

# Australians at War Film Archive

## Raymond Widdows - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1786>

### Tape 1

- 00:39 **Mr Widdows, thank you for being involved in the archive project, the first thing I'd like you to do, if you can, is give a very brief summary of your life, just to give us an idea of when you were born and what's happened since.**
- 01:00 I was born on the 7th April 1918 at the Trinefort [Essendon] Hospital. It's in Holmes Road, Moonee Ponds, which is Victoria of course. I started school at Ascot Vale West State School, at the age of five years of age. I left in 1932. Started work at a company called William L. Buckland in Franklin Street, Melbourne. 12 and sixpence a week. That was in the Depression,
- 01:30 just more or less the start of it, then I went to a company called Stuart and Company which offered a little bit more money and then in 1936 I went to Biddiscombe in Footscray, a trainee shipping clerk. 1935 I joined the cadets in the militia, then when I turned 18 I joined the militia as a gunner.
- 02:00 As well as working I went to night school to try and further my education, Stotts Business College. The 14th of May 1940 I joined the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] and what was called in the 2/2nd Medium Regiment. In October the name was changed to the 2/12th Regiment. We left for the Middle East in November, arrived at Constantine in Palestine
- 02:30 at the 18th December. In March I went together with forty other gunners and officers, we went to a place called Al-Tal Al-Kabeer Egypt. Our job then was to ferry trucks and equipment from Port Said back to Al-Tal Al-Kabeer. Al-Tal Al-Kabeer is about half way between Port Said and Cairo. We did this for about a week and then they called
- 03:00 for volunteers to take some equipment up the desert. Everybody volunteered so they put the names in the hat and I was one of the lucky ones to be drawn out. We loaded some, went to the Massawa Caves in Egypt, loaded the trucks with, five trucks, with ammunition, artillery ammunition and small arms ammunition to go with the 6th
- 03:30 Division over to Greece. And loaded those the port of Alexandria and picked up some medical equipment from the railway station at Alex [Alexandria] which we then sailed forth to Tobruk. We spent the first night at Mersa Matruh next day we moved on again, one of the trucks broke down. I was driving the last truck and they handed me the MT [motor transport] fitter.
- 04:00 So we stopped to fix up that truck. Perky Smith, the MT Fitter affected, the repairs got it back on the track. I packed up and tried to follow the convoy. Unfortunately they were diverted at the Tobruk at the time the Germans were coming down at that time round about west of Derna.
- I must just interrupt you there and ask if you could, we'll go**
- 04:30 **back and talk in detail about your getting to Tobruk. Would you be able to outline just briefly what your war time service was?**
- Yes I served in Tobruk, El Alamein, amphibious operation Lae, Finschhafen, Chalberg the CO [commanding officer] and then we did the amphibious operation at Labuan and British North Borneo. And then the war finished in August and I left the unit in
- 05:00 that's a different story because of the points system, that comes later I guess.
- What did you do after the war briefly?**
- I went back to my original job at Biddiscombe, Footscray where I was a shipping clerk. I then after twelve months decided in-door wasn't good so then went to took out some tennis courts in Ascot Vale near the showgrounds, Flemington.
- 05:30 So I went onto tar courts also ah sports good business, milk bar stayed there for five years and then ah I applied for a job as a representative with a sporting goods company stayed there for eighteen months. And then applied for a position as a representative for a tobacco company and I spent thirty years for

the tobacco industry working as a sales representative and finishing up as a national sales administrator

06:00 manager.

**Could you tell me a bit about your mother and father?**

My mother, my father rather he came from England and I think it was 1913 and he met my mother a little bit later on I think about 1916-17. He was in a protected industry

06:30 and naturally wouldn't, didn't join the first war. My mother was born in Newport and went to school in Williamstown. I think they married some time in '17-'18.

07:00 **What did your father do for a job?**

He was - I don't know what he was doing during the war years, but later he was a draftsman and an accountant by trade, by qualifications, and then he was secretary of Thomas Evans. They were tent manufacturers in canvas goods, had a few agencies such as Ratner Safes and Drizabone [clothing manufacturer]. Equipment like weather equipment.

**And did you have brothers and sisters?**

Yes I had three sisters and a younger brother.

07:30 I was the eldest.

**Could you tell me about growing up and what you used to do with your sisters and brother.**

Well being the eldest I was supposed to be in charge most of the time. So that meant hanging the washing out for your mother and doing the washing up until my sisters became a bit older. But we as a family used to go on family picnics and

08:00 family holidays down to Frankston which in those days was a little seaside resort, not a suburb as it is now. We used to have races around the block and my sisters played basketball and rounders and I played cricket and football. We both went to the same, went to the same church, St Paul's Ascot Vale. I think the whole family sang in the church at one particular stage.

