Universal thing, and they used to take phone calls from company to company. If the captain of one company wanted to talk to the Adjutant or so on, they'd ring up and we'd plug them through and put them through and supervise the call. That's how it worked. When we went into action

24:30 each company – three signallers went to each rifle company and stayed with them during the course of that action. They were responsible for communications between wireless or phone or whatever between the platoons and that company. And then the battalion, they were responsible for – the battalion sigs, our sigs – were

25:00 responsible to back to brigade to the brigadier. That was what we had to do in action. It required quite extensive training because we had to be conversant with the instruments we used – the wireless and the phones and how to lay line. We did a great deal of that.

What would that involve?

In the beginning and during the first campaign in

25:30 New Guinea the lines we used were about an eighth of an inch thick and they were metal lines, insulated, and they were on reels about this big. We used to have them rolled up and we used to have to lay them out and recoil them when we moved. That was what we did in

26:00 action in New Guinea later on. We had all this stuff we used to do. Apart from that we had to attend all the parades and all the rest of it of course. That was our work in the sigs.

Can you tell us about learning Morse code?

Yes well we had to learn the Morse, the da di da di da. Then you had to learn to take it and you

26:30 had to be proficient in taking and sending morse code at 10 words a minute. You could improve on that up to 15 and the very much more proficient of us, and this is in infantry sigs, would be up to 25. Bernie could take 15 and I got up to 15 just about, but I wasn't really

27:00 good at it. Other sigs, the divisional sigs and those sort of people, they would become much more proficient. I did a sigs school once and there were two chaps from Horn Island up in Cape York and they could take 50 words a minute, and it was pure poetry to hear them send to each other. We never ever attained that proficiency, but we did get there – 10 to 15.

27:30 Actually later in action that didn't come into it much because that had all been brought into the training because of the desert warfare, and wirelesses over long distances were good. We discovered when we got into New Guinea and into the jungle that 200 yards was as good as the wireless would give you

28:00 so we never used them much, we relied on phones and that was word by word.

What did you like about being in the signals unit?

We considered ourselves a little bit above the rest of the soldiers because we had to be more skilful in many ways, and I suppose we were snobs to a certain extent. And there were some

28:30 very, very funny characters in our platoon. There were those who were really good parade ground soldiers and there were those that were no damn good at parades at all, but found out when we went into action that they were probably the best of them, you know, in action. There was very little altercation within the platoon – a little now and again, but very

29:00 little, and a mob of pretty decent fellows we thought we were. I had friends, special friends, and others you know. A chap called Vic Fletcher was a special friend. He's still alive and lives in Sydney. And another chap, a special friend, was a chap called Paddy Stollard. He joined us as a reinforcement later. He came from

29:30 Kedron in Brisbane and we called him 'the Kedron kid'. Paddy was still with us at the end of the war and he was with me in action in New Guinea, and he married and he has since died in Brisbane. They were the two special friends I had. There were others. Nicknames were great things. There were four of us and they used to call me 'the Urchin'. I don't know

30:00 why. Our corporal, Jimmy Kemp, he bestowed that name on me once. I don't know why he did it, but he did and it stuck. Dick still calls me 'the Urchin', and when I get a Christmas card from him it's 'Dear Urchin', not 'Dear Nev'. There were four of us. We were pretty friendly when we were in

30:30 camp in Australia. There was Reg Goodyer, he came from Grafton and he was always called 'Possum'. There was Mick Matthick, he came from Melbourne and Mick's name – his name is rightfully Merlin Cosima

31:00 and he never let on for a long time, but somebody saw his papers once and they saw his name on them. And we attacked him about it and teased him about it and he was always called 'Mick'. And so it was the Urchin and Possum and Mick and Paddy. They were the four blokes. We used to get around together and up in the [Atherton] Tablelands I remember we used to go swimming a lot. We used to go down to the Barron River and we used to swim a lot and we always used to say, "What a wonderful place this would be to be a dam."

31:30 There was this big… Lo and behold, after the war they made a dam. There was a big dam up there. Where our camp was it's about under 60ft of water now. They were our friends and there were lots of others who were pretty fair friends. When we went into action the second time and went up the third time to Borneo

32:00 they arranged to have the four blokes go out to different companies as I said. And Johnny Olson, our sergeant, came to me and he said, "You'll be in charge." I'd obtained the exalted rank of a lance corporal by this time. He said, "You'll be going out to A Company, Urchin," he said. He said, "You'll be going out to A Company." I said

32:30 "Yeah, Johnny." I said, "How about if I have Paddy and Mick and Possum with me?" "Oh yeah," he said, "You want to take your pick?" I said, "Well." He said, "I tell you what I'll do. I'll give you two of those

and the third one I'll pick, and you'll have to take the third one." The third bloke was a good bloke and quite all right, but he was new to the

33:00 unit. So he gave me Possum and Paddy, but he took Mick off me and sent Mick somewhere else. There was a great feeling in the platoon.

Did the blokes that had been to the Middle East talk about their experiences much?

Yes, well there were two separate people of those. There were the ones like my brother who had been with the battalion through action in the Middle East and Syria, and there were the

33:30 ones who had gone to the Middle East but had seen no action there. But they came back and they used to talk about the Gyppos, the Egyptians as they called them. They used to speak of it and the ones who'd been to Syria used to speak of the action there. They spoke a good deal of it and we listened with respect and bated breath. They were heroes as far as we were

34:00 concerned until we went up to New Guinea the first time, and then we were as they were.

You were saying before, you remember when the officers got there the officers were really good. Do you remember an officer that was particularly good to you?

Yes, Billy Kemp. Kempie was a corporal when I joined the sigs platoon. When we went to New Guinea the first time and did the Owen Stanley show, the Kokoda

34:30 Trail, Will, our lieutenant, was taken from us to go to a rifle company. Our sergeant, Norm Harrington, became ill and he left us and the whole responsibility for us during the Kokoda campaign fell on Kempie's shoulders, who was a corporal.

35:00 He took us through the whole show very efficiently. When we came back to Australia he was promoted and he missed out – you go from lance corporal to corporal to sergeant to sergeant major to lieutenant, and you then become a commissioned officer. He missed out the sergeant part of it and went straight from corporal to

35:30 lieutenant. He stayed as a sigs officer all through the Lae show and I think he was still with us in Balik [Balikpapan] too. He was a very proficient and very good officer. I was very much saddened later on in life. He survived the war and he went home and got married in

36:00 Melbourne. We had a daughter married in Tasmania and we kept in touch with Jimmy – Bernie did more than I. When I went to Melbourne we had an hour to spare between planes when we went down to visit Jenny in Tasmania. So I rang Jim Kemp's number, I had his phone number, and his wife

36:30 Margaret answered and I learned that he had emphysema. I asked if he was capable of speaking on the phone and she said, "No, he isn't really." And it saddened me to think of a man as virile and decisive and generally authority sat well on him to be reduced to this. But

37:00 he was good. There were other officers who we knew and liked to varying degrees and others who we disliked. There was one chap called Rick Marshall. Rick was wounded four times and in those days they used to – if you were married they put a blue stripe on you. And he had four wound stripes. Rick was a very

37:30 amiable sort of a bloke and a very efficient lieutenant. There was another chap called Cohen and called 'Crop'. And he was a very amiable type of fellow. They were rifle company officers and we found out later that his real name was Cohen and he was Jewish. He changed his name to

38:00 Crop for the very reasonable reason because he was over in the Middle East and if he was captured by the Germans and they found out he was a Jew, well things would not go well for him. So he changed his name from Cohen. He was one. Lieutenant Todd, he was a tall gangling bloke and however he came to be an

38:30 officer I don't know because he was a real larrikin of a bloke. I always remember that when Toddy saluted – you're supposed to come up the long way when you're saluting and then go down the short way. Toddy would come up and when he got to the top he'd go out that way – always. Those were the ones I was most impressed with. Most of them were good, very

39:00 good. A man who we particularly liked and respected, the whole battalion, was our colonel. Not the first colonel we had, that was Buttrose and I had reservations about Buttrose, but then when he left us after the Kokoda Trail show Captain Cotton was 2IC [Second in Command] and he was promoted to colonel and he took over the battalion.

39:30 He was with the battalion until the end of the war. He was an Englishman, a very brave man and a fine man. He was well liked by all of us. I remember once they brought out a field ration and it was a little packet of food which was supposed to last us three days in an

40:00 emergency. It was vile stuff. It was stuff you used to make into a stew and we used to call it bird seed. It was horrible. Instead of sugar we had little tablets, and instead of tea we had little tablets, and all this sort of thing. And they took us out on a show up on the Tableland in '43 I think it was, or it might have

been ’44, and they tried it out on us. We had no

40:30 food but this stuff for the three days. We didn’t like it much and we didn’t see any sense in it. Anyway, we got pretty near to Atherton at one stage of this manoeuvre so we ran around and picked up all the loose money in the platoon and gave it to our Don R [Despatch Rider], that’s the chap who has a motorbike, and got him to go to the butchers and buy us some meat. He came back with a whole lot of

41:00 meat and we got away from the battalion a bit and cooked up this meat. And you could smell it a mile away. Old Tom, he was going past and he came over to us and of course it was all wrong. We had no right to do this because we were supposed to eat this thing. And he looked at it and we thought, “We’re gone, we’re in trouble.” And he said,

41:30 “Jacko,” – that was his batman – he said, “he cooked up my birdseed three different ways and it never came out like that,” and he walked away. That was the type of fellow he was. If a thing mattered he’d be down on it like a ton of bricks, but not if it didn’t matter very much.

Tape 3

00:35 **I wanted to ask you, Neville, a little bit more about the claiming system and how that worked?**

It’s a very simple thing. It was a rule in the army, I don’t know whether it still exists or not, an elder brother can claim the younger brother into his unit no matter where either were providing they both had clean records.

01:00 That’s to say if my elder brother was up in New Guinea in action and the younger brother was in training camp in Redbank he could claim him to New Guinea and vice versa. And that was strictly what it was. So my brother claimed me while I was on Moreton Island, thank goodness.

And how often did that happen? Were there many brothers serving in platoons together?

01:30 In my battalion there was Bernie and I and there were a couple of chaps called Gunn. There were two others, the Birrells, they were twins and very hard to tell apart. They were the only two I knew in our battalion and whether they claimed each other or whether they joined up together I don’t know. In our platoon

02:00 Johnny and Tommy Olson – Johnny was nicknamed Homer because they had some thought about using homing pigeons. The army got some funny ideas. We were going to use homing pigeons to carry messages. They got some pigeons into the platoon and he was put in charge of them and after that we always called him Homer. He was a particular friend of mine too, and he was very fine chap, Johnny, and he died recently.

02:30 And his uncle, Uncle Tommy, he was our sergeant and they were nephew and uncle, but they joined the battalion on the same day and stayed together.

Why do you say that was a funny idea, the homing pigeons?

Well it was totally impractical. How can you use homing pigeons in the jungle? How can you carry pigeons with you? We were flat out feeding ourselves without feeding the pigeons. We’d have eaten them. Anyhow, it didn’t last long.

03:00 **You said that you were very pleased to be claimed by your brother. What was it about being claimed that you liked?**

I didn’t like where I was on Moreton Island. Anywhere would have been better than that. That was number one, and number two was I was happy to think that I would be in the same platoon as he was. He had written home several letters and he was a very descriptive letter

03:30 writer and he had spoken of his companions and they sounded a nice lot. And at that time we were a bit romantic minded, we wanted to get into action you know. And with the infantry battalion you were pretty certain you’d take part in action some time or later. For those reasons I was happy to go.

04:00 **So before you left Australia for New Guinea, how prepared did you feel to go into battle?**

Not very well. Not very well at all. I had complete faith and confidence in those whom I would be going into battle with. A lot of the sigs were experienced men, older men than

04:30 I. I was probably one of the youngest in the platoon and I had great confidence in them. The other chaps had seen action in Syria and were pretty tough and pretty good. As far as I was personally concerned, no, I didn’t feel confident, no.

In what sense did you feel under prepared?

I was scared I would be scared when action came.

05:00 I was afraid that I would be frightened. I knew I would be frightened, but I was afraid I wouldn't measure up. Apart from that there was nothing else that I was worried about. We were very worried about the war situation because it was very bad at that time.

Did you express those fears that you had to anybody?

No. I didn't want them to know about it.

05:30 I was talking to a friend who was in the army, a chap called Woolly. He was an unfortunate type. He was a very good man, married and all the rest of it, but he had no confidence in his own self. And when we were on the boat to New Guinea I said to him, "I wonder what it will be like?" and, "I wonder how it will

06:00 feel when we really go into action." He said, "I know how I'll feel. I'll shit myself and I know it." That was the way he felt and that was the way he turned out. He never did anything to disgrace himself, but he was terrified lots of times, old Woolly. He died not too long ago.

06:30 I'll tell you this because it comes up a bit later on, too. When we were camped, as I said, we played tennis and both of us loved it very much. There were a couple of other chaps in C Company. A chap called Norm Stokes, who was one of the finest men I've ever met and the bravest – he's still alive in Sydney – and a chap called Jimmy Maynard, who comes from Nundah and he died last year. And they were good

07:00 tennis players and we were moderately proficient at that stage. When we were camped near a town in Australia we'd get our tennis racquets out of stores. We had a stores tent and they used to look after our tennis racquets for us and some balls. We'd go into town, and it seems cheeky to think of it afterwards, but we used to walk around until we saw a house with a tennis court behind it. Then we'd walk in and say, "Look, do you mind if we have a game of tennis on your court?" We must have

07:30 done this at half a dozen different places and nobody ever knocked us back. So we used to have a great time and there was a great rivalry. We used to be on a par and we never changed partners. Jimmy and Norm used to play together and Bernie and I used to play together and we used to play each other and we finished up 'even Stevens' all the way. It was good fun. I mention this because they came up later on and I'll tell you about it.

08:00 **So when this chap spoke to you about his fear, did you tell him that you were also scared?**

No. The only chap I can ever remember talking about it was Ray Woolcott, the chap I told you about. I did speak to him about it, but the others, no.

What about your own brother, Bernie, did you speak to him about your apprehensions?

No. And he never spoke to me. I don't think he

08:30 had any. He might have, but I don't think he did though.

So after Moreton Island – you had a couple of months on Moreton Island – how soon after than did you actually leave?

Well I joined them at Casino and from Casino we came up to Caboolture and we camped out there down in the scrub a bit. It was cold. That was in the middle of winter

09:00 there. And in late July we sailed for New Guinea. Things were pretty grim up there. The Jap had landed at Gona, pushing our fellows back along the Kokoda Trail. So they rushed us onto boats and up to Port Moresby. It was a pretty rushed thing because we travelled up on two boats – our

09:30 brigade, the 2/33rd, the 2/31st and the 2/25th. We embarked in Brisbane on the [HMAS] Katoomba and the Kanimbla. You might have heard of those both possibly. They were pleasure boats, tourist boats, and actually it was very good because it was done in such a hurry and they were all victualled and ready to start on a tourist journey around South Australia. They had all the food ready for

10:00 the tourists and they even had waiters. So on the trip to New Guinea we had waiters and good tucker. We got into the boats there.

Before you actually left Australia, did you have the opportunity to say goodbye to your parents?

No, nor were we allowed to write or anything. All our letters were censored of course. There was the famous story about the

10:30 chap who wrote home to his parents. And when the letter arrived there was no letter in it, but just a note from the censor, "Your son is well, but talks too much."

When you left Australia on the boat, which boat were you on?

I was on the Katoomba.

When you left that day on the Katoomba, what were your thoughts about your future?

Well I was excited.

11:00 We had no idea that the Jap was so close and we knew we'd see action, but that was light years away and we were just on a trip to Port Moresby. That was the way I felt about it and I was very soon disillusioned. We had a very pleasant trip up there. It took us two days to get there.

Can you tell us how you spent your time during those two days?

It was pleasant. We did

11:30 nothing, literally nothing, there was no parade, no nothing. We just slept and played two-up and all the rest of it. Back to that two-up, just digressing a bit – when I was on Moreton Island that's when I played my first game of two-up. Two-up was always played. It was supposed to be illegal, but nobody stopped it. You couldn't stop it. There was a game up near the

12:00 camp one day and we went up to have a look at it. And there was a corporal there from another platoon and he was on a winner. He was backing heads and he was on a win. He couldn't get anyone to back him and he was saying, "Come on, come on, back me." So I thought, "Okay," and tossed him five bob or something. Anyway, things turned around and I got a real run of payoffs. I was winning and winning and winning and he was saying, "Bet with me. Give me a chance to get my money back." And I won eleven pounds.

12:30 That doesn't sound much, but when you're on six shillings a day that's a lot. All of a sudden I came down to earth and I thought, "Don't be a silly fool." So I gathered up my takings and chucked in a few bob for the riggies and went to walk out. He went real crook and he said, "You can't leave. You've got to give me a chance to get my money back." I didn't see it in that way at all and I left. That was the first time I played two-up. We played it on the boat going up and

13:00 so on.

You said that on Moreton Island you were very ill equipped to defend?

Well we had rifles and Tommy guns. What use would that be against a warship armed with big guns and God knows what? There were only about 60 of us I think all told. One eighteen pounder gun which had never fired a shot in anger, not in this war anyway.

13:30 **Did you discuss that among yourselves about how equipped or prepared you were?**

We didn't believe that the Japs would ever come there, which they didn't, so we didn't even consider it. We just thought it was just the way the army was – always doing silly things, which they did a lot.

So on the Katoomba you played a lot of two-up. Can you describe the boat for us and the conditions that you were in?

The conditions were good. Like I say, we

14:00 had waiters with napkins over their arms serving us at the table. It had never been like that in all our army life and never was again. And the food was good because it had been got ready to serve the tourists who were going round to South Australia. We got up the coast and I remember sailing through the Whitsunday Passage one

14:30 morning. And I was leaning on the rail looking out and thinking, "Twenty miles over there is where I live. I bet my parents don't know." And our sergeant major, Tremmo, Doc Tremmo, he came from Bowen. And he said, "What do you think of that? We can nearly swim home, you know." We got to [Port] Moresby and straight down onto the

15:00 docks with our gear beside us. We got our instructions and they took us up to Koitake, which is a place just up in the foothills beyond Moresby. That night we were told to buy anything we wanted from the canteen – there was a little canteen rigged up there – but not to buy anything heavy because we'd be carrying it. We were told to be ready to move out the next morning. The next morning they took us in trucks down to Owers Corner and put us

15:30 out of trucks and landed us in the jungle. We were only there one night. We never saw Moresby – we went straight through it.

Can you describe your first impressions of New Guinea when you arrived there?

Yes. We thought how dry it was and Moresby is always like that. Moresby itself is dry and hot. We were up in the foothills and the place looked really beautiful. Those were our impressions, overnight impressions.

16:00 After that we never had any impressions because it was always the same thing – bloody great hills in front of you that you had to climb up and go down and a muddy track to walk along.

What were your expectations about the conditions that you would be in in New Guinea?

We didn't have any. We didn't have a clue. We soon found out.

So you hadn't really been briefed?

No.

So what did they tell you before you went to New Guinea?

That we were going to New Guinea.