08:30 Including my mother my father was the choirmaster in the St John's Toorak.

**What was Ascot Vale like at that time?**

Ascot Vale was a very, very small it was more or less prominent because of the proximity of the Flemington Race Course. The Ascot Vale Race Course and the Melbourne Showgrounds which were in Lanes Road and Epsom Road.

09:00 Ran all the way back to the Flemington Race Course. That was bounded by the Maribyrnong River which was more or less a boundary between Ascot Vale and Footscray.

**Did you go to the races?**

No we weren't a racing family. Not then, go occasionally now.

**What are your memories of school?**

I remember starting off in the

09:30 infants and we were taught to, the old style handwriting up and down, the broad strokes on the way down the light strokes on the way up and copy book style. I started I guess joined the school band in the forth grade. Started off on the trumpet and then finished up on the B flat bass. But apparently wasn't very good at that because

10:00 finished up as a kettle drummer. Then I played football and cricket from the forth grade upwards. I captained the school in cricket and football, a very, very happy school we went a few premierships in the football and cricket. Then I guess 1932 I started work.

**How old were you when you left school?**

10:30 Thirteen and half. Those days as I said before, the depression years it was very, very hard living and with my mother and father working and my mother looking after five children although he had a fairly reasonable job it was still a fairly tough life, so being the eldest I thought well, and there was high school two buses and the train away,

11:00 so the best thing was to get a job and go to night school which is what I did.

**How did the Depression impact on your family?**

It made me very careful about the handling of money, very careful. Even today you think twice before you spend you know a great deal of money, got to be worth the money actually.

### **What memories do you have of the Depression?**

- 11:30 People didn't get paid during the depression, they had to do a little bit of work for the council and they got chits where they could hand the chits in for vegetables meat and groceries. Token system, no cash which is completely different from today. And there was sort of mateship and
- 12:00 friendship the unemployed areas formed football teams and they played against one another and I remember once I had an operation and had my tonsils removed and I had two weeks off from work and the last week I played with the unemployment side of Ascot Vale football which was very, a bit of a hectic memory because they all just thumped about because they were all not much older than I was.
- 12:30 It was an experience.

### **What would men do if they were out of work?**

A lot of them frequented the billiard rooms where they could play billiards for thruppence or sixpence you know depending on the amount of time some of them got a free game because the billiards keeper wasn't making much money and it just kept them off the streets I guess.

- 13:00 There was a lot more friendship I guess and they played cards and ah I guess I was lucky that as a boy I was able to work and if I was lucky spend thruppence and go to a dance at night time.

### **What are your main memories of your family's home?**

We were a very happy family. We used to go everywhere together more or less, picnics

- 13:30 we'd go down to Maribyrnong Park for a picnic down there, probably a mile from where we lived. Everybody would walk. A day out would be a day on the ferry on the Maribyrnong River up to the Tea Gardens, which were about two or three mile up on the Maribyrnong River. You sort of made your own fun in life.

### **Could you describe the house you lived in?**

Yes it was a three bedroom weather board in Mirams Street Ascot Vale. Painted grey with a large cyprus hedge at the front that sort of blocked off the sun and everything from the main bedroom. So my father chopped that down one weekend and it brought more light into the property.

- 14:30 We had a back yard a dog and a cat grew a few vegetables, clothes line and actually a sleep out which I had because my baby brother had the other room later on.

### **Could you describe the sleep out?**

Sleep out was made of fibro with a fibro roof timber floor

- 15:00 lined with a plaster board, room for two beds and a cupboard. About twelve eight I suppose, the old measurements and seven feet in height with a gable roof.

### **What was it like sleeping in there?**

It was very comfortable you're on your own

- 15:30 until my brother got a bit older and he joined me at the age four or five and then we moved from there in 1939 to Combermere Street, Essendon. And that was larger quite a bit larger block of land with a couple of garages and once again another sleep out, that was
- 16:00 my room which I didn't spend much time in, because I was away on service with the militia for a month in early, late '39 then for three months there was a call up in early '39 then in May I joined the RAAF, straight from the militia. Retained at Puckapunyal.

### **Could you tell me about the first job that you had?**

Yes it was mainly folding

- 16:30 statements and invoices and placing them in envelopes, sealing the envelopes or they the letters were sealed and the envelopes were left tucked in because it was cheaper postal rates in those days. Then the next day you would stamp the envelopes and put the stamps in a stamp book, total them up - you were also in charge of the petty cash and took the
- 17:00 receipts, the money the travellers paid in and you showed them a receipt for their cash sales. You had your cash sales book and your stamp book and you ran message, long messages you had to bike or they gave you tickets which were the equivalent of a penny ha'penny to ride the cable tram down to the post office which was on the corner of Bourke Street
- 17:30 and Elizabeth Street or go to the late fee box, we used to work Saturday mornings in those days as well, half past eight to half past twelve. My jobs was to always take the late fee post to the ship going across to Tasmania because William Bucklands had a branch opposite Launceston. And I think the name of the ship was Taroona and you placed the mail in the late fee box on the gangway

18:00 it was collected by the ship's officer before it sailed and hopefully it was delivered at the other end.

**So could you just explain what kind of company it was?**

W.L. Buckland, they were a spare parts for motor vehicles, bicycles, they had a battery agency which was USL, they had the Michelin Tyre agency from France. Later on

18:30 they venture into the radio market with small receivers and larger upright models and they had a I think they could run seven or eight travellers on the modo, in the spare parts business, two in the cycle business and one on the radio business. Used to travel the whole of Victoria and the suburbs of course.

19:00 Stuart and Company, they were the agents for Camregal [BSA (Birmingham Small Arms) Regal] motorcycles and they supplied the police force in that day with Camregal twin engine jet motored motorcycles and side cars. When I went to work at Metters KFB where we were classified as sanitary engineers they made baths basins sinks in cast iron also enamelled them

19:30 pots and pans, electric stoves, electric and gas heaters. Gas coppers, fuel coppers, fuel stoves and also the nickelling and the chrome works and they built a great large morning

20:00 configuration where they moulded the baths and basins sinks and then they were taken across to the sanding shop where they were sand blasted. Then they went to the fettler shop where they were fettled and then they went to the enamelling shop and my first job was costing clerk where I used to go up to the tally room and tally the baths and

20:30 with each of them the basins, stove fronts anything pertaining to cast iron and I'd have to do a quota every day, then you'd have to find out what the scrap metal was and what it weighed and enter that before it went to the costing department and then it was costed up.

**What are your memories of being a fourteen year old boy**

21:00 **working in - ?**

Well it's quite interesting because when you are young you are expected to well we started up at half past eight and worked until six o'clock at night and you worked Saturday morning from half past eight until half past twelve. You were only mixing with adults there was only about three boys of my age in the company

21:30 in the warehouse would have been about twenty-five other people. We had all the minor jobs such as making lunches and making tea that sort of work. Big industry, partly education I guess.

**Do you remember how much you were paid?**

Twelve and sixpence first year. And then I had a rise of seventeen and six and twenty-five shillings. That's when I left

22:00 WR Buckland because I got thirty-one and sixpence at Stuarts doing a job at the counter and I did some book work and also on the floor on a Friday night assisting with selling of motorbikes which was quite interesting. And I applied for a position with Mitter Skaer Pier which was at Footscray and seem to be lots of opportunities, a very

22:30 large firm and the job there was, I was doing accountancy at night school at the time and fitted in with the costing department fitted in with the type of schooling I was doing the night school which gave me good experience. Accountancy work at night school.

**Where did you go to night school?**

Stotts College,

23:00 which is up in Russell Street, I think, near the old Scots Church there.

**And how often would you go?**

Twice a week, Tuesday and Thursday nights. Monday night was militia night. After the Thursday night my friend with the school we'd go to the dance, get there by about nine o'clock.

**Could you explain where the dances were?**

23:30 The dances on the Thursday night they were at Martini Ballroom near the Moonee Ponds Railway Station. Later on we used to gravitate to Saturday night to the Town Hall at Moonee Ponds, Essendon Town Hall and then we got some mode of transport and if somebody had a car we'd go to the Catholic dances. Catholic Churches always had dances on a Sunday night

24:00 even as far as Reservoir and places, Princess Hall and places like that with probably five, eight mile away from Ascot Vale.

**Could you explain what the dances were like?**

Well all the boys would line up on one side of the room and the girls used to sit on the other and you'd

sort of look at somebody and say well go over and ask for the dance,

24:30 sometime you got knocked back sometimes you didn't the girls were very shrewd, you used to have to wait and see whether you could dance or not. And then if you could dance and you asked you were pretty right and you didn't get knocked back. So that sort of made your night.

**And what sort of dances were they?**

What they call modern in those days and old time, the barn dance old time, the Gypsy Tap, the Circular Waltz,

25:00 Pride of Erin then on the modern there was what's called in Sydney the jazz waltz we used to call it the slow waltz in Melbourne. The Modern Waltz rather than the Modern Fox trot, which is now called the Jazz Fox Trot I think. And the Slow Fox Trot, the Rumba, they came much later.

25:30 **How did you learn to dance?**

We went to the school most of them they Junior Football Club went to Kingsford Dancing School in Swanson St Melbourne. Probably about eight of us, used to cost us two and sixpence a night. In all cost us about twenty-five shillings I think.