16:30 That was about all. And then when they took us up to Koitake and took us up to Owers Corner, we knew then that we were going to meet and engage the Jap [Japanese], but we didn't know under what conditions. And the conditions were of course that some time previously the Japs had landed at Gona, which is straight cross the hills. He was working the same trick he

17:00 worked at Singapore. He'd been frustrated in the Coral Sea Battle; he'd been defeated there. And we understood that he was sailing for Port Moresby then. And he'd been defeated there so he thought, "All right, we'll land at Gona where there is nothing to stop us and we'll get out there and we'll walk over the mountains and we'll take New Guinea from behind," which he very nearly did. They landed at Gona and all we had was a standing platoon at

17:30 Gona. And further back along the trail – there is a map of it there – towards Kokoda, there was one brigade of AIF [Australian Imperial Force], that's volunteer soldiers, the 2/14th, the 2/16th and the 2/27th Battalions and two battalions of Militia, the 53rd and the 39th. They were all very

18:00 young, 18 to 21, very young officers and very inexperienced. They had no battle experience whatsoever. The AIF blokes had had experience overseas. They engaged the Japanese getting back towards Kokoda. The platoon had retired. They had to – they couldn't do anything else. About 50,000 Japs landed at Gona and Sanananda and Buna, those were the

18:30 three little places close together. They moved up towards Kokoda along the trail and they were outnumbered by about three to one. The Jap was very well equipped and a very good jungle fighter. They would fight on the smell of a greased rag. They

19:00 must have had it very bad those blokes, because we thought we had it bad, but they must have had it really bad. They were outnumbered and outgunned and had no precautions against sickness or anything like that. Supplies were bad and food was bad. Everything was against them. They got pushed back and pushed back and pushed back and that was why we got rushed up there. After we got left there,

19:30 the trucks at Owers Corner they dumped us out and point us along the track into the jungle. And we marched into the jungle all that day and I remember thinking, "I wonder when we'll come to a clear space where we'll be able to camp down for the night." I was innocent as anything. There was no clear space. When night came we just laid down fully clothed on the side of the hillside and that was where we spent the night. It was the same the next day

20:00 and I think it was on the third day, it was a long time ago, that we met our retreating troops coming out all looking deadly tired. And they just walked past us with their heads down. We said g'day to them and sat down on the side and let them pass through. We said g'day to them and they just nodded. We thought, "Unsociable mob." But we realised after we'd been

20:30 in there about a fortnight your whole effort was concentrated on surviving and carrying on and putting one foot in front of the other. You had no time for civilities. They were brought back to Port Moresby and they were sick and they were wounded and they were at a very low ebb. They were all brought back to Moresby and into hospital and convalescent camps and that sort of thing. We went

21:00 ahead from there on.

Do you remember on that first day when you were taken into the jungle? You said earlier that you weren't really expecting to run into the enemy very quickly. What were you thinking that day when you perhaps realised that you were in the thick of it?

We didn't fully realise it then because nothing happened; we just walked. Nothing happened that day, but then we started to realise,

21:30 "Well, every footstep we take is taking us closer to the enemy, so eventually we've got to face up to him." That was all that happened those first couple of days. And the third day we did meet up with him. He was still coming and at a place called Iorobaiwa. On Iorobaiwa Ridge, that was when we met

22:00 his advance forces. Our brigadier was a man named Ether, Ken Ether. He was a tough, hard man, but a good soldier. He'd had a look at the area and all the rest of it and he didn't like the looks of the land, the place where we were to engage. So he advised us to retreat back to Imita Ridge.

22:30 We did, but our C Company set up an ambush for the Japanese just to cover our retreat. We hadn't been engaged up to that date at all. He set up this ambush on the southernmost slopes of the Iorobaiwa Range and they ambushed the Japanese with moderate success. The Japanese had

23:00 no advice that they were there. And there was a food dump there and they were scavenging around for food for themselves, and that was when our chaps opened up on them. It was moderately successful,

but immediately they had completed that they retreated too. We pulled back to the side of the Imita Ridge and the Jap followed us up. And he camped himself up at the top of Imita Ridge.

23:30 We were back this way a bit and we sat there and that was to be our defensive area. The rumour was, and it was a perfectly true one, that word had come back from Blamey [General Thomas Blamey] and MacArthur [General Douglas MacArthur] in Australia, “No more retreats.” That was to be it. We were to fight from there on and advance with no more retreats. So we sat there an waiting to see what would happen and that was when we started to realise that things were,

24:00 you know. There were three 25 pound guns back at Owers Corner, back where we’d entered the jungle, and we were still within their range. They couldn’t bring them any further, but they could still fire over the top of us and that was comforting to know. But they didn’t have anybody to observe where the shells were landing so as long as they didn’t land on us that was all we knew about them. We sat there for two days waiting for the Japs to come, but nothing happened.

24:30 So word came through, “All right, if he wouldn’t come to us we had to go to him.” So the word came through to attack and recapture Imita Ridge. That sounds easy, but Imita Ridge is a ridge along there with blokes camped on the top of it. The only way you can get up to it is by a track about this wide with impenetrable jungle on either side. You had to march up this

25:00 track and retake the Ridge. “It’s bloody mad,” we said. “One bloke on the top of that ridge with a large machine gun and a couple of rifles can mow us down before we even get there.” But orders are orders. That was when I was scared because, as I say, there were two others sigs and myself. There was a chap called Ray Woolcott, who I’ve mentioned. A chap call Bonny Muderman, again Bonny, I never knew his other name, and myself.

25:30 We were the three that went with our company to attack this ridge. And we were walking up there thinking, “God help us.” Anyway we got further and closer and closer and there was nothing happening and nobody was challenging us, and when we got to the top of the ridge we found out that he’d retreated and there was nobody there. “Aaah.” So we settled down at the top of the ridge and sent the glad word back. We had a couple of sigs following us up with the things and we sent the

26:00 word back and we were very happy. And that was the beginning of the Jap’s retreat. He hadn’t had any fever – it’s rife with malaria; he hadn’t had any. His line of communication was long, right from Gona through to Iorobaiwa.

26:30 And he was sick and he’d suffered at Milne Bay. He’d been engaged by the 18th Brigade and he’d been defeated there. He was expecting reinforcements from there to Gona and they didn’t come. He had suffered in the Coral Sea Battle earlier on. At Midway Bay, Midway Island, he’d suffered reverses there so he didn’t get reserves that he expected and he was

27:00 forced to retreat. So after we’d been up on the ridge for a couple of days, that was when we started to go forward. He’d go back a bit and retreat and dig himself in and argue the point with us for a while and we had to dig him out, and that was the way it went.

Neville, that first operation that you talked about…

The ambush?

Yes, the ambush, what did you observe of

27:30 **that?**

What did I observe? Nothing. We were back behind them.

Could you hear what was happening?

No. We were retreating. We heard the rifle fire and all the rest of it – the rifle fire and the mortars set off.

You could hear that?

We could hear that?

So what was that like, was that your first experience?

That was my first experience of any actual engagement with the Japanese.

Can you describe what you were thinking or feeling at that time?

I was only hoping to goodness

28:00 none of them got… We didn’t suffer too many casualties, because I knew a lot of the blokes. That was the same company that… This chap Jimmy Maynard and Norm Stokes were in that company. I was concerned for their safety more than anything else. We didn’t understand and couldn’t understand why we were being pulled back. We didn’t know that Ethan didn’t like that part of the world. We didn’t know what was going on. We just followed orders and we were quite confused.

28:30 They pulled out and we all pulled back.

What did you think about pulling back?

We didn't know what to think about it really. We still didn't have much idea of what was expected of us, but we started to realise it then and we didn't like it much. But we thought, "If that's what they think we should do, we'll do it." And we

29:00 did do it.

What were you personally carrying with you as you travelled along?

A rifle, 80 rounds of ammunition, two grenades, a one-eyed wireless set and telephones and line on reels,

29:30 half a blanket and the clothes I wore. I had maybe an extra pair of socks and that was all. And any food we wanted to carry because we weren't going to be supplied with food – we had to carry it ourselves from then on. It came up to us, but we had to

30:00 carry it and that was all we carried.

What about something to sleep on?

You're joking, aren't you? There was plenty of ground. It wasn't quite that bad. We had a groundsheet. It was a waterproof sheet which you used to use to lie down on when you

30:30 were in action, and it had some clips down two sides of it and you used to throw it round your shoulders and clip it on in front. We soon learned – we learned a lot of things – but we soon learned that if you clipped two of those sheets together in the right place and lifted them up you could erect a little tent which would enable two men to sleep in it. And that was what we did. But of course we didn't have anything to sleep on then so we just laid down on the

31:00 ground with nothing to sleep on. And that was the way we lived right through.

All that equipment you were carrying, how much do you think that would have weighed?

86 pounds plus a rifle, that was what it was recognised as.

31:30 **During training had you experienced carrying that sort of weight around with you?**

Yes. We'd had plenty of experience in carrying that. We carried it on manoeuvres that same thing, but not in the jungle. We weren't equipped for carrying it in the jungle. Also, when we went on manoeuvres and that sort of thing we had a cookhouse with us and meals served up to us and that sort of thing. No more of that. That was finished. We had to look after ourselves from there on.

Can you

32:00 **describe a typical day in that first week when you were there during that ambush and the actual taking of the ridge. Can you describe how you would begin your day and how it would progress?**

It progressed, as I've said, back to waiting for the Jap to come and he didn't. And then we started to go forward and that was when we really started to adapt

32:30 ourselves and to improvise because you realise that we had absolutely no malarial precautions. We had no quinine and no mosquito nets and there were these mosquitoes which carried the malarial fever which were called the anopheles mosquito. Consequently 95% of us got malaria, which didn't

33:00 manifest itself until we'd been along the trail for about three weeks. Now malaria, I don't know if you've got any knowledge of that, but it's a very high fever with shivering and shaking and it's generally like a really bad dose of flu. There are two types. One is called MT Malaria, Malignant Tertia and one is called BT, Benign Tertia. Malignant Tertia, you get it and it recurs because it is a recurring fever. Benign Tertia, it doesn't

33:30 recur but it nearly always kills you. We didn't get much of that. We got nearly all MT. Don't imagine that you went back to hospital when you got malaria because you didn't. If you could still walk you carried on because if we'd have all gone back to hospital there wouldn't have been any of us left. So then, combined with the conditions and the

34:00 food, we all suffered bad attacks of diarrhoea and that was the worst thing. I don't think, I really honestly don't think that anybody who wasn't there can comprehend the hardships and the miseries of the Kokoda Trail. That's when we really got into action. Leaving aside the enemy, they were a

34:30 minor consideration. First of all there was the diarrhoea and the dysentery. You could imagine that if you had an attack of diarrhoea it might last one day or two days and it's very uncomfortable and very painful and all the rest of it. You imagine it to be three times as bad, I'm talking about 15 visits to the latrines a day, and lasting,

35:00 just lasting and lasting and lasting. No let up for it. You know, three weeks at a time and then you might have a bit of a spell and then get it again. The times we would get rid of it was if we came across native gardens. And I shudder with guilt to think of how much we picked from the poor old gardens of the natives, and we'd get sweet potatoes or stuff from their gardens, fresh vegetables. And we'd have them for a few days until we ran out of

35:30 supplies and that would put our tummies back in order again., but apart from that there was the mud. I've often read about it being knee deep, but that was lot of rot. It was never knee deep. You couldn't march through it if it was knee deep. It was ankle deep. And we reckoned going downhill was good because if you slipped you gained, but if you were going uphill and you slipped you went backwards. That's the way it was. The rain, it rained every day.

36:00 At about 3 o'clock in the afternoon it would rain and it would rain until about 9 o'clock that night – heavy rain. That was all the time. There was the food. Our actual diet was a tin of bully beef and a packet of hard biscuits per day per man and a bit of tea and a bit of sugar and

36:30 anything else that we were lucky enough to gather in. Very occasionally a bit of tinned fruit and a bit of milk and that was what we had. You couldn't open a tin of bully beef in the morning for breakfast and carry it all day so we formed into groups of three. We had no cooks or anything. We had little billy cans that we made out of a tin, tinned fruit and that sort of thing. We used to – when we were allowed fires we used to

37:00 heat our stuff in that. We used to prick holes in the bully beef tins and throw it into the fire and that roasted it a bit and got rid of a bit of the fat. We used to share it out between three blokes at a time and we'd open one tin of bully beef and one packet of biscuits and that would be breakfast, and the same for dinner, and the same for tea at night. That was our meal. Sometimes at night we'd be allowed fires if we were far enough back from the

37:30 Japs and sometimes we weren't. When we weren't we didn't have a cup of tea at night, we just had the bully beef and the biscuits. We used to crumble our hard biscuits and break them up and soak them in water overnight and that would soften them up and swell them up. We used to call it porridge. And if we had sugar we used to put a bit of that on our biscuits in the morning, and we'd have that for breakfast with our third of a tin of bully beef, and that was our

38:00 meal. It wasn't always, but almost always until we got to Kokoda. That was that. And the rain. And after that there was the fighting, of course, which was really only a minor aggravation compared to these other things. The utter misery of it was hard to comprehend. If you had just had diarrhoea for three weeks your

38:30 gullet was bad enough and you felt like you wanted to die anyway. We had all of that plus the other. It was bad enough for us, but I think of those poor beggars that did the retreat. It must have been worse for them because we at least were going forward. They were going back and it is psychological, it creates a psychological state of mind. And of course there was no mail during this time, which doesn't sound

39:00 much but it was a big thing. I remember that after we recaptured Imita Ridge with no casualties and we were going forward and engaging the Jap and so on, I met Jimmy and that was when I first realised what war was all about.

39:30 We were marching along one day and C Company had been ahead of us and we met Jimmy Maynard and Normie Stokes coming out. Stokesy was on a stretcher he was being carried – you've heard of the Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels? They were too. And they were carrying him out. He had got a burst of machine gun fire and he had four bullet wounds there and one in his arm. He had his arm up here and one in his

40:00 wrist, that was the five shots. He was utterly unconscious and the colour of death. And Jimmy Maynard had received a bit of shrapnel or something in his eye and he was walking. I met them there and that was when I realised what war was all about. I felt a bit sick. Anyway, just continuing on that moment I thought I'd never see them again. I thought Norm was as good as dead.

40:30 Jimmy would be all right I suppose, but I don't know what his eye would be. Anyway about three days later when three or four of us went back to pick up our rations we passed by a Field Dressing Station, which is a miniature hospital. They set it up well behind the lines and they take the wounded and they're attended by nurses and orderlies, although I don't think there were nurses there, I think it was just the orderlies.

41:00 Somebody said, "G'day," and here were Jimmy and Norm in the bed. They lifted the flap of the tent up and they were laughing at us and smiling at us. I said to Norm, "You should be dead, you bastard," and he said, "No, not yet." Anyway, Jimmy never rejoined us because he lost the eye, but Norm he went back to Moresby

41:30 and got put together again and rejoined us again at Gona.

Tape 4

00:34 **You were going to say something?**

You will find me not nearly so articulate about other campaigns as I am about the Owen Stanleys [Ranges] because with the Owen Stanley and Kokoda it is so deeply in my memory that I will never forget them. I might forget circumstances or even dates, but I don't forget what happened.

01:00 And as I said, as things progressed the goats got separated from the sheep. There were the city boys who'd never been used to country life or improvisation and they didn't fare so well. Lighting a fire became an art because it was raining all the time. When we'd light a fire we'd light a long fire and we'd put all these little billies and things into the fire to boil. They couldn't light fires and

01:30 little things like that. So Jimmy Kemp, the chap I spoke to you about, he sorted us into groups and he'd sort two of the blokes who knew how to handle themselves with one of the blokes that didn't. He was a great bloke in that way, Jimmy. And we always took great pride in the fact that we could light a fire and little things like that. I remember when we'd been up at Moresby and we'd

02:00 been up at Koitake waiting to come down and I'd bought two packets of chicken soup. I put them away in my haversack and I thought, "I'm going to keep those chicken soups for a day when things are so bad and things are so hopeless you wish you'd die, and I'm going to bring out this chicken soup." So about three weeks in and we're in the middle of the ranges, things were bad. We'd had a miserable day and everything was not

02:30 good and I thought, "The time has come for the chicken soup." I said to Bernie – Bernie and I and a chap called Billy Chertsey, that was our three – and I said, "Would you like some chicken soup?" And they said, "You're mad." I said, "No, no, look I've got two packets of chicken soup." "Oooh." So we got the chicken soup out. And we had a big billy that we carried and we put the chicken soup into it and we put it on the side of the fire and we were sniffing.

03:00 And we were going to have this chicken soup and everybody was looking at us. And I'll never forget it. There was a bloke called Reg Dendy, and I think he took about size 15 boots, and Reg came by the fire and our chicken soup is just about ready to eat. And he comes up and he says, "Where's my little billy? Where's my

03:30 little billy?" And he kicked our chicken soup over with his big foot and we lost all of it except for about that much. I could have killed him. In fact I think I should have. That was the end of the chicken soup. It was lovely what we had, but we only had that much left when we should have had that much.

What did he say?

"Oh, I'm sorry." He'd have been sorry if I'd have had my way.

04:00 **You must have been devastated?**

We were – my chicken soup that I'd carried – never mind.

How did that affect your morale?

No, it was so low at that time that you couldn't affect it anyway. We were just doing things at that time because we knew we had to do them and that was all there was about it. You know, laying lines and taking part in patrols and generally trying to dislodge the Jap.

04:30 He'd dig in somewhere and he'd stay there for two or three days and we'd try to dislodge him. And eventually we might, or eventually he'd give up and go back anyway and rejoin his main unit. They were setting up people to hold us up while the main unit got away. They were intent on retreating at this time and we were following him. And we came to a place called

05:00 Myola, Myola Ridge, and he held us up for a long time there. Now Myola is quite an interesting place because just off the trail there are two big dried up sunken lakes. They were filled with water once we were told. One was about seven miles long and the other was about three miles long and wide. There was no water in them at all, but two streams that ran through them. It was beautiful country, really

05:30 beautiful. And he put up a big resistance there. He had a heavy machine gun which we called the Woodpecker [Japanese 7.7mm heavy machine gun]. Have you ever heard of it? Its real name was the Juki machine gun and it was a slow firing machine gun which fired extra heavy bullets. It was quite unmistakable. We called it a woodpecker because with an ordinary machine gun, a Bren gun, it would get

06:00 'brrr, brrrr, brrrr', but with this one it was 'tut, tut, tut, tut, tut'. And they must have dismantled it and carried it with them because it was quite heavy. And we had a great respect for that gun because some of the fellows maintained it could cut down small trees, and I full believed it. It was a very effective jungle weapon. And he had one of these up on Myola Ridge and we took a long time to get him out of that one and

06:30 eventually we did.

So how did that happen. Can you tell us in detail how that happened?

No I can't because A Company did it. They were the ones that went up there and dislodged him and we were back from them a bit so I don't know.

Could you hear what was happening?

Yes. We could hear the rifle fire and we knew what was going on, but by this time all ignorance was gone. We knew what was happening. We knew what was going to happen and

07:00 we knew that A Company had gone to do what they could to get rid of him. Apparently his land force had retired and a skeleton force was left there and they dislodged them. I very much remember this because we had found a dump of Japanese rice, which was very welcome. We had cooked a lot of this and we

07:30 had big biscuit tins that these biscuits came in. We had one of them and we put some boiling water in this and we got a lot of rice, and we got it and we cooked it over a fire, the whole platoon of us. And we were going to divide it up when it was cooked. And we had a big billy full of rice and a little bit of sugar and milk and we were going to have a feed of rice, which would be the best feed we had had for days. Word came through we were to advance.

08:00 They advanced and two of our sigs had to go forward and lay the lines straight behind our advancing company so they could have communications as soon as night came. And Darkie and Irish –nicknames again – Darkie and Irish were the ones that went with them. They were the type of fellow… Remember I said some where parade ground fellows and some weren't? Darkie and

08:30 Irish weren't, but boy in action they were worth their weight in gold. Darkie, just going back a bit, he had been an artillery sig; he'd been with an artillery unit. Things weren't moving very much and he was a real adventure type, Darkie, he loved the war. He reckoned the war was the best time of his life. And he and Mullaly palled up and

09:00 he wasn't in our battalion, but when we joined up one of our blokes when they found out that we were going to leave Australia he went AWL [Absent Without Leave] and Darkie took his place. And when we were boarding the boat and we were all answering our names as we went on he answered to the name of Collinson, which was the other fellow's name, and went on the boat. He was charged with

09:30 desertion. He deserted from the artillery and deserted to join an infantry battalion that was going into action. Funny, eh? Throughout the campaign, or two or three times during the campaign, we took orders that he was to be sent back to be tried. They just laughed and they just ignored them. We weren't going to send anybody back that was useful to us up there. When he came back to Australia that was all conveniently, I don't know what happened, but that was

10:00 forgotten about and he just stayed with our platoon until the end of the war. Those things happen. Anyway, Darkie and Irish were sent down laying the line after these blokes, but our rice wasn't quite cooked. I said to Darkie, "Leave your little billy with me and I'll collect your rice and I'll give it to you when we catch up." "Righto." So away he went.