**In that first job what were you spending your money on?**

Five shillings went on my mother

26:00 and the some probably to the bank, and the rest to, those days you played football or cricket, you had to buy all your own gear, it took two shillings, or a shilling in those days for the umpire. But the time the end of the week came you wanted your next salary so it was very hard.

**Where would you play**

26:30 **sport?**

Originally we played in the old Ascot Vale Race Course. We used to make our own pitch there and nobody used to worry about it and we weren't doing any harm. We'd play, well when we were at school we even started playing cricket there, we used to play test matches one street against another street and became known hood eleven or widow eleven

27:00 or Charlie Owens eleven, we had four or five teams and we used to make our own score books start up at nine o'clock in the morning have a break for lunch go home, come back and start again about one o'clock and finish about five carry all our gear home it used to be fun.

**What is very competitive?**

Oh yes very much so.

27:30 It was quite an honour to win one of those test matches. You looked upon it and everybody in the team was enthusiastic about the whole thing but it was sixpence to buy a new cricket ball or something like that.

**Who were your sporting hero's at that time?**

Well I guess we'd have to start with Bill Ponsford and Bill Woodfull

28:00 they were my main two cricket hero's. Even when Don Bradman came along he wasn't Ponsford and Woodfull. And in the football of course a guy called Dickie Reynolds from Essendon. Before Dickie there was a guy called Keith Forbes, Norman Beckton and a few of the names I recall. The present captain of Essendon now

28:30 his grandfather played for Essendon, by the name of Hird [Alan T. Hird, grandfather of James Hird].

**Was there any kind of memorabilia?**

Yes it came in the form of cigarette cards. They used to put cards with players and everybody would try and get their own particular

29:00 pick you know- mainly football or the cricketers. Even collecting the English cricketers, Australian cricketers, test cricketers that is. Soccer players from England, Rugby players from Australia and England, everyone collected them, also stamps the collecting was a very, very popular in those days.

29:30 **Did you collect cigarette cards?**

Yes, yes I collected cigarette cards, I had a very big collection of stamps too, overseas stamps. My mother when I was away used to visit the Heidelberg hospital, the troops there had come back from overseas or the islands

30:00 and she saw one chap who was very badly wounded who was interested in stamps so unfortunately without asking she gave him my stamp collection. But oh well I forgave her and it took its course, just one of the things I remember.

**Could you tell me about joining the militia and why you decided to do that?**

We joined the militia at a young age, they took cadets and three or four of us were in the football team and some of the guys in the

30:30 senior football team were in the unit and we were in the Ascot Vale, Erskineville district but the unit that we joined was in Windsor which was in Argyle Street, St Kilda because the senior players went there, us juniors went there and we formed a lot of friendships there. So much that when

31:00 we were in the militia services in 19, early '40 we were asked if we could combine and join another unit and the originals in that 2/12th were from the militia unit and also from the forth at Queenscliff where about thirty five members, a fortress joined the unit.

31:30 **Could you tell me where you had to go for training and what you had to do?**

Originally we went to Seymour as a cadet though we went down to Queenscliff to a site alongside the fort which was called the Crows Nest. Crows Nest is where the sixty inch guns used to go. The mobile ones on the sixty inch houses we used to fire from there

32:00 over outside the heads when they did military training. And that was recognised as the cadet camp.

**And what did you learn?**

Riflery, signalling, machine gun training which later on you learn gunnery, gun laying then when you went to the militia full the over eighteen,

32:30 when you qualified for signals you got a Cross Flag badge and a Knowal badge which meant you were a gun layer, a deer which meant you were a licensed driver and than an MG [machine gunner] badge which meant you were a licensed machine gun operator and you had these badges on the one arm on the left arm I think, yeah.

33:00 **How much of an influence was the stories and histories of world war one on peoples decisions to join the militia?**

Well it's mainly from my father's side he came from the navy side although he trained in the artillery in England and the RHA [Royal Horse Artillery]. He didn't do anything when he came to Australia about joining up

33:30 but all his brother's and my sisters married into the Maritime Services, Merchant Navy or they Royal Navy. My brother, one went down in a submarine and another cousin of mine went down in the Jervis Bay and all his my nephews over in England and cousins they all served in

34:00 the Royal Navy or the Merchant Navy. I guess that had a bearing on joining the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] but then I think lot of it came from militia training. And all the friends joining the same unit as we trained together in the militia, we trained together in the army.

**When you were doing the militia training in 1935 was it?**

'34, '34-'39 yeah.

34:30 **Was there an idea at that time that you were training for something specific, what was your thoughts?**

Well I was training for the defence of Australia mainly. Early in those early days there was little talk about any war, it was only when Hitler became a little more outspoken I guess is the word and terrorised the Jews

35:00 and we got to hear about that, that we felt that there would be a possibility of a war another major war happening.

**Do you remember how you found out what was happening in Europe?**

I remember the 3rd of September when war broke out it was Sunday night I heard it on the radio, Prime Minister Bob Menzies

35:30 made the announcement and mixed emotions, sadness and although I guess even then you knew something had to be done. Because Hitler had invaded Poland, which to my belief was against the agreements that had already been made. I guess that had a bearing

36:00 **Where were you when you heard that news?**

Ascot Vale.

**Do you remember what the reaction in your family was?**

Well I think amazement and worry and wondering what was going to happen but Australia was more isolated in those days,

- 36:30 no aircraft like it is today. You didn't hear apart from the radio, read it in the paper possibly the next morning but radios weren't very strong and powerful in those days, no television of course, but I guess people more or less wondered
- 37:00 what was going to happen. I guess as it went on and they called for the AIF to be formed, a lot more people thought about it. Firstly it seemed to be, when the 6th Division went away, they went to the desert went to Palestine or rather to Egypt. And then it wasn't until France fell I think the impact
- 37:30 was felt mainly in Australia. That's when I think many people, like myself, decided it was time to join the AIF. When most of us from the militia did join the permanent army and the people from the country and the suburbs flocked down to the enrolment areas, that would be about early May '40.
- 38:00 **So for the few years leading up to the war when you were doing your training in the militia, was there much talk about Hitler?**
- Not a great deal because being isolated we didn't, it was only what we read out of the papers and I don't think the full truth is printed even then in those days. Took about two years in to the war
- 38:30 before the full story started to emerge about all the atrocities and things like that. Hello, there's been a fall.
- Do you remember going to see newsreels at this time?**
- Yes there were a few newsreels and there wasn't a great deal on
- 39:00 I remember when we were at Camperdown when the newsreels from the 6th Division were showing in Egypt but there wasn't a great deal from behind the, from Germany or anything. That I can recollect. Because mainly ships that were sailing possibly and maybe some isolated navy events
- 39:30 or sinking of an unarmed vessel by a submarine that's about all I think.
- What were your reasons for wanting to enlist?**
- Well I guess we were all at that age we had the King and Country, thought about that, and the mateship, mates were going and
- 40:00 in the long term it would affect Australia because better to have it over there rather than have it over in our country. And the sense of an adventure I guess. That's about all I think.
- When you heard that war had broken out did you know then that you wanted to go?**
- Yeah definitely yes.
- 40:30 because we're, well when war broke out, that time at night I thought about it but as we met with our mates in the militia, we decided we would go, and most of us decided we would go together and there was talk then in the militia camp that they would form a unit that's why a lot of us didn't join early. We'd rather go as a group together into our own unit,
- 41:00 where we'd trained together, we knew each other.
- So where about were you training with the militia at this time?**
- At the Argyle Street Drill Hall on week nights, but each year we had a camp at Seymour which for a duration of two years, sorry two, two weeks, two years it's long while. Then later on when the war broke out we went
- 41:30 down to Mount Martha on the Mornington Peninsula and we had to take the guns out to down past through Rosebud, Rye out to Point Leo where we used to fire out across the Tasman Sea I guess it is there. On practise shoots.

## Tape 2

- 00:31 **How long after the war was declared did you enlist in the AIF?**
- It would have been about September 3rd to May the fourteenth. What's that six months I think, about six months, yep.
- So after you enlisted what happened, where did you go and - ?**
- Went to Caulfield to enlist. First of all we went to the drill hall at Argyle Street,
- 01:00 signed some papers there saying we were happy to enlist and then from the militia into the AIF. We then were told to report to the Caulfield Racecourse where we went through a strict medical examination went home that night and were told to report back the next day which we did we were issued with some