10:30 And we finished the rice and we had ours and I got Darkie's little billy and I hung it on the side of my thing and away we went down the other side of Myola Ridge. And there was a little creek at the bottom of Myola Ridge and we'd marched for about an hour or half an hour. We got to the bottom of this and two machine guns opened up on us from the other side of the creek. So we went to ground and were lying there and then the rumours started. It's a great place, the army, for rumours. And the rumour was,

11:00 "They're not retreating at all. It's a trap and we've fallen into it. We'll be surrounded and we'll be killed. The first company that's gone here, they've been wiped out." All this rot and none of it was true. It was just two machine guns left behind to hold us up so that the main body could get away. But you believe anything given the right circumstances. So we're lying there and I'm thinking of this billy of rice. "Here I am lying here and Darkie's probably been

11:30 killed and he'll never eat it." So I ate it, to my shame. I hardly got the last mouthful down before somebody sidled up beside me and said, "Where's my billy of rice?" It was Darkie. And I had no defence so I said, "I ate it." And I suppose I was in a bit of danger at odd times in the campaign when I was down there, but I don't think I was ever in more

12:00 danger than when I told Darkie I'd eaten his rice. I don't think he ever forgave me for that, really.

When you were eating that rice did you really think, "This could be my last meal?"

Oh yes. That was why I ate it. I wasn't going to let that rice be wasted. The rumours really had us convinced that we'd walked into a trap, which wasn't true at

12:30 all.

In moments like those, did you pray?

Sometimes. Sometimes I forgot, but sometimes, yes, I did. I remember, looking ahead a bit, probably afterwards when we were in Balikpapan in Borneo, we were out with one company and

13:00 C Company were over to our right. This is well ahead, looking into the distance, but I'll tell you about it now talking about praying. They got into a spot of bother and we could hear it all the rifle fire and all this. And the phone rang. And I answered and he said, "Urchin, is that you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "It's Bill Fraser here." Pop Fraser we called him. He came from Charleville and he was a married man with four kids. "It's Bill Fraser here from C Company and we're in a spot of

13:30 bother." I said, "Yes, we can hear it." He said, "I rang you up because some of the blokes here want to know…" – Paddy and Stollard knew that we went to church, we went to mass – "Some of the blokes here want to know if you and Stollard can tell us the second line of the Lord's Prayer." He was only joking of course. Anyway, we went ahead from…

Just getting back to that rice story, what did your mate say when you told him you'd eaten it?

14:00 Leaving out the profanity – not much.

No you don't have to leave that out, just tell us what he said?

He said, "You bastard, you were supposed to carry that for me." I said, "I thought you were dead." It sounds funny, but it wasn't. It wasn't a bit funny. I was in dire danger, I can tell you. Darkie was a wild man. He's still alive. Darkie Perrit, Harold, his name

14:30 was.

How did you get out of that situation with the machine gun?

They'd held us up long enough so they just packed up and strolled off to their mates. They had two machine guns. That wasn't the woodpecker, it was just a light machine gun. They just packed up and after 15 minutes of nothing happening somebody got brave enough to have a look at things and there was nothing there, so we carried on.

Can you describe, Neville, the first time that you were under fire?

15:00 That might have been the first time that I was actually under fire. It was the rifle company boys that were the real fighting men. We were there and we had to face up to it, but our job was not to fire back. Our job was to see that communications were preserved. If there was somebody firing at us while we were doing it then that was

15:30 bad luck. Unless it was an emergency, which did happen later on, we never took part in the actual battle.

So how does that work for a signals person and you're in a situation where you could be fired on, but you're laying lines and you're not holding your gun ready to fire, obviously?

No.

So how do you cope with that?

We just had confidence in the blokes that were looking after us. Under those circumstances there were always rifle company blokes guarding

16:00 us or close enough to hope that we wouldn't get shot. We had confidence in them. We had nothing else to do anyway. That was what we had to do and that was all there was about it.

What was it like to be under fire for the first time?

Pretty awful. You even ate your mate's rice. No, it wasn't too bad then because

16:30 it was just spasmodic firing over our heads into the bush and into the jungle, and they couldn't see us and they were only there to hold us up. Later on at a place called Gorari, which I will tell you about later, we were very much under fire and that was a different thing altogether.

In those first couple of weeks when you first getting adjusted to the life that you were leading there, how did you sleep?

Like a

17:00 log mostly. Two of you used to crawl into this little two-man tent. You used to have to back into it and then lie down and then pull yourself out of it by your feet. Bernie and I shared a two-man tent. I slept pretty well. Actually, it's a funny thing with all those sicknesses that we got in New Guinea we never got

17:30 colds. That was because we had a pullover, it was something like this only it was thicker and woollier. We were ordered to wear those next to our skin under our other clothing, and because of that we reckon that absorbed all the sweat and the moisture and none of us got colds. We were soaked to the skin plenty of times, but we never got colds.

Having dysentery, though, and having all this diarrhoea,

18:00 **what methods did you have to deal with the hygiene of that? What equipment did you have to deal with that?**

What hygiene? There wasn't any. That is something which you lost all together – it was your sense of personal dignity. This is one of the things that you don't usually talk about too much, but when you went to the toilet,

18:30 to the latrine, you had no paper. There was no paper at all – nothing to clean yourself up with. That was all part of the show, just a complete loss of any dignity. You were all the same. That's the way it was.

And you had one set of clothing?

You might have a had a spare set or something. We had underpants and a singlet for a while, but they became so dirty and indescribably filthy and smelly that we threw them

19:00 away and just had the others. You might have had a spare pair of pants if you were lucky. I don't think we did. Spare socks we did have and we'd wash them out in a stream and change our socks occasionally, but that was about all. Our long pants would get all raggedy and dirty at the bottom and we'd tear them off and they'd be raggedy shorts, the way the kids wear them nowadays for preference. That was the way it was.

19:30 **You talked about the bully beef. Can you describe what bully beef is like?**

You know these tins of luncheon meat that you buy nowadays? Well that's very much what it was except that it was very much coarser. It was much more coarse meat with little lumps in it and so on, but it wasn't too bad actually, but every day, three times a day. It wasn't too bad when you poked a bit of a hole in the tin with your bayonet and threw it onto the fire, it tasted a lot better then. Actually, I never got to dislike

20:00 bully, but it got very monotonous.

How often did you get… You said that occasionally you got the opportunity to get some food from the gardens of the natives to help your stomach problems. How often did you get something?

Oh, once a week or maybe every four days. It was pretty hard on the natives because… You see we never saw any natives at all because they all retreated away from the trail and

20:30 away from their village into the hills and away from us and away from the Japs and we never saw them. We raided their gardens and we were just eating their sustenance and their livelihood, but we didn't even think of that. It was survival of the fittest as far as we were concerned. So we got these green paw-paws – we used to cut up green paw paws and boil them and that was good –

21:00 and sweet potatoes, mainly. We used to boil them. The city boys didn't know anything about this. They didn't know how to dig up a sweet potato, the ignorant fools

So sweet potatoes and paw-paws, was there anything else?

No, that was about the limit of anything we got from the native gardens. We went from Myola forward and at another place… There's a

21:30 map there. I'll show you afterwards. That shows you all the villages we passed and all the rest of it. This is one of the things was the funniest things that ever happened to me. Well, it wasn't funny for Mulally [Neville Mulally]. We advanced one day in a bit of a hurry. We found out he'd retreated so we advanced. And our whole battalion moved forward and Irish and Darkie and I were

22:00 detailed, left behind to lay the line behind the battalion because they could move fast but we were slow because we were laying line and checking back. So we laid the line and were carrying these big reels of stuff. And we laid the line and we got into to rejoin them about getting on to dark. And when we…

22:30 In cases like this, and when the occasion demands, whenever you camped you dug little slit trenches for yourself just in case. They could dig a latrine and so on and they'd fill that in before you left. They were always very careful of that. We set the phone up and we were just getting it all fixed up and the Japs started to mortar us. They were sending over mortars, little two inch

23:00 mortars. How on earth he pinpointed us, because it was right in the middle of the jungle, and how he pinpointed us I don't know, but they're landing right among us and that was when I was a bit under fire. We had no foxholes. The trees up there, some of them have big flanges coming out of them. So I found myself in a tree and got in right close to it as close as I could. I didn't see Darkie anywhere, but I

23:30 saw 'Mull' [Mulally] looking around frantically. And all of a sudden he saw a slit trench or a hole and miraculously there was nobody in it so he ran over and he jumped into it. He no sooner jumped and I thought, "Lucky so-and-so." And no sooner had he jumped into it than he started to climb out of it. and I thought, "What's wrong with Mull?" And the mortars were coming over. And the

24:00 mortar bomb, you know the way the trajectory is like that with a mortar bomb and when they come

down they go like that and they go ‘Whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo’ and you reckon every one is heading for the back of your neck, you know. Anyway, Mull is creeping out of this and another mortar came and Mull would jump back into the thing. This happened about five times and I thought, “What’s he doing? Why doesn’t he stay there?” Anyway, after a

24:30 while they stopped and we all crawled out. I thought I’d go and find out what Mull was doing. Mull crawled out of this hole for the last time and walked towards me and as he walked towards me I realised what had happened all right. Mull had mistaken the latrine they had dug for a slit trench and it had been used, and like I tell you, we’d all had diarrhoea so it wasn’t just the ordinary – it was pretty sloppy to be quite

25:00 honest. And the smell! He said, “Shit inside, shit outside,” he said. “I didn’t know which was the best.” He never had any mates and he had to go back along the trail a bit and find a stream and wash his socks and wash his boots, and he still never had any mates for a day or so afterwards.

25:30 Mulally got a Military Medal after that campaign was over, but I don’t think it had anything to do with jumping into the latrine. Anyway, so it went on and we went through villages, Sumanari and Templeton’s Crossing. I remember at Templeton’s Crossing we had a day off so we all went back to a bit of a stream just

26:00 beside where we were camping and we got in and had a bath in the stream. And blow me down if the Japs didn’t start to mortar us again. I remember this particularly because Bobby was there and Bobby said to me, “In case you don’t know, this is what’s called being caught with your pants down.” Anyway, we kept on going and it was the same old thing.

Can you describe that situation a little bit

26:30 **more, in a little bit more detail, having your bath and then suddenly… What happened?**

Well it was very undignified and very embarrassing. We couldn’t very well go and lie down anywhere. We had to get dressed. So we ad to stand up to get dressed and the mortars were falling and so on. Fortunately, one thing about the Japanese mortars was there were a lot of duds. They’d fall and they wouldn’t go off, but of course you wouldn’t know that until after they’d fallen, but that was handy.

27:00 There were no casualties that day. I don’t know why, but there weren’t any.

How close were the mortars falling to where you were?

Oh from here to the kitchen there.

So just a few metres away?

Yes.

So what was your reaction?

Dead scared and hoping the next one – and they’d sort of come down and one would land down and the next one there and the next one there and the next one there.

27:30 And when one landed there and you were over there, you’d hope that the next one that landed which would be closer would be a dud. Ordinarily you’d scatter around a bit, but we had no clothes on so consequently it was a bit awkward until we got them on and got out of there quick and lively. Then we went on and we went through villages, and this thing went on

28:00 day after day. We were always going forward and it wasn’t too bad. We got to Kokoda and everything was going to be all right when we got to Kokoda. They were going to land planes and there was an airstrip and we’d have cooked food and all the rest of it. There was nothing there. There were only two airstrips, which were boggy fields. But

28:30 somehow or another they had got one soup kitchen, a stove, up to us and we had our first meal there and it consisted of bread. We hadn’t tasted bread since Moresby which was six weeks ago. You’ve no idea how you miss bread. They got bread to us and dehydrated potatoes, which they cooked, and tinned

29:00 sausages, which they cooked, and tinned fruit. Oh, it was a great meal and we made hogs of ourselves and ate great big food. And of course what our stomachs did, which had been attuned to this bully before, they rebelled and we were all sick as dogs. Two hours after we’d eaten it we all threw it up again., but anyway we had a good meal. That was Kokoda. And we moved on from

29:30 there and we came to the Kamusi River. We were at the Kamusi River, but the Kamusi River is a very fast flowing deep stream and it had a bridge across it. The Jap didn’t destroy the bridge because he wanted to retreat across it and nobody wanted to destroy it because we wanted to use it. There was a flying fox up a bit further where you went across, but this bridge was there.

30:00 This was one time when the army did do a good strategic move – I’ll show you on the map afterwards. Our battalion did a circling movement. The idea was that we would get between the Japanese and the bridge across the Kamusi River and we were to hold him up there until

30:30 our main forces could come behind him and wipe him out if possible. So we did forced marches for a day. And that night we marched half into the night, too, around to a lesser trail. And we got around behind him and we got settled down at a place called Gorari on the banks of the Kamusi River. Our job was

31:00 then to stop him. It was quite a show because there wasn't one of him, there was a thousand of him, and he was in full retreat. If we could stop him getting to the bridge and getting across it until our other forces came up behind him we could deal a telling blow and scatter him. And that was when I first really came under

31:30 direct close fire for about three hours. He had there what we called a mountain gun. It was a small artillery piece and he used to disassemble it and carry it in pieces. The Jap was a dab hand at doing these sort of things. And he mounted that up on us at a range of about 200 yards and he fired on us. Our

32:00 company, Don Company, was engaged him right up close. Real hand to hand stuff, you know. And our other companies were there and we were there behind them. Buttrose was a very ill man then and this bloke Tom Crop that I've spoken to you of before, he practically took command. We suffered a lot of casualties, but we

32:30 did hold him until our advancing forces got behind him and scattered him. And that was regarded as one of the decisive actions during the Owen Stanley because that ripped apart his whole defences. He suffered very heavy casualties there. One of his generals was killed we found out later, General Horii. He tried to cross the Kamusi River in a barge at some time during this show and the barge capsized and he was drowned. We didn't know that until later. That was when I learned to smoke.

What, during the battle?

Yes. All the blokes were carrying native tobacco and I got some from

33:00 someone and I smoked it end to end. We saw it out, but I remember there were some funny little episodes. There was one of our sigs – and I won't name him because he could be still alive as far as I know – but he was up with Don Company, which was right up with the enemy, and it was pretty hot up there. We had our RAP, a

33:30 Regimental Aid Post. Do you know what that is? That is where you carry your own doctor and you carry your own orderlies and we had that all set up there. Sergeant Cherry was in charge of it, and as our casualties came back he was attending to them as well as he could. Each soldier carried a field dressing. It's a big piece of

34:00 wadding and it's got a long bandage in it, it might be yards long. It's rolled up in one piece and you carry that. And the idea is that if you get a wound and it's bleeding badly you staunch it with this padding. Each man carried one of those himself. So this sig came back wounded with this field dressing on his arm. Cherry said,

34:30 "What's wrong with you?" "I've got a bit of shrapnel in my wrist, in my arm, and it's bleeding like anything." And Cherry said, "Oh yeah." And he got the thing and he unwound it and unwound it and unwound it and there was no blood. When he got down to the thing just on the inside there was a little bruise about as big as a sixpence or a 5 cent piece. He said, "Where's the blood?" I was there

35:00 listening to all this. He said, "It must be bleeding internally." So Cherry choofed him off and sent the poor bugger back. I didn't blame him. I'd have done the same thing I suppose if I'd have been up there because they were really in the thick of it. Anyway this mountain gun was firing air bursts.

35:30 They were firing them over and they were exploding in the trees about 15 ft above our heads. He got a clear passage down the trail and was firing on us. And they kept on exploding and exploding and firing and the shrapnel was dropping all around. The chap next to me, a chap called Tony Johnson, got a bit of shrapnel in the cheek and it was a big wound right down there. It was bleeding badly. The RAP [Regimental Aid Post] fixed him up as good as they could and he said to him, "Can you walk?" and he said, "Yeah." And they said

36:00 "Righto." The medical dressing station was back about two miles and they said, "Well if you can walk you'll be on your own. Walk back there and they'll fix you up." So Tony set off and he was telling us about it afterwards. He got about 200 yards and every time he walked he felt his foot slipping. He looked down, and as well as the bit of shrapnel that hit him in his face, another bit of shrapnel had hit him in the heel and it had knocked off the heel of his

36:30 boot and all the fleshy part of his heel. And he's bled all over his shoe and he's slipping in his shoe every time he moved. He hadn't noticed it just because it was so sore up here and it was numb down there and he hadn't noticed it. He said, "Oh well I've got this far now, I can get the rest of the way." So he kept on going and went back. He rejoined us later on. He went back to Moresby and he rejoined us later on. After the campaign was over we went back to Moresby and came back. He'd been in hospital and you could still

37:00 see his big scar up there. It wasn't terribly noticeable, but whenever he got excited or angry or anything it used to flame red and he knew about it and he was very embarrassed about it, Tony. But that was probably the hairiest of all the engagements. That was a really bad show.

Neville, can you tell us what you

37:30 **did, what you were doing from the beginning of that engagement in some detail. Tell us what your movements were and what you had to do?**

We had to man the phone back to brigade telling them exactly what was happening because we'd laid the line around the circuit where we came around them, which led around the Japanese lines back to brigade. We had to man that and we had to be prepared to fight. I

38:00 didn't actually fire a shot in that engagement. I got fired at, but I never fired back. And that was what we were doing most of the time. There was one stage there where Don Company, that was the one that took the brunt of it, there was C Company and A Company there, and Don Company there, and A Company was in reserve and we were there in the middle of it. And Don Company broke and started to come back. And that was when Tom Cotton, that was the chap that I spoke about, he pulled his revolver out. He was in

38:30 charge of the battalion practically because Buttrose was sick. He got up where he was and came back out to where the phone was and he said, "Go further back. Go back to where you were. We fight and this is where we stay." And he led them back up the trail. And I can still see him with his revolver in one hand and a cigarette in his mouth blowing

39:00 smoke and leading these men back. He was a brave man. He was the captain at that time, a major at that time, and a colonel later. That was between Kokoda and Gona.

When you say the D Company had broken, what do you mean by that?

They had been

39:30 forced back. They were in retreat and if they retreated it meant, number one, they were coming back through battalion headquarters which contained the colonel and all the rest, which we didn't want to get killed, and in addition to that they would get command of the bridge and be able to retreat across the bridge and escape our battalion which was coming behind them, our other battalions, which were coming behind them – the 2/25th and the 2/31st, which were the other battalions in our brigade. They were

40:00 coming up behind him. Very shortly after that they came up and engaged him from his rear and his forces scattered throughout the jungle. A lot were killed. We don't know how many because the Japanese always picked up their dead and carried them away if they could. And that was the end of that.

Tape 5

00:30 **I just want to try and get from you from the very beginning of that day. If you could just try and paint a picture for us because we have no idea of the exact movements of that day, just with you, what happened from the very first start of the day?**

Well that is just what I've been saying. That was all that happened.

Can you describe it from you waking up in the morning through each little movement that you did during the day?

We didn't wake up in the morning, we got there and we went to sleep.

01:00 We had forced marched around. So we were awake and we knew what was on and we knew what had to be done.

What did you first have to do when you got there?

Settle down and set up the phone and wait until the Japs came up. He didn't know we were there, or I don't think he did anyway, so we had the advantage of surprising him, which took up a little

01:30 while, and all the time our blokes were coming up behind him and after that it was all pretty confused.

How many blokes on our side were there?

A full battalion, when it's at full strength that is 897 men I think, but we were down in force. There were probably about 500.

Because according to the notes that I read about this

02:00 **that you were involved with was something around the estimate of 5,000 Japanese?**

Yes. I doubted that. I doubt there would have been that many, but still there were thousands, yes.

Could you see any enemy?

No. We couldn't see him, but Don Company could. We could hear it. We knew what was going on. We could hear the yelling and the firing and grenades.

02:30 **And how many casualties were there on our side?**

I wouldn't know. I wouldn't have any idea, but quite a number because I wouldn't know – we got a few back where we were, Tony Johnson and blokes like that and others. But the main casualties were up in the rifle companies and particularly Don Company. They got savaged a bit.

What would happen to the casualties? As you walked through, did you see any?

Like I said we had the MDS,

03:00 the Medical Dressing Station, which was back a couple of miles and was better equipped to handle them. Those who could walk would walk, like Tony did, and those who couldn't would be carried back by the Fuzzy-Wuzzies.

And what about the people that didn't? Where were they taken? What happened to the bodies?

We buried them. They've all been since disinterred. All them men who died in the

03:30 Owen Stanleys have been disinterred and taken and buried in the cemetery at Moresby. They made a cemetery there. I've been up there once since the war, seeing where they were buried.

Do you remember seeing the bodies at the time?

No, not actually, I don't.

So what happened to them for you not to see them going through?

04:00 They were closer to Moresby than we were because we'd gone up behind them and they were up the front so they were just buried. Getting back, a bit at Efogi, a place called Efogi, when we were advancing that was just on the north side of the Imita Ridge. When we

04:30 advanced we came across a place where he had outflanked our fellows, that mob that were retreating, and they'd taken a bad falling and we found about 40 to 60 bodies there that had been killed a couple of weeks before. They were still there and not buried and our chaps had to bury them. I didn't fortunately, but they

05:00 did and that wasn't a very pleasant job.

Did you actually see the bodies?

Yes.

That must have been really awful?

It wasn't much good. It wasn't bad though, it was the fellows who had to bury them, they were the ones that had it bad. They had to get their identification discs off them, dog tags we used to call them, you had them round your neck. They were little things with your name and number on them. They had to gather all of

05:30 those for the records. They had to bury them, but they were all disinterred and brought back to Moresby later. From then on we went on and we moved up to Gona and we met a bit of resistance, but not much., but then we got to Gona and some went back to Sanananda and some went to Buna and some went to Gona, and we went to Gona.

06:00 The Japanese had put themselves into a position along Gona Creek. I don't know how many of them there were, but we couldn't dig him out. He'd made big underground tunnels and he just used to retreat into them when they shelled him or anything and come out and we couldn't dig him out. We were down to about a third strength by this time. So we were

06:30 camped there and we got reinforcements because the 2/27th and there 2/16th and the 2/14th, they were the ones that retreated. When they went back to Moresby to a camp, those that were fit enough to come back again, they formed themselves into companies and they called themselves the Char Force, I don't know why. And one of their companies under a lieutenant named Haddy came to join us,

07:00 which augmented us. So there we were out there, and this Haddy Company, they sent them up to cross Gona Creek and arrange themselves along the north side of it so the Japs couldn't retreat up along the coast. They didn't show any signs of wanting to either. He had nowhere to go really because Lae was so far away. And we couldn't get

07:30 him out. And myself and Joe Gillespie and one other chap we were detailed to go with Haddy's Company around. And that was where I spent the time when I was at Gona. We found them very, very hospitable because when you went to another unit, sometimes you didn't get your full share of chocolates that came through or anything like that., but they were very

08:00 good. They were all West Australians, nearly all West Australians, and we found them very good to get

on with them. Haddy was remarkable and a very brave man. I had a lot to do with him because I was a lance corporal. No, I wasn't, but I was in charge of the three sigs. We were manning the phone and we had to keep in touch with the company and all the rest of it. My most vivid memory of Gona is that it was a siege and we couldn't do anything

08:30 about it. But my most vivid memories of one day in the war was one day when they decided, all right, they were going to make a big attempt and they're going to get him out, the Japs. They were going to send bombers over with parachute bombs and they're going to drop parachute bombs. There were about three 25 pounders back a bit and they put up harassing fire all night. Open shell every

09:00 minute to keep the Japs awake and not let him get any rest. There were three of them and the planes were to come over and the Kittyhawks would come over and strafe, and the planes were to come over and drop parachute bombs. They dropped a parachute out with a bomb attached to it, and when it hit the ground it would explode and this sort of thing. And our Vickers guns were going to open up and the 25s were going to open up, the three of them. And after that we were going to attack the

09:30 village and we were going to get rid of him. We didn't anyhow. Because the planes were coming over with the bombs and the strafing and we were so close to them they were going to come over from the south to the north. And Haddy Company was ordered to retreat 700 yards back along the trail. So they all got out, except Haddy and I remained on the phone for last-minute communications. This was

10:00 supposed to start at 10 o'clock. They got out at half past 9 in the morning and Haddy and I were to remain there until 10 to 10 and then we were to rip the phone out and race down after them. Something happened and the first planes came over at twenty to 10 instead of 10. And there's these bloody planes coming over and there's Haddy and I sitting there and I could hear the bullet fire,

10:30 the bullets going thud, thud, thud into the ground all around us. So we ripped the phone up and we headed for the jungle still hearing the bullets landing, and we made the jungle and we were right there. We walked down the track 700 yards to where his company was and we thought, "This will be good. A cushy job this. We'll just sit here and listen to all the fun." We hear the bombing going on behind us and the 25 has just begun to open up. And we got

11:00 down and I just put the phone down and a 25 pound bomb landed on us, one of our own. I jumped to the phone to stop the gun and the phone was dead. Something had happened to the line. So Haddy grabbed his machine gun, his submachine gun, and I grabbed the phone and I had to go back

11:30 along the line to find out what had happened and get in touch with our battalion to stop the 25. While we were going there we heard two more shells drop and we knew two blokes had been hit. One of them was badly wounded with facial wounds. It was terrible. We got back and I didn't like it very much because we were going back towards where all the

12:00 goings on were going on. Anyway, we got back and we got around a bit and we found out that something had fallen on the line and broken it. We found one bit of wire and found the other bit of wire there and I hooked into it and I got on the phone and shoved a bayonet into the ground for an earth to the phone and buzzed headquarters. They answered the phone and it was

12:30 Bernie on the phone at the other end. He said, "What?" I said, "Stop the 25! Stop the 25! They're firing on us!" And there was dead silence. And I'd like to say I prayed, but I didn't. I said, "Well, you bastards, what do you think you're doing?" He said,

13:00 "Calm down little brother, calm down, they're stopped." And they were. He had got off the phone and their o-pip, their chap that was up forward, guiding the 25 fire. He'd stopped him and he'd stopped the 25s. So anyway we connected up those two lines again and tested it through and everything was

13:30 okay and we went back to Haddy Company.

How did a mistake like that happen?

We don't know. The gun was elevated correctly and it was parallel – one of the three guns. It was human error and I don't know what happened about it if

14:00 anything, but they found out when they checked it all through that this was happening. He'd landed I don't know half a dozen shells among us. There were only three casualties and one was Sandy Campbell. He had bad facial injuries, and the other got shrapnel and that was all.

No one died at it?

No. I thought Sandy would, but I did

14:30 meet up with him later on when we came back to Australia up at Rocky Creek in the hospital. I had a bit of a talk with him. I said, "You came out of it pretty well, Sandy, your face is not – there's a bit of a scar?" He said, "Yes, they gave me plastic surgery and it was pretty good."

At the time of the explosion do you remember what had happened to his face then?

What happened? No I don't know. It was just a big bloody mess when I saw it. And it didn't see too

much of it because I was too busy

15:00 worrying about the phone and all the rest of it.

So when that happened, when you first realised that you were being bombed, how did you know that it was your own?

You get to know what a 25 sounds like. They knew better than me.

And what was Haddy saying? Was there a panic for a while?

No. There was no panic. They all just scattered and Haddy and I went back along the line.

15:30 I had a great regard for Haddy. He was a great man. That must have been in December I suppose, and we pulled out, we were relieved. And actually Gona fell two days after we were relieved., but during that day that all that was on they did suffer some fairly heavy casualties among our sigs back at

16:00 battalion headquarters where Bernie was, because Mac got shot. Whether it was a sniper's bullet or whether it was a stray bullet, I don't know. Shorty got shot and Mildred got – Mildred, his name was – he was a little girlish looking chap and he got the name of Mildred. He got shot in the leg and

16:30 Shorty, Don Shortis, got Shorty and he got wounded, and Tommy Olsen, Uncle Tommy, he got wounded. There were four of them. Four of our sigs were all wounded that day. As I say, we were pulled out shortly after than and another company moved in and Gona fell about two days after.

17:00 **Would sigs be in the line of fire because they're trying to get communications through the ranks?**

Yes.

I mean the four sigs?

They were busy taking lines out to the companies and so on. Three of them got killed that way. Mac got killed by just a stray bullet – we don't know how. They brought him back to

17:30 Australia but he never recovered he died in hospital. He was sent here about 10 months later. Uncle Tommy was a sergeant and he was back there and he got just a stray, something stray, but the others were out with the companies and they were under fire pretty well.

Being in the same battalion as your brother, did you often worry about him?

No, I think it was the other way around. Mum said if there was ever any

18:00 trouble to be found that I'd find it and Bernie would be all right. There was one occasion later on during the second visit to New Guinea that I'll tell you about that he worried considerably about. Just to finish that off, we pulled out of Gona and I learned later that two days after we pulled out Haddy was killed on patrol. He was killed by a Japanese grenade. I was very sad to hear about that because I had a great regard for

18:30 him. He was a great bloke. We pulled out back to Popendetta. There was an airstrip there near Gona. And we pulled out and after a couple of days there they flew us back to Moresby and that was the end of the campaign as far as we were concerned.

Having experienced a couple of really difficult situations, how do you think you changed as a person?

19:00 **Did you change through that?**

I don't know. Not much I don't think. I suppose I got a bit tougher and realised what things were. I was more experienced. It's just an instinct that comes to you. You understand things a bit better, you know, the way it was. I don't think I changed in myself very much except I smoked.

19:30 We stayed in Moresby for a while and then we came back to Australia. We went up to the Tableland up there and I remember on the way up we were treated like heroes. At Caloundra and one of the other places up to the Tableland they met us with cakes. We couldn't eat them. As I said,

20:00 I went up there at 11 stone and came back at 7 stone 6. That was really the way it was. We went up on the Tableland and the main thing there was that Jimmy got his commission like I told you, our lieutenant. We got a bit of home leave. We got a fortnight's home leave. I remember coming back and the Burdekin River was over and we had to sit there and wait for it to go

20:30 down. It wasn't a high bridge any more. It was low. I remember coming over it and there was still about 2 foot of water over the railway line when they brought the train over bringing us down. And you could look out of the window of the train and you couldn't see any train lines ahead, all you could see was the water and, "I hope the train line is still there." We came home and had a fortnight's leave and went back and did

21:00 training and all the rest of it.

What was it like to come back to Proserpine?

It was good, and I was pleased to be home and pleased to see Mum and Dad and my two sisters., but most of the people around the town seemed like strangers to me. Some of them weren't. Some of them I'd known pretty well, both boys and girls, so it was good.

21:30 But a lot of them seemed like strangers. It was different. You'd gone into a different world and that was where you lived. It wasn't… Home wasn't that sort of a home any more, it was just somewhere different.

So it was hard to settle back into home for that two weeks?

Well I didn't really; it was so short that I didn't have time to even

22:00 think about that. I stayed around home and went into town a bit and we didn't have any blackouts up there so it was quite good. I went to the pictures.

Did people want to know what happened?

Yes, but we didn't want to talk about that much then because we were forbidden to, we weren't supposed to. But they did; they talked to you a bit. Some did and some didn't want to know about it. I didn't blame them either because most of them had relatives over there

22:30 anyway. So we went back to the Tableland and that was '43, halfway through '43. We did training up there. I remember one episode of the training. We'd been out for three days and we'd walked and we were pretty tired. Anyway word came out that the manoeuvre was over and we were going back to camp and

23:00 we were going back in trucks. We didn't have to walk back, "Good." We were all just climbing into our trucks and the brigadier came through – I mentioned him before, Brigadier Ether, a tough man. He said, "Who are these men?" Curry was there, Phillip Curry, our captain, and he said, "A Company 2/33rd battalion, sir." He said, "Infantry men?" Curry said, "Yes, sir." "Infantry men march." He said, "Let them walk back."

23:30 We had feelings too deep for words. We had to pile out of our trucks and walk back 15 or 20 miles back to where we were camped at Kirra. We got about half an hour down the trail and we stopped for ten minutes. When you're marching like that you stop every hour for ten minutes for a rest. So we are having our ten minute rest and the brig [brigadier] comes through in his 4 x 4 [four wheel drive vehicle] standing up

24:00 a la Montgomery looking out over his troops. A Company was here, and that was us. B Company was there and A Company was here. As he came through, B Company booed him, "Boo, boo, boo." He just got out of their company and into ours he stopped the jeep and got out and he said to Curry, "A Company?" He said

24:30 "Yes, sir." "Very well." Anyway, we got marched back to his thing and a few minutes later Curry said, "Well, that's done out." We are to stay out and do two more days' manoeuvres because we booed the brig. And the funny part about it was it wasn't us at all, it was B Company, and he came out of them and just entered us. So he kept us out on manoeuvres for two more days. But we

25:00 didn't do anything, we just went down the creek and put up camp and lazed around. They didn't do anything. We booed the brig.

Didn't they know what you'd been through? I mean, how much more training did you really need when you'd been through so much?

Yes, but you've still got to do it. You've got to keep fit. During that time we had a lot of sport

25:30 and they had an inter-battalion football thing which we won, our battalion won. And we held the cricket, inter-company cricket competitions and volleyball and things like that and a lot of that. We had a lot of that up there too. It was not too bad. Then in August 1943 we

26:00 set sail for New Guinea again up to Moresby again, but this time it was much more leisurely. And we got out at Moresby and they took us up in trucks to a place outside Moresby and we set up camp there. We trained and played cricket and trained, and that was when I

26:30 got word that I'd been promoted up to lance corporal. Then we got word that we were go into action again. We were to be flown over the hills. There were two disused airstrips at two little places out from Lae and the American Field Paratroopers had landed on them. Nobody was there and they'd

27:00 held them against the Japanese, but the Japanese didn't bother about it very much. They didn't know what was going on. They cleaned them up and we were to be taken out and landed on this and we were to fan out from there and retake Lae. That was the scheme. We went down and on the 7th December, which is a date I'll always remember, we got taken down to Moresby to the airstrip there and it was

27:30 about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and we were sitting in the back of the trucks. There was myself and

two younger lads. We were the ones who were to go to Don Company to be with them during the engagement. A bombing mission took up of Liberators and Flying Fortresses and Kittyhawks to guard them and they took off. And one of the planes was a

28:00 Liberator and it struck air trouble almost immediately on take off. The pilot tried to bring it back and land it on the 'drome, but he didn't make it and it crashed right on the top of our company, on top of Don Company. We were in battle order, which meant we were carrying 80 rounds of ammunition and two grenades and mortars. And the aeroplane had three

28:30 250 pound bombs and one 500 pound bomb on it, plus about 2,500 gallons of high octane fuel. And the whole lot went up – the whole lot of it. It was a bad show and it pretty well wiped out the company. It didn't wipe us out, but it made us inoperable. We had 78 killed and about 120 or more put in hospital. I got

29:00 thrown out of the truck I was in. The nose of the plane hit the truck and tipped it over and threw me out and knocked me unconscious. I was unconscious for I don't know how long – maybe a minute or maybe five. I think what woke me up was I had a very bad agonising pain in my elbow and there was a bit of shrapnel lying on my arm, a bit of hot shrapnel, and it was red hot and it burned my arm very badly and I've still got a

29:30 scar there. Apart from that I was burned, but so on, but I was conscious. The thing was still going on, but the bombs must have gone off while I was out. The flames were still there and there was a little bit of a space around where I was. I don't know how that happened. There was another chap there and he had a smashed ankle and he couldn't walk. So I helped him up and the

30:00 two of us we looked for the place where the flames were the lowest and we got out. We got a bit singed going out, but we got out.

So the flames were all around you?

Yes. I handed him over to somebody or other and I went and leaned on a railing, a fence that was there, because I had severe pains in my back. It seemed to be apart from the flames, but I was

30:30 burned, badly burned on my face and my back. Anyway, then the ambulances arrived and they took us down to the field hospitals. There were two field hospitals, big hospitals, big marquees, and nurses and all the works. It was just like a hospital but under canvas in Moresby. The 2/5th and the 2nd – I think we went to the 2/5th. And they put just in there and there was great confusion. There were nurses and orderlies and doctors everywhere and they put us in

31:00 bed. I was in a fair bit of pain and one of the sisters said, "Are you in pain?" I was doing a bit of a whinge and I said, "Yes." And she said, "Didn't you get a morphine needle out of the pain cart?" and I said, "No." And she said, "Well you should have. Everybody did or should have." So she went away and got me one and injected me with morphine and it was lovely.

31:30 It was beautiful. It was just like they got the blanket and the blanket was the pain and they lifted it off me. Anyway, I went into a coma then and I didn't wake up until – that was Tuesday I think if I remember rightly and I didn't wake up until Friday afternoon. The sister said, "You decided to come back and be with us again?" I was still moaning a bit and she said, "Are you having trouble?" And I said, "Yes."

32:00 And she said, "Where's the pain?" And I said, "In my back." She said, "Your back wasn't badly burned. Your arms are and our face is and your knees and your arms and legs are, but your back isn't." And I said, "No, it's inside." And she said, "Oh." She went away and she got a doctor and they wheeled me up to x-ray and then found out that the second bottom joint on my spine had been injured. There had been a bit sliced right off it. How I don't know, but they showed me the x-rays.

32:30 I still have trouble with it even now, but not all the time. Now and again it flares up, but it was all right. I was in hospital for about five weeks and then they took me up to convalescence camp at Koitake, the same place that we'd landed the year before. And I spent about four weeks there in con [convalescent] camp doing

33:00 nothing much but playing cards and playing cricket.

At this stage had you found out what the aftermath of that accident was and had you talked to anyone else from the battalion or talked to anyone about it?

You mean what caused it and all the rest of it?

Yes.

I'll tell you what the rumours were and I've no idea whether they were true or not. The rumours were that it was sabotaged. The

33:30 rumours were that some members of the ground crew were, to put it literally, spies and they doctored the air line of the plane up so it was allowed to warm up with petrol and enough to get airborne and then the fuel line would cut out the fuel.

34:00 I don't know whether this is true, but the fact does remain that during that week there were seven

bombers crashed around Moresby – Liberators and Fortresses. But only the one that did any damage except to the crew and to the plane and that they caught the two blokes doing it. One was killed resisting. They caught them doing it.

34:30 Two Americans they were, and the other one was court-martialled and shot. Those were the rumours and I don't know whether they are true or whether they are not, but the fact does remain that after that was supposed to have happened there were no more crashes. So I don't know.

So the rumours were they were Americans working for the Japanese?

No they were Americans. They'd been living in America. This was how Germany had prepared for war. They'd been living in America before the war. They were American

35:00 citizens planted there by Germany. This is what we were told and as I say, I don't know.

They were Germans living in America.

But they'd been there for years. They were American citizens., but that is all rumour I can't guarantee whether any of that is true or not.

When did you

35:30 **hear that?**

After con camp. I got back and our camp was still there. Our LOBs [Left Out of Battle] were still there, left out of battle they call them. When you go into battle a certain proportion of your battalion, a skeleton staff, are left in your battalion. They stay behind in your camp and look after things for you to come back to. I went back there and that was when I heard about it back there.