other things that didn't fit and ah given up some blankets

- 01:30 and told to go to the horse stalls where we got a couple of bales of hay and spread them out in the horse stalls, one blanket on top of the hay and one blanket to sleep on top of that and put it over you. It was in May and pretty cold too in Melbourne. We were there for about six or seven days and we went to the Argyle street Drill Hall
- 02:00 and we took some tractors, click track tractors, hooked them onto six sixty pounders artillery guns, and we towed them from the Argyle Street to High Street St Kilda, down the old High Street round St Kilda Junction
- 02:30 along the road right into the city, diverted to Swanston Street and up around Bouverie Street to Elizabeth Street and up Elizabeth Street to the Hay Market from the Hay Market along Grand Parade [Royal Parade] through Parkville to Sydney Road Brunswick
- 03:00 where the cable trams run through, electric trams then. We had a lot of difficulty there because the sixty pounder was very large gun and the tractor was very large and there were cars parked on the side of the road and trams going, we had to pull up to let the trams through. Took us many, many hours to get through to Coburg. But one memory, took an opportunity
- 03:30 for the girls in Woolworth's and Coles [supermarkets] to stop work, they came out the front and gave us a wave and a cheer. The Woolworth and Coles at Brunswick and also at Coburg. We arrived at Broadmeadows at about six o'clock that night, stayed the night there in the tents, left early in the morning from Broadmeadows and drove up the Hume Highway. We were doing up to three and a half
- 04:00 four miles per hour before we came to Kilmore just outside Kilmore we stopped outside a church hall where we met a group from an officer and another gunner a panel van, not a panel van, a utility with some hot food and we slept in the church hall all that night, started up again the next morning and eventually reached Puckapunyal about -
- 04:30 there was a mess call sounded that night, which was about six o'clock. And we were a very tired group of people after sitting on a tractor for three days.

**Can you explain what exactly the artillery guns were that you were transporting, what they were and what they looked like?**

I've got a photo if you want it. No they were sixty pounders

- 05:00 they were iron shod of course, about four feet in diameter, maybe five feet in diameter, they were fourteen eighteen vintage I mean they were very, very old equipment. We had a buffer recuperation system where the artillery piece itself would be about eight to nine feet long the projectile which was the shell weighed sixty pound
- 05:30 the trailer itself was possibly about nine foot long maybe ten with an eye hook that was hooked onto a tractor. I can give you the weight of that next break if you like. I've got it all recorded. That's about all. Travelling was only about three and a half, because
- 06:00 of the condition of the wheels. I mean you couldn't travel more than about three and a half four kilometres an hours. And the boys I think they tend to think they'd all fall to pieces.

**Do you remember what the men talked about, how did you pass the time?**

There's only one person on each tractor, you know, didn't have any muffs or anything like that

- 06:30 just in your ears was the sound of the tractor going. We used to stop for an hour for smoko [break], brew up, lucky to have something to brew up on, always stopped for lunch and then the truck with us had a primus we could put up for a cup of tea. Mainly it was water when you stopped for smoko.

**When you were passing through the suburbs and through the country, were there**

- 07:00 **civilians, given that you were transferring these massive guns, what were their levels of curiosity?**

Oh they were very interested, amazement one of amazement, think that these things come out of the archives I think. But they gave you a clap and a cheer, various did, yep.

**What was your level of skill at this stage as a gunner?**

In the militia I had two stripes, bombardier,

- 07:30 qualified in gun laying, machine gunnery, signalling, driving, [UNCLEAR].

**Can you explain what the role of gunnery is just for the sake of someone who doesn't know anything about it?**

Gunnery is a - well depending on what gun you're working on say eighteen pounders

- 08:00 twenty-five pounders, field guns, you have a crew of six, there's the sergeant a bombardier, number three is a qualified, he lays the gun. In the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] his qualification was group three which entitled him to three shillings extra a day, group two, two shillings, group one, one shilling. That was the only group on the guns,
- 08:30 group three, the bombardier got basically on five and sixpence the bombardier, same as a gun layer, the sergeant in those days was ten and sixpence I think, a day. The gun layer job was to lay the gun, he received the orders from the command post, which was set up before the four or six guns in the troop depending upon when the
- 09:00 what the formation of the artillery was at that time. In the command post would be a gun position officer, an ack [anti aircraft] and some sigs [signals]. Coming from the gun position would be the OPO [observation post officer] which was with the forward troops or an observation post is where the original orders came from. An OPO would range on the targets either by field glasses,
- 09:30 optics which he had a bearing to, and then would shoot one gun at an estimated range, estimated direction which he had given in degrees of minutes, he would then give the order to the GPO [gun position officer] and command post on the gun position. They'd fire four or six guns on that line. The axe in the gun position command post
- 10:00 would immediate on the artillery board transpose all the orders onto the sheet and record wind positions and temperature and then produce a final angle of sight and final prediction of range of things and those orders were to be transferred to the gun sergeant who would pass them onto the gun layer who would lay the gun or the dial sight and the ranges were
- 10:30 down below, swing the gun on the target and then when the gun was ready and the order was given by the GPO to fire the gun sergeant would say fire and the gun would fire. The OPO then had the position observation post, would correct the angle of shot back to the un- position, then relay the orders back to the guns, that's briefly the sequence
- 11:00 of how you fire a gun, hope that's lucid.

**So what does the bombardier do?**

Bombardier is the second in charge to the sergeant and they generally make sure that the ammunition is correct before it goes to the ammunition numbers. He generally takes the job off number six, number one is the sergeant, number two is on the bridge, they go and close the bridge, three the gun layer, four and five ammo [ammunition] numbers,

- 11:30 six the final ammo number who checks Q settings, the artillery shell comes in on a twenty-five pounder, '117', '119' and a '223' which is set for fuse for a head burst and their job is to correct and make sure that the right avenues and the right charges are used. There are four charges, charge one, charge two, charge three and super.