How did that

36:00 **incident affect the morale of the battalion?**

That was what I meant to tell you. Bernie was not with Don Company, he was with battalion headquarters, and they went over and landed at Nadzab and linked up with the two airstrips and they did the recapture of Lae and secured all the Markham Valley area and all the

36:30 rest of it, the Ramu Valley and all the rest of it. But in all this time until about three weeks later he never knew whether I was alive or dead or what I was. He did know about a week later because there was a lieutenant that was LOB and he visited the hospital, and I had come out of the coma by this time and I was taking notice again. I saw him and

37:00 asked him if he would send up word to Bernie that I was all right. And that was when he first heard about it about a week later. But he had to be in action all that time not knowing where I was and not knowing what I was like. I remember when I was in hospital and my back was burned a fair bit and a lot of it turned septic because of the conditions up there. They decided they'd bathe me and give me a

37:30 saline bath. They would put me into a bath so they could get all this salt into my back. They took me and one of the sisters put me into the bath and I'm lying there and she said, "Do you feel all right?" And I said, "Yes, I'm okay." She said, "Well I've got to do a couple of things in the ward. I'll only be two minutes and I'll be back." I must have been weaker than I thought I was because I fainted. When she came back into the bathroom I was lying in the bottom of the bath

38:00 blowing bubbles. They grabbed me and took me back to the ward and I was out still. I came back in the ward and here's her face, it is about two inches from my face, and I came around and she said, "Don't you ever do that to me again." I said, "No, I won't." Anyway, we got into con camp and got back and

38:30 it would be two and a half months later they put myself and another bloke called Bill Lilly onto a boat. And we came around on this dirty filthy little Dutch ship it was. It was filthy. There were maggots on the deck. Anyway, it took us around the toe of New Guinea and landed us in Lae. And we

39:00 reported there and they said, "Your battalion is up the valley, up the Ramu Valley. It's that way. That's the road that leads up to it and you're on your own. We can't supply transport." So Bill and I set off on the road up the Ramu Valley and every quarter of a mile or mile or so we'd ask for 2/33rd and, "Oh yeah, it's up there." We got

39:30 sick of it, but about the fourth time we asked it was, "Oh yeah, just around the corner." So I rejoined the battalion there.

How did it feel to meet up with them again?

It was good, but casual. "Not your turn to fry, eh?" and things like that.

Is what they said?

That was the way it went. I had a

40:00 bit of trouble. The fighting was over, but actually I never saw any action during the Lae show at all. That

was Shaggy Ridge – You've heard about Shaggy Ridge have you? – Shaggy Ridge and all that. I heard about it afterwards. Bernie talked to me about it a lot and so did all the others. I went out on patrol a few times.

What did Bernie say when he saw you again?

He said, "G'day." No, I was safe and everything was all right. He was all right.

40:30 I went out on patrol one day and by that time we had the Owen gun. You've heard of the Owen gun? It was a modified version of a light submachine gun. The old Thomas submachine gun was very heavy and had a lot of stoppages and things, but the Owen gun was different all together. It was very light and you could drop it in the mud and pick it up and

41:00 fire it and it generally was a magnificent weapon for infantry in the jungle. It had one weakness. If you dropped it on its butt onto the ground the bolt was so sensitive it used to set itself off and shoot. We went out on patrol and we did make some

41:30 contact with what we thought were Japs that we could see way ahead. And two of our blokes, scouts, were sent forward to find out what they could about it and not to engage and come back and we'd get the information. We wouldn't engage them at all, we'd just retire back. And we were standing there and one silly bloke dropped his Owen gun on the butt and she went off, bang! And of course that was the end of it. Our cover was blown. The two blokes

42:00 dropped back in a hurry and rejoined us.

Tape 6

00:30 **So Neville, I'd like to go back to that accident with the plane. Just before that happened, exactly what were you doing personally?**

Sitting in the back of the truck on one of our wireless sets sound asleep.

What was the first thing you remember hearing?

I remember hearing a big noise,

01:00 a big rumble, and waking up confused and thinking, "We're being bombed," and then I looked around and the nose of the plane was silhouetted against the sky 10 feet away and then it hit. The nose of the plane hit our truck and we were a bit luckier than the ones next to us because the props [propellers] – there weren't jet planes then they were props – and the

01:30 props went through the two trucks next to us and did some damage.

How soon did you realise what was actually happening?

I think after I woke up and before I got out, because I had seen the plane. When I woke up I was in full possession of my

02:00 senses. And this young fellow was there too, and I saw the oil of the plane and I realised that a plane had crashed.

When you woke up and you were surrounded by flames, what could you hear? What was going on around you?

I could hear planes and I could hear explosions, but not the bombs. The bombs must have gone off while I was unconscious. All I could hear was our mortars and our

02:30 grenades and our ammunition going up.

I can't even imagine what that was like. Can you describe it for us?

Well, it was too sudden and too near to be scared. I wasn't scared because it was a bit beyond that. I thought just, "How on earth

03:00 will we get out of this?" And probably, man being made the way they are, probably that young fellow being there with me helped me, although he couldn't walk because his ankle was smashed. I never saw him again. I don't know where he was from or what he was.

So when you got out of there, how hard was it for you to actually get out of the truck?

Well needs must as the devil drives, I suppose, so it didn't seem to be hard at all.

03:30 What I do remember is he put one arm around my shoulder and the other arm… He took hold of this hand with his hand and when I handed him over to whoever I did, when he took his hand off all the skin off the back of my hand came with it. It just came off with his hand and he took it away with him

somewhere.

At that stage were you feeling

04:00 **pain?**

Yes, but it was so acute that it wasn't as painful as a lot less pain I've felt.

I guess in that situation your instinct to survive takes over?

A lot, yes.

What was going on around you and what did you see of other people?

04:30 Nothing at all when I woke up. When I got out with him there were people who were waiting and they couldn't do anything. They couldn't come in to the flames. There were people standing around and I handed him over to them and there were other people running hither and thither and so on. After I'd been about two minutes there the ambulances started to come. So I couldn't have been out too long, although that would have been a matter of say 20 minutes I suppose. It would take that time to

05:00 get out to the ambulances and get out to where we were, I suppose.

So how many ambulances arrived?

I don't know. I haven't any idea – maybe 5 or 10. There were plenty of them there, army ambulances, you know.

It must have been quite a chaotic situation?

That was the word to describe it, yes, it was, and it was even more chaotic when we got back to the hospital, poor beggars.

So can you describe that scene of chaos for us?

At the scene? No, that's all it was.

05:30 People were running hither and thither and a few vehicles standing around. I don't know what they were. I can't recall any of the others getting out. They must have got out or got out later, but I didn't see them come out anywhere near me or with me at that time.

So what did you observe of any other casualties?

None at that time, only this chap that was there.

So you were taken to the

06:00 **hospital, can you describe the scene at the hospital for us?**

Well you used the word chaotic. There were sisters, nurses, orderlies, doctors everywhere. Everywhere there were doctors trying to attend to two or three patients and it was, "Yes, I know, but I can't leave him and I can't leave here." "Yes, I know I should be there, but I can't be there." They worked very well. There was no panic, but it was

06:30 chaos. There were so many of us. I suppose about 150 went to that hospital or more.

How big was that hospital, can you describe it for us?

I can only describe the ward I was in. I think the main ward would have had about 60 beds in it. It was a long, big marquee and it had about 60 beds.

Can you describe for us the type of casualties that they were treating?

Burns, mostly burns, a

07:00 few shrapnel, but not many. It was 90% burns.

How well equipped was the hospital to deal with that?

I don't know. They did very well, but I don't know how well equipped they were. I remember, I was just reading a letter the other day and I'd forgotten this, but after I recovered consciousness a few days later… No, it would be over a week later, it would be about 10 days. She said,

07:30 "Hi, you don't know me." I said, "No, I don't" "I've just come to see what you looked like once you'd got rid of all those burns." I said, "Why, did you see me then?" "Did I see you?" she said, "I sat beside you all night changing your dressings every 10 minutes." She said, "I never knew if I'd bring you back to life or not." They must have left her with me when I lost

08:00 consciousness. They were well enough equipped to take me into what you'd call intensive care I suppose.

You were in a coma for several days?

Up until the Friday afternoon as far as I recall – four days it was.

So what did they tell you about their expectations for you to survive during that time?

Oh, they let drop occasionally that they

08:30 thought there wasn't a great deal of chance early on. The longer I lived the better chance I got, although they reckoned it was a bit long, four days. It wasn't terribly unusual for that type of wound.

When you came out of the coma what sort of state were you in? What do you remember of what you were feeling?

Mainly I was worried about that part of my back because that was very bad then. I'd been on my back and of course nobody was taking any notice of it or taking any care

09:00 of that. And that was very painful, even more so than the burns.

How were they able to treat that?

They couldn't. When I went up to the con camp they put me on an exercises course and in charge was a gentleman, and if you're old enough you'll remember him, called Raphael Cilento [Sir Raphael Cilento, medical pioneer].

09:30 He had a daughter named Diane Cilento. He was a famous physiotherapist of that time. And he was up at Koitake in charge of the physiotherapy there. And I remember that part of it. I remember also that this arm was by far the worst and the hair hasn't grown back on the elbow. That was a very bad burn right up there.

10:00 And all this part here used to form a big matter every day and the only way they had to treat that was to scrape it off with a little bit of stick like an ice-pick to get rid of it, and that used to hurt. And then when that was over they'd give me a needle and that was good. I'd go to sleep again for a couple of hours.

10:30 As far as I can remember that treatment would last maybe 10 days, and after that it started to clear up. Then, the climate being what it was up there, we were very susceptible to infection.

You'd already been suffering from malaria and dysentery and malnutrition and here you were almost dying from these burns. How did you

11:00 **recover?**

No, you see there'd been a year since all that other business. This is September '43. All that other stuff had finished up about the end of '42, so really it was nine months ago.

And you had recovered from those other things? The malaria was a recurring malaria?

It was. We were up in the Tableland then and I'd been in the hospital with malaria at Rocky Creek.

11:30 They had then discovered a thing called Atebrin. Have you heard anything about that? Atebrin is an anti-malarial thing. It's like quinine, but it's more effective. In fact the army claimed it was so effective that if you got malaria after they put you on it – they put us on Atebrin, one Atebrin a day – and they maintained you couldn't get malaria if you took your Atebrin. So if you got malaria

12:00 it was an army crime and you could be charged for it. Some of the fellows didn't like to take it. The rumours were that it wrecked your liver so they used to take it off and pretend to take it and throw it away. So they made you take it on the back of your hand.

Where did that

12:30 **rumour come from?**

Where do rumours start? I don't know. The army maintained that most rumours started in the latrines while they had time to think.

What faith did you have in that particular rumour?

None. I didn't believe in any of the rumours until they proved it. I'm like that and I don't now. I like things to be proven.

Was there in fact any

13:00 **substance to that rumour?**

No. None at all.

But consequently some of those people possibly have got malaria when they might not have got it?

Possibly.

Do you know of anybody that was charged?

No. I think that was only a threat personally, but I do know that when I came back from the army... No, I was still in the army. I was in Brisbane awaiting

13:30 discharge. Joan was there too. But we went down to Casino to her aunt's place and we went swimming in fresh water. That afternoon after swimming in fresh water that is the last time I can remember I got malaria. I hadn't been taking Atebrin then. I was still supposed to but I didn't bother. I took some that night.

14:00 **When you got malaria, how long would it last?**

It depends on the severity. That time it didn't last. It lasted an hour or two hours. It could last a couple of days. I had an attack at Port Moresby and that was before Atebrin came out and after the Owen Stanley show, and that was a very severe attack and that lasted about three

14:30 days. And I went up to about 106.8. That was my temperature, and it stayed there for quite a while.

Were you having to move at all during that time – were you on the move while you had malaria at that time or were you able to stay?

I was in hospital down at a place called Ishitabu. It was a field hospital, nothing very flash.

Can you tell us what that was like, the field hospital?

15:00 Well a field hospital, they weren't hospitals, not like that big one I was in. That was a fully equipped army hospital. A field hospital is about half way between that and the RAP that you had in the battalion. It had orderlies, but not nurses as I recall, but it had orderlies and it had a doctor and it had medications and it had needles and that sort of thing. But it didn't have the

15:30 expertise or the equipment that a big hospital had and it was under smaller tents too.

What is your mental state during that time of having malaria during those days for example?

You get pretty fuddled. What do you call it when you've got no control of your speech at all? You're half hysterical, but not violently

16:00 so. You don't think very straight. I got an attack in Brisbane after I came back the first or second time and I got onto the wrong tram. I found myself away over at Ashgrove instead of heading for Lutwyche and that sort of thing.

So when you were in the Owen Stanleys and the Kokoda Track, how often would you have become sick do you think? How frequently would you have been sick?

With

16:30 malaria? Sometimes you didn't even notice it, and then there'd be the diarrhoea and all the rest of it. Having a guess, I'd say that I might have had four to six attacks of malaria during that Owen Stanleys before we pulled out.

And when you had those attacks at that time, were you having to stay on the move and just keep going all the time?

Yes, sometimes, it all depended. If somebody got it you knew that they were a bit

17:00 sick and somebody would take their rifle and somebody would see that they got their cup of tea. I myself got very sick one day and somebody took my rifle and all I could think of was having a cup of tea at the end of the day. Fortunately we were able to build fires and Bernie brought me my cup of tea and I had a night's rest and sleep and I was not too bad the next day. That was

17:30 mostly malaria, but I was sick too.

So how much did the blokes look after one another in that situation?

Very much. Well, not very much – it was just one of the things you did. It was just taken as there and you did it. Of course some of them weren't that good themselves either, so they weren't capable of looking after anybody else.

Could you give us an idea of a typical day on the

18:00 **Kokoda Track, say starting from when you woke up in the morning. After you woke up how would a typical day progress from there?**

There were two types of day. One was when we were static and one was when we were advancing. A typical day when we were static is you woke up and you had your breakfast and you straightened your clothes and all the rest of it and you went to the toot [toilet] and all this sort of thing. And that was about all you

18:30 did. You stood around and waited for something to happen and wondered what company was going to

do what that day and looked after the telephone. That was all you did. On other days you'd be on the move and you'd be marching or you might be laying line or you might be with a company doing something. There would be more action in it. There weren't many

19:00 days that the sigs on the trail, the Owen Stanleys, that the signals were actually involved with contact with the Japs because we didn't need to go out with the company. If there was an exercise or something like that, or a probe, they'd just go forward by themselves. They wouldn't have any sigs with them then because any

19:30 messages they'd get back, it would be so close. It would only be a couple of hundred yards. Distances in the jungle are so different. 10 yards in the jungle is equal to a quarter of a mile out here. The Jap might be only a couple of hundred yards away. He'd be quiet and you'd be quiet and you mightn't even know he was there.

So in that sort of situation, what sort of

20:00 **communication did you have with other troops in terms of talking?**

Phone mostly.

If you were that close to the enemy, were you able to always be communicating with each other?

We had to keep the noise down. We could talk and all the rest of it, but you didn't shout out, "I'm here, come and get me," or anything like that, but we could talk and we did.

What did you talk about?

20:30 Everything. Some of the blokes were very confiding about their homes and their wives and all the rest of it. Sometimes we would just talk about what we were doing. And sometimes we would get news by phone of the war on the other side because that was right at the time when Montgomery started his push against Rommel in the north of Africa and we started to get the upper hand there. And they

21:00 thought that would hearten us up a bit, which it did. So we used to get phone news about that and we used to spread it around and we used to talk about it too. Other times we wondered what on earth was going to happen in the next few minutes.

When you were talking amongst each other, how did you keep your morale up? What sort of things did you talk about given the deprivations you were suffering?

We used some bad words about that, but

21:30 apart from that, no, morale was a thing that came in after the war. We didn't talk about morale very much up there. It was just you were miserable or you didn't feel too bad. Mail was a great thing. We did get some mail in the Stanleys at times; it came through. You'd see all the blokes gather round and have their names read out. Some blokes would

22:00 sneak away with looks on their faces when they had no mail. I used to get a fair bit of mail because I used to write a lot.

Who did you write to?

My Mum and my sisters and a couple of friends in Brisbane that I've told you about, and a couple of girls in Proserpine. That was all.

How did it affect people when they didn't get mail?

They'd be very disappointed and they'd be quiet for a while. They'd be just

22:30 disappointed. I suppose to use a modern term that would lower their morale, although there were blokes who didn't expect it and didn't want it. Darkie Perritt was one. Darkie wouldn't have wanted a letter. He wouldn't write it and he wouldn't answer it if he got it.

What about yourself? How important was it for you to get letters?

Very important. At that time there was Mum and Dad and Flora and Mary, those were my two sisters, and my brother out here.

23:00 There was also this girl that left here and went out west that I was very keen on at that time. I thought she was the one girl in the world for me. It would be nice to get letters from her. A few of the other chaps wrote too, occasionally. There was quite a variety of people.

Neville, you said there was a lot of

23:30 **censorship. What could you write to those people about?**

For instance I couldn't tell them I was in New Guinea and I couldn't tell them that we'd been in action. I couldn't mention any geography. Even when we were in Australia and we were camped up in the Tablelands I couldn't mention Atherton or

anything like that.

So they never had any idea where you were?

Oh, I used to get word one way or another. For instance there is a range of hills out here, you'll see it as you go outside, it is called Dryandra. And we used to often talk about it and we knew Dryandra well. Our farm wasn't far from the

base of the hill. And when we went to New Guinea the first time and we were allowed to write letters on the ship and they were posted in Moresby. I remember I said, "Mum, I've got to see things a different way now. I often used to argue you about it, but now that I have viewed your Dryandra system from a different direction I've changed my mind." And she

deduced from that that I'd seen Dryandra from sailing up the coast, so she did know that I'd gone to New Guinea.

When you were injured in the accident, how soon after that did your family know how you were?

Actually almost straight away because we had cards and we used to carry them with us. "I have been in an

accident," or something, or, "I have been sick recently," and you'd cross out what was right or wrong. And, "I'm in hospital a few days, but I hope I will be well soon." You'd sign these and you'd cross out what was wrong and you'd post them. They were free of charge. I sent one of those. I had one in my pocket and I sent one as soon as I was in hospital. I gave it to the nurse before I went into a coma. And they got that, just

that. They also got a letter from the Minister of the Army and I've still got that telegram there now.

What did that say?

It advised that I was seriously ill. "Your son, Q82566, Private Neville Lewis, is seriously ill in hospital not on the mainland." It didn't say New Guinea, but, "not on the mainland." "The War Department," – or whatever it

was – "office sends sincere sympathy and if there's any change in his condition you will be notified as soon as possible." It was something like that. I'll show you later.

Did you find out afterwards, later, when you spoke to your mother, what her reaction was when they received that?

Yes. It was pretty bad because Dad was the ultimate pessimist. When Dad got that he immediately assumed I was dead. That was the way he was. "He's been killed. They won't

tell us straight away, but he has been." That didn't do much for Mum's morale either. The thing didn't say that. Dad was working at the local sugar mill at the time and the telegram was delivered there. He got home with the telegram and told Mum and that was his reaction. Like I say, he was the ultimate pessimist and he thought I was dead I suppose. Yes, they were very distressed. Fortunately it wasn't too long before

word got through that I was still alive.

What about your brother, Bernie? How long before he found out that you were alive?

I would assume that it would be. I went into hospital and I came out of the coma on the Friday. I reckon that the day after I came out of the coma there was a lieutenant there who came down from our camp. He was left out of battle,

LOB, and he came and saw a few of us. I told him and I asked him if he could get in touch with Bernie through military channels and tell him that I was okay. I would assume that it would be five days or six days when he found out I was still alive.

When did you next see him?

When I got back. I was four weeks in hospital and five weeks in con camp and another week,

so 10 weeks – say nearly two and a half months.

Where did you see him again?

Up the valley, up the Ramu Valley. After the Lae show was practically over.

One of the things I'm curious about – after the time that you had on the Kokoda Trail and the Owen Stanleys suffering that incredible deprivation, when was the first time that you found yourself in a normal

bed eating something other than bully beef and biscuits?

Probably when we came back – well a normal bed, a normal army bed. Probably when they flew us back from Popendetta to Moresby and we went into camp at Moresby there. We were in camp at Moresby there for some time before we came home.

29:30 **What was that like that first day that you were able to sleep in a normal army bed?**

It was a big relief and you hardly believed it. We'd been out and we'd been in the plane and gone over the range back home and were gradually assimilating ourselves. We were there for some time at Moresby before they brought us home. And of course

30:00 a few of the tempers got frayed because the blokes reckoned we should be sent home and get some leave, particularly the married men. A few of the tempers got short and there were a few fights and things. Not many, but a few. I remember when we were somewhere near Kokoda I think, I don't know where, there was a general in charge of our brigade, General Vasey.

30:30 You wouldn't have heard of him, I don't think. George Vasey. He was a very fine man. We met him and talked to him quite often along the trail because when we got to into the jungle all the officers took off their badge of rank and we were told we were never to address an officer as sir. We'd always call him George or Harry or Bill or whatever his name was. The reason for

31:00 that being if there was a Jap that sneaked up on us and was close by and he saw a chap with three pips on his shoulder or heard us call him, "Sir," he'd be a fine target to get shot. So anyway, Vasey was quite often up with us, which was extraordinary for a general but typical of Vasey. One of our chaps who was no brains by any mean, he was a good bloke and all that, but we were

31:30 near Kokoda and Vasey was there talking to the colonel and a group of other officers. And we said to Hutch, "Hutch go on, he'd know. Go and ask him when we're going home for leave." A general, mind you. Anyway Hutch sidled up to the general and said, "Hey, general, when are we going home on leave? Will we be going home or will we be getting leave?" He came back to us looking very crestfallen. We

32:00 said, "What's the matter, Hutch?" "No chance" he said. We said, "Why?" He said, "He just looked at me and he said, "What's the sense of taking you home to Australia for leave and bringing you back in two months time to take Rabaul." That was Vasey. We never took Rabaul.

You must have had many very special moments in a way out there with the people you were with

32:30 **because you were living in such deprived conditions but so close together. How do you describe the sort of relationships that you developed?**

Very close sometimes, but other times you were too busy worrying about yourself to worry about them. You did develop a close relationship with the… Remember I told you we teamed up into

33:00 groups of threes? You developed a close relationship with that trio. They were very close. Apart from that it wasn't so much. We did share things, what there was to share, and all the rest of it and there were a few jokes, but not too many. You didn't feel like jokes. It was a pretty close relationship, but there were too many things to think

33:30 about.

Were there any opportunities for what you would describe as good times?

On the trail? Yes when you found a potato patch and got some. That's about all. Apart from that, no, there weren't.

What would you describe as the most challenging times during that period of your war experience?

Keeping one foot going in front of the other,

34:00 literally. We all cut ourselves sticks and used walking sticks when we were marching along the trail. You had to to keep your balance and your foot out of the mud and all the rest of it. You just put your head down and looked at the boots of the chap in front of you and kept walking behind him. That's all there was to it. There wasn't any challenge really – well, there was no alternative.

34:30 **Were there moments when you stopped and wondered what you were doing there?**

No. We knew what we were doing we just wondered if we could do it. We knew that if the Jap wasn't stopped that Moresby would fall and then there was nothing left between Australia and the Japanese. That was the situation and we knew it was that

35:00 and that was all there was to it.

So you described to us quite vividly the deprivation and the terrible suffering that everybody was going through. What gave you the strength, do you think, to put that foot forward?

There wasn't anything else to do. What would you do if you didn't do it? Fall down and die.

35:30 It was just a case of keeping going. Nobody had any spare time to look after you. It was just a case if they picked you up and put you on a stretcher and the Fuzzies carried you out. You didn't want that. Anyway, you didn't want to go because, well, everybody had to stay.

36:00 **Did you ever observe anybody who did falter?**

On the trail, no. Only the bloke that came back with the little bruise on his wrist and said he had blood flowing everywhere. No, I never did. Not then, no. The last one I suppose that I heard was the bloke that went AWL when he heard we were leaving Australia.

36:30 **So, on the trail you didn't observe any signs of people exhibiting fear or what you would describe as cowardice?**

No. There was no time for it.

But you yourself said earlier that when you were heading over there that you were scared. You were scared about your own ability to cope. How did you meet your own expectations

37:00 **about yourself?**

Adequately I suppose because like I say, there wasn't any alternative. If you ever stopped to think, you didn't think about doing anything but what was to be done because what were you going to do?

Now the trio that you spoke about, you got close to the trio – who was in your trio?

Bernie and another

37:30 bloke called Billy Chertsey.

So what sort of relationship developed between the three of you?

It was pretty close because we were the ones that shared our biscuits and lit our fire and all the rest of it. All the things you do to keep going we did, and it was pretty good.

On a daily basis, what did it mean with how much time you spent with one another?

Mostly only during the times when we shared our tucker. Our tin of

38:00 bully beef and a packet of biscuits came out and we shared it up and ate it, during that time. That was all. As far as sleeping arrangements were concerned it was pairs. I was with Bernie and Billy – he and Bonny Muderman, I think they palled up together.

What was it like to be with your brother in that sort of situation?

How do you mean?

38:30 **In the sense that it's a very extraordinary situation and you were there with your brother, who obviously you were quite close with, how did that affect your relationship?**

I don't think it made much difference because we were always together. We went to school together and we played tennis together and we worked on the farm together. We cut cane together and we were

39:00 always thrown together. It just continued after I rejoined him in the army. When he went away we were apart for a couple of years, but then we came together again and we stayed together as much as possible.

In that sort of situation, what sort of a comfort was it to have him around?

It was good to have him. It was good to know he was there. When we came

39:30 back after the Lae show he had got consistent bouts of malaria and his health had deteriorated right down. He had been in the army a longer time and had been over to the Middle East. He was boarded B Class and he had to leave the battalion. He stayed in Brisbane for a while at the detention camp there as a clerk and then he was

40:00 boarded out of the army for health reasons. For a while after he left the battalion I did miss him a fair bit. He was quite a steady influence on my young exuberance.

Tape 7

00:35 **I wonder if you could tell me about the mass that you conducted at Gona?**

It wasn't at Gona it was up there, look. Well that was just a mass that was said there. Padre Lynch from Hendra, he was our chaplain at that time. And we had mass two or three times during the

01:00 Stanley show. And we had a photographer who used to come around us occasionally. He was a little insignificant bloke, but he was a good photographer and he was a good brave man. He was right in the go all the time. He was there doing his bit and one of the chaps there he was from brigade and he was a captain and got sick of the fellow and he said, “Listen, I find time to say my

01:30 prayers anyway, but with you clicking all the time.” He said, “Have you got to do this? Have you got permission to do this?” The bloke pointed to Padre Lynch and he said, “He’s the boss isn’t he? He said I could. Is that okay?” “Oh, well that’s okay.” That’s Bernie there serving the mass and there’s another bloke – I’m up in the corner and you can see some shadowy figures right at the back, they are natives, but you can barely make them out.

02:00 **Bernie was doing the mass?**

Serving. In the Catholic church they have an altar service and they assist the priest. He celebrates the mass and they bring him the chalice and all that sort of thing. And at that time it was all in Latin. It has been changed since. And they answer the apportions. The celebrant says the apportions, but the order of service

02:30 says that they say that. He was equipped to do this. He had done this before.

What did the other men think about you going to mass?

That was one of the things about the army. They tolerated and accepted it and didn’t take much notice. Occasionally

03:00 you’d get terms like, “You and your Bible-bashing brother,” but that would be one in 500. I only ever heard that term used once by a bloke I didn’t know. He was in our platoon and he said it to me and I didn’t like him much.

Did men talk much about missing women on that trail?

Yes.

Because with that many men you’d think they’d be

03:30 **missing sex?**

No. They talked about missing women, but mostly it was the married men talking about missing their wives in the most respectful manner. As far as the sex was concerned they didn’t have much inclination for it at that time.

They were just too exhausted?

You got a bit of that when we were camped back at Moresby or up at the

04:00 Tableland and that sort of thing, yes then, but not on the trail. There were too many other things to think of.

What sort of thing would happen when you were back at Moresby? What do you mean by you got a bit of that?

A bit of talk about girls and girls they’d seen and how good it would be to get back to Australia and see girls again and all that gab, but not on the trail, no, we were too busy otherwise.

You were telling us a story before about someone’s

04:30 **gun that went off accidentally – much later on?**

The chap that dropped his Owen gun.

Can you tell us that story because we were sort of in between it, I think?

We were out on patrol and that was up at the Ramu Valley after all the fighting was pretty well over. The Japs had scattered, but they were still around. We went out on patrol and that was after I’d rejoined the battalion. In a clearing way ahead of us

05:00 a couple of hundred yards we spotted this activity. And we knew it wasn’t our blokes. There were little bits of activity going on, and we stopped and the lieutenant sent forward two blokes to get as close as they could and check on what they could without being seen. And we weren’t to engage, we were go back and report back to battalion what they were doing. And one of the scouts had gone forward and one of the

05:30 chaps dropped his Owen gun butt first onto the ground and she went off. Of course that was the end of that. We had to get out as quickly as we could because we could immediately see the flurry or commotion up ahead. The scouts came back in a hurry and we left.

What else happened while you were in that area?

Action wise, nothing. Nothing at all.

06:00 I missed all that – Shaggy Ridge and all that jazz. Bernie tells me the story – Shaggy Ridge was occupied by the Japs and it was very hard to take. Bernie told me the story once that they were camped well back and were there for observation but weren't doing anything about it and, they sent forward two men

06:30 up the road, up the side of the road, to creep up as close as they could and see what they could. There was a false crest before you got to the ridge and you could look over that and you could see. They saw one of the Japs, he told me who it was, but I forget, it wasn't a sig it was a rifleman bloke. We saw him look over and he looked over the

07:00 little ridge and then he looked back again and looked over again. And then we saw him fumble in his belt and pull out a grenade. And we saw him pull the pin out of it and he put his head over and he tossed it onto these Japs that were only just over the ridge. And promptly he and his bloke came back to us straight away and he told us what he'd seen. He said if he had

07:30 had a company or a couple of platoons with him at that moment he could have taken Shaggy Ridge because there were no guards set. There was nothing. Nobody was watching on the road. They were having something to eat. Bernie was telling me. I wasn't there at the time. He said the captain said, "What did you throw the grenade for?" He said, "Just to wake the buggers up and tell them to be more careful in

08:00 future."

What happened after you were there?

We did a few patrols, but that was the only one I went on. Then we pulled out and we came back to Moresby again. Did we come to Moresby? Yes, we came back to Moresby. We got flown back to Moresby.

What was at Moresby? Can you describe the camp at Moresby?

Just before I do,

08:30 there's one more thing I remember that is of interest. After I joined the battalion, joined the platoon again, we were all talking for a while. And then I noticed sitting in a tent there was one chap just sitting on the edge of the bed and he was new to me. I hadn't known him before we'd left. And I said, "Who's that?" They said, "He's come from the Chocos." The Chocos was the

09:00 name they had for the Militia [Citizen's Military Force]. Most of the blokes were all right, but some of them didn't think much of the Chocos as they called them. One of our blokes said, "He's a bloody corporal. He comes to us from the Militia and that'll mean because you're only allowed so many NCOs in a platoon that somebody won't get promotion."

09:30 I said, "He can't help that, can he?" They said, "Oh no, but still." I didn't think that was fair anyway. So I went over to him and I said, "We haven't met since you joined the platoon." He looked up and smiled and he said his name was Rusty Clark. I introduced myself and we sat and talked for a while. He came from Port Fairy, which is down near Melbourne, and as a

10:00 point of interest when he came back after the army he became the mayor of Port Fairy. He has died since. He was a very fine chap and a really proficient sig. He'd only joined the platoon a couple of days before I rejoined it and he knew the feeling of some of the fellows. And when we got back down to Moresby he went straight down to the orderly room and threw his stripes in so he was back to private.

10:30 It was a funny thing because three months later in the next promotions that came through he was promoted straight up to corporal and nobody demurred one bit because by that time we'd realised what a great bloke Rusty was and how very much more efficient at his job he was than a lot of us were, so that all worked out all right.

What did people say when he threw his stripes in?

11:00 Nothing much – they didn't say much. Some said he was silly to do it and some said, "Oh well, so he should have," and some didn't say anything at all.

You were promoted as well. Did it change for you when you were promoted?

Lance Corporal – one stripe, yes. 'Glorified privates' they called us. It didn't make any difference to your pay. When you became a corporal you got two shillings a day extra, but being lance corporal you didn't get

11:30 anything extra.

What was the base at Port Moresby like?

It was just like an army camp. There were six men to a tent and they were camped all over the place. You did your drills and lectures and sport and all that sort of thing. It was just the same as if you were in

12:00 Australia.

Can you describe a little bit more about what you could see in the camp? How many tents were here on average?

There were six privates to a tent. The officers had a tent to themselves in their battalion, but privates and corporals were six to a tent. Sergeants, I don't know. There was

12:30 897 men to a battalion. That was at full strength. So you can work it out for yourself how many tents there were. There would be about 100 tents for the privates and maybe another 50 for the officers because they had one tent to each person. Yes, about five or six hundred tents I

13:00 suppose.

Can you remember how long you were in Port Moresby before you went on to the next stage?

Before we went to…

Balikpapan?

No, we never went to Moresby before we went to Balikpapan. We went straight to Balikpapan from here. But when we went up the second time to go to Lae, to do the Lae show, I'd have a rough guess at two months.

13:30 Don't quote that – well you'll have to quote it I suppose – I wouldn't know, but that would be my guess.

Did it get frustrating waiting there for so long to do something?

No, not much because we had to do what was there and we played a lot of sport. They encouraged that and that was the idea so we didn't get into trouble. There was a lot of

14:00 talk during that time and later on about dissension between the Americans and the Australians, but we never found it so. We were camped near Port Moresby, not in the town, but well out, we were camped right next to the 2/5th American Air Force. And when we went there we were told not to fraternise with the Americans because it could only cause trouble and not to go into their lines.

14:30 It only lasted about a week and then we were walking through their lines freely and they were coming to us and there was never any trouble. I remember, going back a bit, we were out with Captain Petrie and we were out doing a stunt out towards Bald Hills and we stopped for the night, and of course somebody started a game of two-up. We were playing two-up and there was an American camp close by and two Yanks came over and said,

15:00 "What's this game, buddy?" We said, "We toss the penny." And show them. "Ah – can we have a game? Can we join in?" All our thoughts were of this beautiful American money and we'd get it quick and lively. Yes, like hell we did. Twenty minutes they walked off and the game broke up. They had all our money. They took the lot of it. I never saw such a run. And to add insult to injury one of the blokes said… You had special pennies for two-up

15:30 all polished up and the queen's head on one side and he wanted to buy them off the bloke. He said, "I'd like to teach my brother how to play that game." We didn't sell it to him and they walked off with all our money and we thought we were going to take theirs.

So you got on pretty well with the American soldiers in New Guinea?

Yes. I believe there were some troubles in Brisbane

16:00 but that was back with the base people and they were a different breed.

Did you come across any Negro American soldiers?

Oh yes. When we were up at Koitake at the con camp we would sometimes come down to Port Moresby to just look around and go back. We'd thumb a ride down. We

16:30 thumbed a ride with an American truck and there was an American Negro driving the truck. He said, "Yeah, get in buddy." I got scared. He was the most hair-raising driver I'd ever met. And the roads up there are curly and they go around like that and I thought I'd die before we got to Port Moresby. And he pulled up and we said, "We want to go buddy. Would you listen to us?" and we got out.

17:00 We had a fair bit to do with them. There was a lot of discrimination from the white American soldiers, a lot.

How did you know that?

By the way the white Americans soldiers spoke of them and by the fact that they didn't mix. They were there and they were there. They were big fellows.

17:30 I think it was on the way to Balikpapan we stopped at Biak, the island of Biak, and we were camped and it was close by and we stopped one night there. And they were unloading depth charges. These long things, round things. And they were unloading them off a truck

and they were rolling them down and they'd roll them off and on to the truck. But when they got to the last one they couldn't roll it down. They had to take the things right out to drop it on to the truck and it had to drop about this far. And there was no way the darkies would be in it. They wouldn't drop a

depth charge that far. And the officer said, "Ah," and he jumped up into the thing and he grabbed the depth charge and he rolled it down himself. And you never saw so much movement, 'zoom, zoom, zoom'. All you could see black faces looking up from behind palm trees to see what happened. It was all right. Nothing happened.

Can you tell us what happened when you left New Guinea and you came home the second time before you went to Balikpapan?

We came home and went to Petrie. That was when I met my wife because she was staying at this house. Hothams their name was and they lived out at Lutwyche. Do you know that area at all? You know the Imperial Theatre? Yes, well about 200 yards from the Imperial Theatre and that was where she

stayed and that was where I met her. We were at Petrie and it was during that period too that we met that lady that was school teaching before. We were camped at Petrie there for quite a while and then we got sent up to the Tableland again.

You met the lady that was school teaching from Proserpine?

Yes.

So you met both?

In Petrie, yes, from that little school there.

And what appealed to you about

Joan? What did you like about her?

Her cooking. I don't know – what appeals to you about any girl when you meet her? I don't know. It wasn't a mistake anyway.

You've been together a long time?

57 years, yes.

Did you continue to write to Joan after that?

Yes, I wrote to her when I was up in the Tableland and then when we sailed for

Balikpapan I wrote to her after things calmed down a bit I wrote to her. And I was in Balikpapan when the war was over.

When you first met Joan did you manage to have time to take her out while you were here?

No, that was the funny part about it. There were a lot of young people that used to come to that

house and we used to do things, we used to go and play tennis and things like that and I knew how I felt, but I never had a chance to tell her. I don't know what she felt at that time, but I didn't get a chance to talk to her until the night I proposed to her. We got engaged the first night I went out and I didn't actually take her out that night because there was a group of us. And I couldn't dance and I still can't. And she loves

dancing and a lot of us used were going to go to the dance at Trades Hall in town. But the others, something happened to all of them and it finished up only Joan and I going with a couple of the girls she knew in town. And we went to the dance and that was the first time I'd ever seen her on her own.

And you proposed to her that night?

Well I had to because I told myself I wasn't going to get another chance and that was that.

So how long did you know her before you proposed?

Three months or four months. I'd tasted her cooking.

What did she cook?

She didn't cook for me, but I did eat some of her cooking. They stayed at this place and they did their own cooking. She and her sister did their own cooking and Nola didn't like cooking much so Joan did most of it. Sometimes I ate her cooking and it was good.

Did you find it easy to talk to Joan at that time about what you'd experienced?

No, I didn't. I didn't talk about it at all with that family. There was a widowed mother and the daughter was about 16, I think, and the twins were about 12 or something. They went to Grooby Terrace school. I used to go out to the football matches and they'd come on in black and red

23:00 and all the rest of it. No I talked about it as little as possible. That wasn't the place.

Do you remember how you proposed?

Yes, but I'm not going to tell you about that.

So you were in Brisbane for three months?

No. I don't know how long we were there and then

23:30 we got moved up to the Tableland again. I fail to remember how long. I know we were there for quite some time, but how long I don't know.

What was your feeling about going back to New Guinea?

We didn't go there.

Well going back to any kind of conflict?

Well we knew the war was on and we knew we'd probably see action again and we accepted it. Going back a little bit, there was one other time

24:00 during the Coral Sea Battle. Our battalion was made responsible for communications. They were afraid of the invasion and we had to

24:30 set up stations all down the coast with Lucas lamps just for emergencies. We had one in the water tower at Woody Point. Do you know where that is? And you know where Mura Park is out at Sandy Gate – it's right up on the point there, there is a place called Mura Park. And we were sent there. Bernie and I and Billy Chertsey again. We were

25:00 sent there and all our job was… There was a rotunda in the park there and we lived in there and camped in there. We got our meals sent down to us from Petrie from the battalion and all we had to do was call up Woody Point every day and establish communication. That was all we had to do. It was really good fun. And like I was telling you about tennis courts, there was a big house just across the street

25:30 and behind it there was a lawn tennis court. I'd never played on one. And we had our tennis racquets with us and a couple of division sigs they had their tennis racquets, so we reckoned we had nothing to lose. So we went up and knocked on the front door and a big chap with a checked cap came out and said, "Hello." We told him what we were and where we were and all the rest of it. And we said, "We see you've got a lawn court in the back. Do you think we could play?"

26:00 "Yes of course you can," he said. "I'll get the mower out and I'll give it a mow." He got the mower out and he gave it a mow and we played tennis for half the day. We were doing it real good. His name was Minnerman and we found out he was one of Brisbane's big bookmakers. We enjoyed ourselves very much when we were there.