**Were there any**

- 12:00 **accidents in training?**

Not much in training no. There were mishaps in action due to conditions of guns and ammunition, there is a term that we call, can't think at the moment.

**What sort of protective clothing did you wear in training, did you have anything on your ears?**

Nothing in those days. In Tobruk we just wore a shirt

- 12:30 out, didn't wear a shirt lot of the times, pair of shirts, boots no socks, sometimes a steel helmet, no head things. We were told to, when the young sergeants would fire, you'd open your mouth and the sound was supposed to come through your ears out your mouth or through the mouth and out your ears. No ear muffs or ear protection. That's why most of the artillery have a pension for deafness, that's why I'm a bit hard of hearing.

- 13:00 **You mentioned that those sixty pounders looked like they'd come out of the archives, had they been used in World War I?**

Yep all used in World War I and they'd been used in the training army, right through.

**So what happened, was it Puckapunyal, was that your destination?**

Puckapunyal we were

- 13:30 training in the RAAF yep, it was the military training. It was in Seymour, in that area it was the old Seymour artillery range where we used to use the guns in the militia days.

**So what did you do once you got there?**

Well we did, we arrived in the sometime the 24th or something of May but we had them in the gun park

- 14:00 but seeing there were, there should have been sixteen guns and there were only six guns or seven not

quite sure, each battery had to take turns training on the guns. And there weren't enough equipment there were only three drag ropes, so you needed to two drag ropes for each gun so you had to imagine there was a drag rope there and there were a lot of missing things like hand spikes and had to make

14:30 there were no very few vehicles and at one stage to get an idea of a troop being employed as a troop movement, everybody had a little ticket with a number and a vehicle on and they toddled along with that vehicle and had to go where the map showed you to go and if you had a vehicle you had to take a gun

15:00 or the observation officer had to go with a GPO officer or the troop leader had to go with his vehicle and the cigs and the axe where they had to go actually the full troop deployment was represented by people moving around with small carts indicating the vehicle number.

**Can you give a rough idea of how many men were training at Puckapunyal at that stage?**

In an artillery

15:30 regiment there would be a medium regiment close to eight hundred, more than eight hundred, there was the 2/2nd Heavy Regiment there was the 2/8th Regiment with it's headquarters, the other battery was Tasmania, there was ah

16:00 engineers, heavy duty battalions, I guess there could be up to three thousand maybe more troops. Later the camp was, the camp was in its infancy then but later on they expanded it and I don't know what the full total training there is.

**Had you had mates or people in the neighbourhood who had already sailed as part of six giving?**

16:30 Mates in the unit. Knew some people from Ascot Vale who had gone, unfortunately they were chaps who were unemployed and they joined because I guess it was something to do, couldn't get a job so they joined. Not a great number, I knew another chap who was a very highly qualified lawyer who joined but not a great number.

17:00 Most of us who joined the militia were waiting to be called up for their own individual group or unit.

**You mentioned that a lot of those 6th Division men were products of the Depression, could you describe for me what those men were like?**

Very hard to describe because some of them weren't

17:30 nice people to know. There was an element that, put it this way they were probably unemployable.

**How prepared do you think they were for a campaign in the desert?**

Not very well prepared I would say, would be a very hard job, for the get them into line, to be troops you know,

18:00 but I have heard of one who was a very, very hard person to train and a difficult person to live with, who was a very, very fine troop, in the 6th Division, in the Crete's battle and that.

**What were your impressions of the other men at Puckapunyal in terms of their experience and training?**

Well most of us coming from the same unit we knew each other and had spent four months together previously.

18:30 We were the 'concrete gunners' we called the people from the fort, they were, they were the 'piers' we used to call them, they were the top men, the knew everything and even coming from the militia you had to listen to them. The poor old enlisted guy, we felt sorry for him because he was in between the militia and the concrete gunners and they came from farms and they were lawyers, accountants,

19:00 salesmen, real estate agents, you name it, from all walks of life, graziers, jackeroos and you know, very quality person.

**Can you explain why the concrete gunners were considered the top men?**

Because they were permanent soldiers, they were from the fort in Queenscliff and very, very top training,

19:30 they trained in the fort, they did a run from Queenscliff to Point Lonsdale every Monday, PT [physical training] parade on the football ground and a march through Queenscliff once week with the big band, it was called a salience parade in Queenscliff. But they were all generally a person six-one [height in feet and inches], six-two,

20:00 very well built and very fine specimen of a person. A lot of them had come from the militia and got into permanent army. But you'd advertise for men in the permanent army and generally if there was say one hundred and twenty applicants there's only be twenty or thirty they selected each year. Really high, the

standard was very, very high.