26:30 Where did we come from Balik? The war finished at Balik.

Can you describe going up to Balik and what you had to do? You went to Atherton before that?

We were up at Kirai actually.

What were you doing up there.

The same old thing – training. A lot of sport and all those sorts of things and generally

27:00 not having too bad a time.

What happened then? Did you know what you were going to do at Balikpapan?

No we didn't. We embarked at Townsville and we knew that we were going up to the islands again. And we took it for granted we were going to New Guinea, but we soon found out we weren't. And they had meetings of all the NCOs,

27:30 of which I was a lowly one being a lance corporal, and they briefed us on what we would do. We called at Lae and Biak and went on to Balikpapan and did the landing there.

And what was involved in the briefing? What exactly happened?

We were told that we were going to Borneo, to Balikpapan, and we were to go and there and recapture it. We would be landing right at Balikpapan and the 9th Division would be coming in from the

28:00 north and together we would be retaking Borneo. That was Dutch Borneo. We were paid in guilders then. Guilders then were back then better than the dollar. We knew then we were going there.

When they do a briefing

28:30 **does one person do a briefing and is everybody there? How does that happen?**

They brief the NCOs and tell them what will be happening and tell them what they can tell the privates,

because they don't tell them everything. To put you in the picture, they'd called it to say what would be happening, but Balik was bombed out of all existence before we got there. They bombed it for 39 days before we landed. We met very little resistance in

29:00 Balik. There were a few mortar shells landing and the Japs had retired to the foothills behind Balikpapan.

What was involved on the day that you landed there?

When we landed we just had to land and establish a foothold there and then after that came the tough part. We had to chased the Jap and root him out of all his strongholds around the hills around

29:30 Balikpapan. I said to Bernie, "This is blooming Borneo over again." He said, "Yeah, I know." Not Bernie, it couldn't have been because he wasn't with us. He'd left us by this time. I said to one of the others, "This is Borneo over again." He said, "Yes, I know.

In what way? Can you describe that a little bit more?

It was pretty awkward because the Japanese, he was a very

30:00 obstinate sort of a bloke. If he didn't want to leave a place he wouldn't leave it. It was very hard. We fought our way from one ridge to another all around the place. And this is what we were doing when they dropped the bomb, the other bomb, and the war finished. I was on the phone the night they dropped it, we got word they dropped it. Actually we were in action for quite a while I suppose, for three weeks or so.

30:30 We'd landed and there was no opposition really, but the opposition increased the further we went into the hills to try and clear all the spaces. The town was practically bombed out of existence. All the oil wells were buckled and broken.

31:00 I was there and then word came through that they'd dropped the bomb and the Japanese had capitulated. They dropped two, one after the other, but it was after the second one that it came through and we heard about it. And I remember when the news broke down in the town where all the navy was, all of the navy guns opened up.

31:30 **When you first heard about the atom bomb what happened at that point? What was the reaction amongst the men?**

Sheer relief as far as I was concerned personally. Absolute complete and utter relief well that I was safe

32:00 now and there wasn't any war, although it wasn't entirely that because some of the Japs didn't know about it until a while afterwards. They had to drop leaflets and things and tell them that they weren't fighting them any more and all the rest of it. But we never went into action after that at all so that was sheer relief. I know there was, and still is, feelings on the atom bombs. Some people say it was the most cowardly act in history

32:30 and I don't take that point of view. There are two points of view as far as I am concerned. One was personal. There was I. I was in Borneo and in imminent danger of having my head shot off by the first Jap that got me in his sight. Back home I had a brother and a mother, two sisters and a father and a girl who had promised to marry me when I came back. All the world. After they dropped the bomb and they capitulated I knew I'd get back

33:00 home, so it was sheer relief. The other point of view, of course, is that the bomb killed 236,000 Japanese and a lot of them were civilian. Yes, it did, but we listened to Tokyo Rose on the thing and she was telling us how we'd never beat Japan. "You might take a few islands," she said, "but you won't ever beat

33:30 Japan." She said, "Japan is preparing itself for a 100 year war if necessary." This was her attitude. We didn't think it would take 100 years, but our best thinktanks at that time, they figured that it would take about 2½ years before the war would finish. We would win and we were on the way to winning, but at the rate we were going it would take about 2½ years. At the rate we were going we were losing in the Pacific war, us and the Americans and Dutch,

34:00 were losing about 200 men a day. Well take 2½ years and that's 700-odd days and 200 men a day that we'd lose – but that was only in the war zone. Then there was the war in China and that was going on too, and then you add to that the war in Burma and other places. And then most important was our

34:30 own prisoners of war which were being badly treated and the sooner we could get some of them out the better and all the rest of it. And it added up to hundreds of thousands of lives, but that was only on our side. When we were approaching Japan there would be big bombing raids under ordinary bombs and there would be 7,000 or 8,000 people die. Set that against the 236,000 that died with the other

35:00 bomb and we were still better off. That was the view I took of it anyway, and still take.

When you were first in that lecture where they had the communist guy talk about killing Japanese…?

That was only one man, Julius.

Had your view changed, because at that point you had a view of not really going along with him that much. Did you change at all?

No it didn't. I never, ever entertained a personal

35:30 hatred of the Japanese. I didn't like somebody. You didn't have to like somebody that's trying to shoot you, but I didn't… I remember at Gona we captured a diary – not a diary, a letter – that a Japanese was writing home when he was killed. It was in Japanese, but we

36:00 got a member of our intelligence section to decipher it and read it to us. And it read so like a letter that I would be writing home. It was just the same. And I thought, "Well, they're just people." I never changed and even now today I've got no hang up about Japanese. I wouldn't trust the buggers.

How did you feel about firing on them?

I never fired a shot. I never fired a

36:30 shot in the war, but I would have done it without compunction because it is self defence, but I had no occasion to do so.

What did you think about Balikpapan when you were there? How different was that scenario to what you'd experienced before?

The warfare and the type? It was a war of attrition when we were there.

37:00 He had retreated from the town and the town was ours, what was left of it. And he was in the hills around and we had to find him or shift him or kill him or get rid of him or do something about him. There were some bitter engagements.

What about the local people? Were they happy for you to be there?

The natives were, yes. We didn't understand their lingo

37:30 but I'd say so yes because we fraternised a good deal with them between the time the war finished, because it finished while we were there, and the time that we all left. We had pretty friendly relations with them all at that time.

So where were you exactly when you heard that the war was over?

In Balikpapan.

Do you remember what happened?

38:00 As I say, I was on the switch at that time because when we were out chasing the Japanese it was a bit like the Owen Stanleys and where we had no communication or anything like that., but when we pulled out from the back line and another battalion had gone in and we were back at rest and recreation for a couple of days. And it was while we were back there that… I'm laughing because I remember what

38:30 happened. After the war was over our dominant fear was we'd get…something would happen to us by accident or some Jap might not hear about the war being over and to get killed after the war was over… I got more scared then than I was when it was on.

39:00 We were in bed this night and Mick Baddick, he was one of the blokes, remember? And Possum was there and a few of the others, and we heard Mick in his bed and he was saying, "He's under the bed, he's under the bed." And he was asleep. And Possum said, "Who's under the bed?" And he said, "The Jap. Can't you

39:30 see him, can't you hear him?" The room, like, there was like there was nothing in it, but you'd believe it. I heard Possum grab… He had the Owen gun and I heard him pick up his Owen gun and cock it and I said, "Possum, put that away. There's nothing there." He said, "He's under the bed, he's under the bed." Anyway he was having a nightmare. And

40:00 then he let out a terrific scream and he went out of the bed and took his mosquito net with him and headed down into the scrub screaming his head off. The aftermath of the dream was that he was running away from this Jap that was under the bed. It took us about half an hour to find him in the scrub and bring him back to camp again.

We'll stop you there.

Tape 8

00:33 **I wanted to ask you, Neville, we have heard some criticism about the campaign in Balikpapan because that was the last of the Borneo campaigns. What is your view about that or what was your view at that time?**

I have heard that too from people who weren't even born at that time. They are entitled to their

01:00 view. Some say that it was because Blamey was starting to think that the Americans were taking all the glory in retaking the Philippines and so on and his men weren't getting any, but I don't know whether that is true or not. And that MacArthur said, "All right, you can take Balikpapan in Borneo," and I've heard that. Other say they would have just left it there to have withered against the vine and just bypassed it and go on.

01:30 My argument against that is twofold. It was necessary to take Balikpapan because having Borneo there like that it left all our eastern flank open all the time. The second was that it was it was a big oil producing centre and the more you can deprive the enemy of oil… Oil is the centre of war, and if you can deprive the enemy of oil then you are halfway

02:00 there. The third and the most telling was in my book was that why shouldn't we take Balikpapan and do something about our POWs [Prisoners of War] who were in Kuching and those places there and get them out of it as soon as we could without them being brutalised and starved and dying of fever and God knows what? After all we did owe them something, didn't we? So even for that reason alone I would say that it was worthwhile, a worthwhile campaign, yes.

02:30 **When you arrived there it had already been severely bombed. Can you describe what you saw?**

Yes, I saw oil tanks with sides an inch thick crumpled down with the heat. The bombing and the heat had been so intense when the oil caught fire and all the rest of it. The town itself was utter desolation and

03:00 that describes the town. It was complete desolation when we arrived there after 39 days of bombing.

You said you didn't really meet any resistance. Did you have any resistance at all?

Only a few mortars. A few of the Japs had established themselves along the coast a little bit away from the town and they mortared us as we were landing from our

03:30 LCIs – Landing Craft Infantry. And they backed in as far as they could go and dropped a tailboard and you had to jump out into 3 or 4 feet of water and wade ashore. While we were doing that they dropped a few mortars, but it didn't do much damage. It did a bit, I suppose.

That must have been quite a situation for you. How would you describe that in terms of

04:00 **battles that you'd been in?**

Well it was something entirely new and things happened. I remember these blokes on the next LCI to us, they took their mortars with them. They had the big base plate with them and that was pretty heavy, and they put that over their shoulders and carried the barrel. And they stepped off the back and waded ashore carrying these things. And this LCI had landed alongside a big hole in the

04:30 water, and it was deep water. And instead of him wading into four feet with this base plate on his shoulders, he just stepped into about 15 feet of water and just went down and he was drowned and they couldn't do anything about it. He had the base plate tied to his shoulders and he couldn't get up. I remember that.

How unnerving was it before you got off the LCI? What were you thinking in that situation?

05:00 Well it was a bit because we didn't know how much resistance we'd meet, and we'd never taken part in a landing before so we were a bit fearful of what would happen.

As you got off and you were being mortared, what is going through your

05:30 **head at the moment?**

Well get to the beach as quick as you can and get up into those trees so you are under cover. That was the thing we had to do.

And as you are doing that, you are seeing people like this fellow drown?

That was an isolated case.

Were there other casualties?

Yes there were some, but we never even saw them. You just forged ahead and didn't see them, but there

06:30 weren't many.

I guess you just focused on getting ahead and didn't have time to be watching.

When you are carrying about 100 pounds of packing and so on and your rifle and you've got to jump into 4 foot of water and wade 100 or 150 yards to shore not quite knowing who was there to greet you, you haven't got too much time to think about anything else – you just do it.

07:00 As a point of interest we did find… After the war was over one of our patrols went up the coast a bit and

up the coast they found a big placement of guns, big guns, bigger than 25s or anything like that. And they were all pointing out to sea and they were Japanese guns. They couldn't traverse. They couldn't bring themselves round to the beach at Balik. If they had they would have been able to make mincemeat of out ships. But they couldn't fire on us. We found them up there and their ammunition still not used. They never used them.

How close did you come in terms of any personal contact with any Japanese soldiers?

07:30 I suppose it was only a matter of a few hundred yards. Once at Gona we came close, but there wasn't any action. Our company at Gona, Haddy's company were just across the creek, they were across the creek and we were on this side of it, but there was a lot of vegetation in between.

08:00 Haddy's company, when they joined us they went round up the creek, forded the creek and took up a position on down the side, but they were out of communication with us because they had no sigs with them. Dick Fletcher and I were ordered to go out and follow up their trail and find out where they were so we could come back and guide the sigs to take them out a telephone line. We couldn't find where they crossed the creek

08:30 and we headed back down the creek towards the coast looking for the place where they'd crossed to see some sign of where they'd crossed. And we kept on walking down the creek and kept on getting slower and more careful and more careful until we heard 'jabber, jabber, jabber' in the bushes ahead of us about 10 yards. And it wasn't in English, it was in Japanese. And that was the closest contact I ever had. Of course we didn't stay there too long, we

09:00 backed out. But that was about the closest apart from Gorari.

On Balikpapan after the war ended was there any sort of surrender there? Were you witness to any of that?

Yes. The Japs did come in. We were in charge of a lot of POWs and we were in charge of them when they were

09:30 building. We had a lot of contact with the Japs at that time.

How did you find that personal contact with them?

Quite all right. We used have a laugh with some of them. There was one isolated case of cruelty to the Japanese prisoners by one member of our battalion. And he was discovered ill-treating prisoners of his working company, in his company, and he was very

10:00 promptly told that that was not on and there wasn't to be anything like that and that never happened again.

Could you tell us a little bit more about that about what he had done?

He had flogged them with bits of fencing wire. He didn't flog them, but he hit them across the shoulders and so on. They were building a camp for themselves and he was urging them on to work and hitting them across the shoulders, but he wasn't actually giving them a flogging with the

10:30 piece of wire, but he was hitting them with it. He was a corporal, too, and he was told that that wasn't to be.

And that was the only incident?

That's the only incident that I have any knowledge at all of Japanese prisoners being ill-treated by our men.

So you said that you actually had a bit of a laugh with some of them?

We did. There was one bloke there

11:00 and they used to work around our camp and they used to get him to do little jobs for them. And they called him Umbry. They didn't know what his name was. And he was always laughing, this bloke, and one of their favourite tricks was all of a sudden they'd go, "Umbry," and they used to laugh because he'd jump to attention and laugh. There wasn't much else because lots of those fellows that were captured, they weren't

11:30 soldiers at all. They were Koreans from their workforce. They'd really taken no part in the war at all – they were just forced labour.

So how many POWs do you think you would have had there?

I'd be only guessing now, but I'd say several hundred.

And what was the condition of those people, the physical condition?

Pretty good. They'd had no…

12:00 Until we landed they'd had no part in the war at all. They'd just been stationed at Balikpapan garrison

and looking after the place and looking after the oil wells and all that sort of thing.

With all that bombing that had gone on there, and I know that there were in fact Allied casualties there as well, what did you observe, if anything, of the deaths on Balikpapan?

We saw one plane go down, one Australian plane.

12:30 It seemed to have been hit by something and we saw a big cloud of smoke and a big explosion. That was all we saw, really. During the war after we landed and during the fights we had to get him off the ridges and so on there were a fair few casualties there on his side and on our side. A bit of bombing went

13:00 on and there were a few attacks and there was a fair bit of fighting.

How did you deal with being so close to people being so seriously wounded and being killed?

You got used to it I suppose, but we didn't see a great deal of it because our stretcher bearers handled most of

13:30 those and they were hurried past us to the nearest medical dressing place or wherever they could. Those that were killed were buried immediately. They had to be, of course. There was just a hole dug and a marker put up where they were buried.

Did you participate in any of those burials?

No.

14:00 **I remember you saying that the first time that the war really hit home to you was when you saw that chap coming out on a stretcher. After that, when you would have seen a lot more of that, how would you describe the way you'd become accustomed to that?**

It's like you become accustomed to anything. Familiarity breeds contempt. You just accepted it – it

14:30 happened. Like if somebody copped it yesterday. The first casualty our platoon had in the Stanleys was not due to enemy action at all. It was a chap called Dick Waugh and he was a big chap, 6 foot tall, good looking and a married man with two kids. After we were two days into the Stanleys,

15:00 Dick developed peritonitis. He had appendicitis and he probably had pains and didn't say anything and he got peritonitis, and of course there was nothing that could be done. We had a doctor, but he couldn't operate. They just put him on a stretcher and sent him back to Moresby and he either died on the way back to Moresby or else when they got him into hospital at Moresby. That was the first casualty

15:30 from our own platoon.

And D Company, you lost so many men through an incident that wasn't involving enemy fire with the accident with the plane, the American plane that came down on your company.

That's right, 78 of us then.

What actually happened to D Company after that?

Don Company?

16:00 Well it didn't take part. The few people that were left fit to fight, a lot of them were left back in LOB because they weren't fit to fight anyway, although physically they weren't too bad, but mentally they were in a pretty bad state. It formed again afterwards. It got reinforcements and reformed as a company. It fought again, that was before

16:30 Lae, and Don Company was Don Company again before we got back to – it never went over to Lae as a company. A few of them who were mentally and physically capable of fighting got sent to the other companies, A, B and C Company, and the others reformed the company again after the Lae show was over. They reformed the company again and it got reinforcements and it was a

17:00 totally new mob.

What sort of lasting aftermath did that incident have on the men in that company and the battalion?

Not a great deal, no, not a great deal. It was always remembered, vividly remember, but it never had any affect on the morale or anything like that that I could ever see.

Was there any view that the troops have regarding an incident that was not actually involving enemy fire,

17:30 **effectively an accident, did the troops view that sort of accident differently in any sense?**

No. It was regrettable, but these things happened. They've happened in every war. People say that in France there were more people killed by our own bullets than by the enemy. I remember in Balik

18:00 a plane, I'm not sure where it came from, but it came from somewhere, but an enemy aeroplane strafed

the jeep that our brigadier was in and he had to get out in a hurry and get out of the road. No, that's right, it wasn't an enemy plane it was one of our own planes.

18:30 That was why I remembered it. And that jeep that he was in was not supposed to be where it was. He had gone one square too far and he was close to the enemy's lines and this plane mistook him for a Japanese jeep, and being so close to the enemy's lines and there wasn't supposed to be any of our blokes there, so they shot his jeep up. It served him

19:00 right for being in the wrong place. He didn't get hurt except his dignity.

So it is just accepted that that kind of thing is part of war?

Yes, regrettable and sad, but, yes, it happened.

One thing I meant to ask you about earlier was about the Fuzzy-Wuzzies. What was your view of them and what did you observe about them?

They were tremendous. They really were. They

19:30 saved an awful lot of lives. They did a job that we couldn't have done. Even if we could have spared the men to have done we couldn't have done it because they were barefooted and surefooted, and four men to a stretcher. When I saw a stretcher, the stretcher was simply limbs cut from a tree and a blanket on it and tied with bits of sig wire. And the blokes laid on the blanket and two Fuzzy-Wuzzies at the

20:00 back and the front and they'd carry them out. And they were surefooted and as far as I know they never dropped anybody and they must have saved an awful lot of lives. We had a great respect for them and a great liking for them.

What were they like?

Physically?

Their character and physically, both?

Well culturally I don't know because we didn't have enough to do with them to know. Physically,

20:30 they were pretty good physical specimens. They were pretty big, some of them, and they were practically the only ones. We saw some others occasionally, but as I say, they had ordered us back on the trail, but we did see the Fuzzy-Wuzzies that carried a lot of us out.

I have heard some people say that they haven't been sufficiently thanked for their part in the war,

21:00 **what is your view on that?**

It could be true. I don't know that it is true, but I'd say that it was entirely possible. We saw a documentary on it and they were talking to one of the few descendants of the Fuzzy-Wuzzies living. And this old chap was there talking on the TV and the burden of his song was, "Never got paid, never got paid." He reckoned the Australian government never paid

21:30 him. They did give them some recompense after the war, those that they could sort out who did it, but this bloke had been overlooked and had never got paid.

So you didn't have any really close personal contact with them at all?

Not them no, not really no beyond putting some of our chaps into the stretchers for them. They'd usually go in parties of twelve, three stretchers, with four men to each with

22:00 one white person in charge. And the white person would usually be somebody, a non combatant, who lived in that area and knew the natives and could speak the language, and they would oversee them taking the wounded out.

So going back to Balikpapan, how long were you there after the war waiting to get home?

22:30 Quite a while. At one stage there they sent a company from our battalion around to Pontianak. Now Pontianak is the capital – Balik is on the east coast of

23:00 Borneo and Pontianak is around the bottom on the west coast. We went around there to liberate it. We went around in a frigate, I forget the name of it, but this company took us around anyway. And we went round there and I remember we slept up on deck and I remember it was

23:30 quite pleasant. And it was night and we heard the anchor go down, rattling, and I said to one of the fellows, "What's doing?" and he said, "As far as we're concerned this is uncharted waters. We've no maps of these waters for years now so we'll just wait until it is daylight." And when it was daylight, 400 yards ahead of us there were all the breakers

24:00 breaking on a reef right in our path. They must have had some idea that it was there. Anyway we got round from Balik to Pontianak and we unloaded there at the deck. And there was a bloke named

Trigger, some bloke talking to our captain, the captain in charge of our company. And we were lined up there and he said, “RCs [Roman Catholics] fall out.”

24:30 That was Roman Catholics. And I suppose there were about 30 or 40 of us and we all fall out and he said, “The Bishop of Pontianak is here and he’d like to have a word with you.” So he retired and the bishop came and talked to us. He was a Dutchman, but he could speak English. And he just wanted to welcome us and tell us that if anybody wanted to go down and see him they’d be welcome and all the rest of it.

25:00 Anyway, there was Paddy Stollard and I and another chap called Butch McGuire. The next day there wasn’t much doing and we decided we’d go around and see this old bishop and have a talk to him. And all there was there was one bishop, one priest and a sister. The priest and the sister were Javanese and the

25:30 Bishop was black. And they were talking to us and it was most illuminating. He said that before the Japanese came he said they had two schools and two hospital and 60 nuns and about 40 Christian Brothers teaching there. I said, “And there’s only you left now?” “Yeah that’s all.”

26:00 “Well, where are the others?” He said, “Well, some were killed and some went to where even the Japanese won’t follow them.” And I said, “Where’s that?” And he said, “A leper colony about 40 miles inland.” They went to the leper colony and the Japs wanted no part of that so they didn’t follow them. And he told us that he had not been back there, but he went back while we were there to see what, if anything, was left of his

26:30 teachers and priests and so on. And I said, “What will you do?” “We’ll start again.” He was 74 years old and he’d start again. We had a good time there. Everybody thought we were heroes, but we didn’t do anything. We stayed there I don’t know how long, maybe eight or nine days, and came back to Balik.

On Balikpapan there must have been some graves with the

27:00 **Japanese dead. We have heard stories in some places of people collecting souvenirs from the enemy dead. Did you hear of anything like that happened there?**

That happened all along. If an Australian soldier came across a Japanese officer that had been killed and he still had his sword they took it.

27:30 I had a Japanese sword for a while and I carried it around for a while. I didn’t take it off anybody, but it did happen. Where was that? That was at Balik. And we found it hard to dig them out of the place there, but we did. I was with the company that took the place and everybody spread out looking for souvenirs. That was what they did. They spread out looking for souvenirs. And Possum again was with me at that time and he found

28:00 two swords and he gave me one. I didn’t have time because I was too busy doing what we should have been doing and not getting souvenirs. He gave me this sword, this great big long thing, and I carried it around for about a fortnight I suppose until I got sick of it and an American bloke offered me 10 guilders for it and I gave it to him. I didn’t want it. But they used to polish it up and take it home and tell them it was a samurai

28:30 sword belonging to a high-ranking Japanese officer and all this sort of stuff. They used to do that.

What other souvenirs did people take?

Anything – watches and revolvers – anything with a souvenir value.

What about body parts? We’ve heard stories about that.

No. What parts of the body? No. To my knowledge that never, ever happened and I couldn’t conceive that

29:00 that would be. I can say with certainty that to the best of my knowledge it never, ever happened and I wouldn’t think that it would be possible that it would have, not in the Australian Army anyway.

How eager were you when you were waiting there, how eager were you to get home?

That is a bit funny. We were all eager to get home you see, but first of all they had the

29:30 five year plan. They had a plan. The army has always got a plan. The five year plan was that anybody who had been in the army five years had first priority to get sent home. After that the married men, that was the second phase that would get sent home. And after that it was the rest of us. I was one of the after that’s because I wasn’t married and I hadn’t been in the army five years. And everybody was keen to get home and of course it was at that

30:00 time that they called for volunteers to go with the army to Japan, the occupying army. And some of our fellows went – they could see a pretty good time so they went. And then some of them were sent to other places to liberate. Rabaul was one. We were sent from Balik to Rabaul and Paddy Stollard,

30:30 a young mate of mine that I’ve mentioned before, he was one of those that was ordered to Rabaul. That

meant of course that he was going to be there a lot longer because he was on garrison duty. There was the five year plan – the married men's plan and then us. We didn't do anything. We played a lot of sport and all the rest of it, but yes, we were very keen to get home, very keen.

And when did that

31:00 **finally happen?**

Blow me down, I don't know. That was the 15th of August, wasn't it, that war was finished? I would say, guessing, that in September the five year men went home and in October the married men went home, and from then on until January

31:30 1946 the rest of us were dribbled home. And it was an entirely different voyage because for the first time while on board ship we had all the lights on. It made it very different.

So what was that like that trip home?

It was pretty good.

Did you get home for Christmas?

No. As I remember we had Christmas in Balik, the last of us.

32:00 A lot of us had gone home, but the last lot, we all had Christmas in Balik.

So when you arrived home can you describe that for us meeting Joan and your family?

I didn't meet the family because we berthed in Brisbane and I was sent to Victoria Barracks. That was out near Victoria Park there.

32:30 You probably know where that is, up from the hospital. And I went there awaiting demobilisation and Joan was not in Brisbane at that time. She had left Brisbane and gone home – no wait a minute – I must have come home before Christmas because all her family and all her relations used to go down to Rainbow Bay and stay there over Christmas.

33:00 And she was down there at that time. I went down after I'd been in Brisbane a few days. I knew she was down there and I went down to see her down there. And boy, I was so scrawny. She must have wondered what she'd struck because I was a pretty scrawny looking object, I can tell you. We were all skinny. That was the first time I saw

33:30 her after.

What was that like after all that time and the war was finally over?

It was a bit emotional I suppose, but we weren't very emotional because she had all her relations around. All her uncles and aunts and the rest of it and we weren't going to put on any show for them. So it wasn't as emotional as you might think it would have been. I had weekend leave and I stayed there for a couple of

34:00 nights and then went back to Brisbane. I went down a few more times and then came home.

And when you came home to see your family again?

That was good. That was good, yes. Mum and Dad were still alive, both of them. We'd sold the farm and they were living two or three miles out of town. I went to live with them. Bernie had married. He had married

34:30 before we went to Balik and he had come up here and he was working.

How hard was it for you to adjust to being back in Australia in a sort of civilian life?

Not very hard, not for me anyway. I went back to working in the sugar mill and that was in 1946 and

35:00 we didn't get married until January 1947. And Joan was in Brisbane at that time and I was up here. I adjusted pretty well and I got to know all the people again that I had known before and slipped back into the old town ways. Because it was a little town, you knew most people. No, I didn't find it hard to adjust.

How long did it take you to recover physically?

35:30 In the main about a year I suppose before I really got back to feeling like eating properly and all that again. It was about a year. My back still caused me a lot of trouble and it still does, but apart from that I had no ill affects I don't think.

36:00 **What about emotionally? Did you find yourself…?**

I was too busy playing cricket and tennis and all that sort of thing to let that worry me. It never did worry me, the emotional side of it, getting back. The only emotion I used to show was I used to get angry when people used to say it wasn't necessary to drop the atom bomb and that we shouldn't have

landed at Balikpapan and things like that, and they never

36:30 knew what it was all about. They weren't even born then most of them and I used to get a bit annoyed about that sometimes.

You didn't find yourself having dreams or nightmares about the war when you returned?

Yes. I still do sometimes, but nothing too bad.

What sort of dreams?

Just dreaming that you're somewhere and things are happening and it's caused by something that you've seen on TV or something that you might…

37:00 Just little connections and just fleeting dreams, that's all, and not very often – very rarely. There wasn't much of them, a bit after the war, but not much. I dreamed about… For a while during the war I dreamed about the plane crash several times, but not after the war.

And those dreams then that you had then about the plane crash, what sort of dreams were they?

They were just dreams of what had happened,

37:30 what had really happened. You'd wake up sitting up in bed panting your heart out. But it was all right. It never lasted and you'd go back to sleep again.

So when you got married can you tell us a little bit about the wedding?

We got married in Tinting. It was a little wedding with only about 40 people, that's all. They were Joan's friends because none of my friends were able to get down. We were still searching for a penny.

38:00 Mum and Dad couldn't have made the trip anyway, and Paddy Stollard was in Brisbane and he came up from Brisbane to be my best man. He was the only one of my friends at that wedding. The others were all the old dairy farmers and friends of Joan's people and the people that lived in the town.

38:30 The publican and his wife and the people from up on the hill behind Frank and Eadie's place and all those people came. It was very friendly and very homely and very bushy. It was what I was used to.

And were you able to have a honeymoon?

No. I'd always told my wife that when we got married I take her on a

39:00 honeymoon in Brisbane. It didn't work out that way because I had to get back here to start work and she's never let me forget that. We had two days in Gympie and that was all we had, and then we came home.

And you continued working in the mill?

Yes, I was working in the mill at that time.

So you didn't find it difficult at all to adjust to life back in Australia.

No.

39:30 **What sort of things that you had missed during wartime? Were you glad to have again particularly the things you described to us in New Guinea? Were there things that you were glad to have access to again?**

I was actually pleased to be with my family again. My sister had married. She was married well before the war, my elder sister, and my younger sister had married. I wasn't at their wedding, or was I? Anyway, she'd married and they had children and they were my nieces and nephews and so on and it was good to see them. It was good to be back playing tennis again with some of the same old people and cricket and

40:00 so on and living with the townspeople and the storekeepers that I knew and, yes, it was all good.

Tape 9

00:33 **How important is Anzac Day to you?**

Well it was important. It is important. It is more important to be just as a remembrance as a day and the blokes that I knew in the army and the blokes that didn't come back. That part of it is very important to me. I sometimes become a little

01:00 frustrated by some of the self-importance which is attached to some members – not locally, although that has occurred – but bringing out big glossy magazines and all the rest of it sometimes I just shake

my head. But the day, particularly the morning service and the Last Post,

01:30 are very emotional and very important.

What are you thinking when the Last Post is being played?

About the blokes that didn't make it. It is very haunting. The most haunting of all the bugle calls, I think, and I think that is very important.

Does it move you every year?

02:00 Yes. Anzac Day is celebrated here in Proserpine by having the morning service at the cenotaph and the names of the fallen are read out and the Last Post and all that sort of thing. That is important to me. They go back and they have a cup of coffee and a glass of rum at the RSL [Returned and Services League]. I

02:30 used to go to that, but I don't now because I've had enough now when the service is over. Then they go down for the march and then they come back and have luncheon. I still go to the march, but I don't go to the luncheon any more because I'm just not physically capable of that any more, but the day is still important, yes.

Do your children and grandchildren

03:00 **get involved in Anzac Day?**

Yes. Through the schools mainly, yes. I think they do and some of them do very much. A lot of them come to the morning service, which is pretty good because at 4.30 in the morning nobody wants to get out of bed at that time. Yes, they do, yes.

Did you talk to your children

03:30 **about your war experiences very much?**

A little bit now and again. Jenny said, "It's a bit hard to get you wound up, Dad, but you're not bad once you start." But not about the action part of it, not much, no.

Why's that?

There's no need for them to know about that sort of thing, and besides, it has always been my experience that blokes that talk about the

04:00 action side of war tend to play themselves up a bit as heroes and I always try to avoid that if I can because I wasn't. They might have been too, but I just thought that that didn't appeal to me very much.

Have you enjoyed being a father?

Oh yes, my word. I'm tremendously proud of my family and they have

04:30 been a great comfort to Joan and I in our old age. They are wonderful and they are very much a together family. They love to get together and I just think there's no family that ever God made like mine to be quite honest. They are tremendous. And the grandkids, I feel like that about them too. I know all their little faults and

05:00 ways and so on, but they still come around here and sit down and talk to us and so on. They're a great comfort in your old age, grandkids.

When was the first time you met up with the guys from the battalion again? Did you have a reunion?

Yes. Bernie and I went down to Rockhampton. They have their reunions in Brisbane and we always get invited, but it is just not

05:30 feasible. But this time, many years ago, they had it in Rockhampton so we made the effort and we went down. And it was quite enjoyable and quite good.

What was it like seeing the guys again? Did you instantly kind of have the same experiences and talk about them?

Pretty well, although not too much because a lot of them…

06:00 Pretty much it was the same, yes. It was quite enjoyable. It was just one night and we went down and stayed the night at a motel and came back the next day. And that was quite enjoyable. There was the time they took me down for the anniversary of the plane crash, and we met in Brisbane and there were about 30 of us there then and that was enjoyable

06:30 because I knew most of them, almost all of them actually. Our regimental sergeant major came up, old Ken Anderson, commonly known as the Shark, he came up from Tasmania, he and his wife. There was one Aboriginal chap in our battalion, Charlie Meaney. He and his wife

07:00 came and it was good to see him. Charlie was one of the ones that went to Japan after the war.

In the occupation forces?

Yes. He was a good soldier and a good bloke.

What are you most proud of in your service in the war?

I don't know. I was proud of our battalion

07:30 and proud of our division. There was the old saying the 6th, 7th and the 8th and the 9th Divisions were after A-U-S-T – they annihilated 6th, the silent 7th (that was us), the sacrificed 9th and the talkative 9th. We used to call them that because we reckoned if you've ever

08:00 met a 9th Division bloke you've heard all about El Alamein. We had a priest here, Father Gard, a great bloke, and he was rather famous at Tobruk. He organised – it was very close fighting, very fierce – and he organised an ambulance with a driver and took out a white flag out onto the battlefield and met a

08:30 German officer and declared hostilities off for two hours while they picked up their wounded and dead. He did that and he was given the OBE [Order of the British Empire]. And we always used to say, "We know, father, we've heard all about El Alamein." And when we were doing the Lae show, I wasn't there, but I heard about it, there was great rivalry about

09:00 who would be the first division to Lae, to say they'd retaken Lae. Well we were in the 7th Division and we reckoned that the 9th Division would have beaten us to Lae, but they stopped to tell the ones about El Alamein. "Oh yeah, oh yeah."

You survived some real hardship and you did some really brave things. Are you proud because you survived that?

09:30 I'm proud that I survived. I'm not very proud of any brave thing, Nicole [interviewer], because I didn't do any brave thing.

But it is brave to survive?

It is brave to be there I suppose, but after all, once you enlisted that is what you were going to do and you were just following orders. There was no bravery about it. There was I suppose, there was with a lot of them.

I suppose from our point of view it

10:00 **seems very brave to go through that hardship.**

You see brave things, some brave things. In Balikpapan I saw a very brave thing. There was a chap called Snelling, 'Lizard' Snelling. He was a corporal with A Company and I was out with A Company at that time. And I was close by when this happened, maybe within 20 yards. And they called him Lizard, Lizard

10:30 Snelling, I didn't know his name. They reckoned he looked like a lizard and he did, too, a bit. And his section, a section is a third of a platoon, about 12 men, they got into a real tight spot. They got sort of trapped. It was in the jungle and to get them out he took the Bren gun and he crawled forward about two metres and got up on one knee and

11:00 exposed himself to the enemy and sprayed lead all around. And under that covering fire all these 11 men got out, but of course there was no covering fire for Lizard so he didn't – he was killed. Well, that's bravery. And I didn't do anything like that. I don't think I could have. That's real bravery. The rest was

11:30 all part of a show. You did it because you had to do it, and anyway, you wouldn't not do it with everyone else looking on, would you?

What do you think of war now when you see the conflicts that are happening overseas at the moment?

I still maintain that where a war is necessary, then it is fair enough. You can't just accept everything

12:00 as it is. Regarding the present war, I have mixed feelings on it. I am very sorry that it had to finish up as it did with these acts of terrorism and all the rest of it, but I still think that America and Australia and Britain did the right thing. I honestly do. Because you never hear of it in the media, but Saddam Hussein

12:30 killed not tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands of his own countrymen under his rule and he would have continued if that hadn't been done. After all, that has been stopped at least. It's a terrible thing that lives are still being sacrificed and things being done that shouldn't be, I know.

How important in your war years was your religion?

All important.

13:00 All important, yes. There were three battalions in each brigade and each battalion was given a chaplain. And we were fortunate from our point of view that our chaplain was Roman Catholic. The 2/31st had the Anglican minister and the third one, the 25th Battalion, was what they called

13:30 OPD, Other Protestant Denomination. That, strangely enough, was a Presbyterian minister who had been in Proserpine who I knew. But yes, to have that priest there with us at the time was very, very important to us.

Was it hard to have those kind of beliefs when you are in the middle of a war where people are killed?

14:00 It's not hard. I think it is easier.

Did you talk to Bernie much about the war after the war?

Yes a good deal, and we still talk about it.

Has he got different views about it to you?

Not fundamentally, no. If you had interviewed him you would have got information that would probably be much more

14:30 accurate, but I don't think you would have got it in the detail that I've given it to you because he isn't built that way. But his views are much the same as mine.

Did he struggle after the war to adjust back to civilian life?

Not to my knowledge. I don't think so. His health was impaired for some time, but not too badly, though. He recovered and he was all right.

Do you think we

15:00 **won the peace? You helped win the war. Did we win peace?**

There are different ways of looking at that. I don't like things that are happening in our society since the war. I could say to some extent that we lost what the peace should have given us by means of that by corruption and various things that happened and people doing dishonest things and called it business. I think that's

15:30 disgusting. There was no question of it that we won the war all right. What would have been the alternative if we hadn't have won the war? We'd all have slitty eyes, to put it bluntly. What would have happened if England had lost the war and Hitler had been given full reign? Because he was a very bad man and there's no doubt at all about that after all the things that he did to the

16:00 Jews. I think we won the war all right, but whether we are winning the peace or not is a matter for our own consciences and our politicians, and sometimes you wonder.

Do you have a final comment that you'd like to make about your war or life experiences for people who might see your interview in the future, these tapes?

16:30 No. If people have different views on different things I think they are entitled to them, and if something happens that makes me feel really angry I will speak out then, sometimes a bit too impulsively. That is where Bernie and I are

17:00 different. He's not like that, but I would be like that. I think people are entitled to their own views as long as they don't seek to impose it on me.

What about the younger generations? Would you have any advice?

I would hate to be a young person growing up in the younger generation. Peer pressure is a terrible thing

17:30 and most of the evils of the younger generation the older generations are responsible for them because they haven't lived up to their duties as parents. And teachers and politicians are meant to be an example to young people. So they've come to accept things which are not acceptable to me, anyway, because older people have practised them. So I don't

18:00 blame young people altogether for some of the things that they do nowadays. I do blame the things that they do such as marijuana and drugs and things like that. Equally do I blame the things that grown ups do. I have complete condemnation of the low morality of the modern age, the permissive age as it is called. I have nothing but condemnation for

18:30 it. I still hold in high regard the sanctity of marriage and the family and things which are repulsive, completely repulsive to my way of thinking, are things like lesbianism and homosexuality and that sort of thing. If there are

19:00 people who believe in that I don't condemn them, but I do condemn them for their efforts to impose that on society in general, such as the latest effort being their efforts to bring marriage between men and

the same sex and their right to adopt children.

19:30 I have no time for that at all. You started me.

I've put you on your soap box?

You did, too.

I think that's the end of our interview. Have you got anything else to say?

No. I'd like to say thank you to you both for your sympathy.

It's been a pleasure to meet you today. It's been really lovely. Thank you for talking to us.

I was a bit apprehensive about it, but I've had no qualms about it as it went on. We might have a cup of tea, Joan, eh?

INTERVIEW ENDS