**So given that in this camp**

20:30 **there were these great specimens of men that were well trained, what was the mood like, anticipating going away for these campaigns?**

Very good. Everyone mixed in well in these units, very, very, you could see it was going to be a good unit from the early days. Everybody combined and became a unit and we had a very good CO

21:00 took part in the 14-18 War, he was one of the first ashore in Gallipoli and he was shot down over the Gallipoli line in the neck after doing the artillery shoot with a POW [prisoner of war] from the gangs but he was the CO of the fortress up at Queenscliff. Very, very strong disciplinarian but a very, very fair-minded person and he built in with the unit a very good sense of responsibility

21:30 and even before we sailed there were people weeded out that were more or less square holes in round pegs, round holes in square pegs or visa versa, you know.

**What do you think would make a man a round peg in a square hole?**

Or square peg in a round hole better yeah. That he just wasn't suited to be in the artillery,

22:00 wasn't suitable to be in the army, maybe some other branch in the army not the artillery maybe ASC [Army Service Corps] driving or store or clerk or something like that.

**What sort of man did you need to be in the artillery unit?**

Well to go on to be a gun layer you needed reasonable education, it was a fairly responsible

22:30 position, very responsible. If you made an error and it wasn't corrected by the gun sergeant you could cause casualties and amongst your own troops. So that's the type that had to be very accurate. And other parts of the artillery, the GPOX AC [gun position officer assistant] which were mainly very, very highly qualified and they dealt with directors and map boards and working in

23:00 logarithms and slide rule things of that nature. Even the sigs, good on wireless, stenography, wireless telephony Morse code. I mean the average labourer he'd be able to you know, if he had a good mind he could make a good gunman person and any ammunition number

23:30 very good, good digging and cruise bits and but you have to have a reasonable amount of intelligence like for sigs and necks [?UNCLEAR] and number threes.

**How important was it to have that knowledge and experience of those men that were involved with World War I?**

Oh very good, because we were taught right that you have to dig to save casualties. You had to dig no matter what time you moved into encompasses.

24:00 At midnight or three o'clock in the morning. You dug in before you did anything else. It saved a lot of casualties in our unit, it saved a lot of casualties in Tobruk, particularly in the desert and then again in the islands. Tricks against counter factory work like the Atori, the Atori, particularly in Tobruk from there from the Luftwaffe [German Air Force].

**So can you explain**

24:30 **that digging how that worked, do you mean - ?**

The gun pit, the gun pit for medium artillery is about three to three and a half feet deep probably about twenty feet in diameter circular, ammunition shelves were on the side which were dug in with a shelf say about

25:00 eighteen inches above the ground which went to about two feet above below the surface of the ground level, sand bags all around the outside filled with the soil inside the gun pit and then a net placed over the top and then you dug side pits so you could shelter against the environment if you weren't firing then you dug your own doha [?UNCLEAR], which was probably about six

25:30 feet deep with sandbags on top and a curtain or bracken in front to stop the bomb blast thing coming in.

**Why was it important to dig that at night?**

Oh because of you'd be attacked next morning. Could be.

**Can you explain how the 2/12th was formed was that in Australia?**

From Australia yes, it's formed from the unit called the 2/2nd Meeting Brigade, which was medium unit

26:00 using sixty pounders. 2/12th Regiment was designed to use eighteen pounders which were the only equipment apart from 4.5 [inch calibre] howitzers we used in Australia at that period in time. We borrowed some, we were loaned rather some eighteen pounders from the 2/8th Field Regiment to do it, quick training on them when we came back from final leave -

26:30 that was in November some time, towards the end of November, but strange enough we never fired an eighteen pounder. Although we fired five sixty pounders.

**You mentioned Puckapunyal was in its infancy at that time, what was the town like that was there?**

No town at Puckapunyal, Seymour was the nearest town and that was about ten miles out. Seymour was a railway town had shops

27:00 near the railway line where the railway station was. There was another group of shops further up the town where the main road run in between Melbourne to Albury. There were service stations and cafes there and three hotels. That's a secret of the troops.

**Was there much evidence of men enlisting in the country or on the way up?**

27:30 There was of course a plan in being that all the people all of the boys couldn't join up, farms all the land properties, because it was needed for some people to remain behind to run the farms and also the grazing properties. So I guess in that respect it was limited to people in the township certain people off the land.

28:00 **What were your living conditions like in Puckapunyal?**

Pretty raw really, issued with a palliasse, which was a hessian bag and you I think it was three men to one bale of straw. You had the bale of straw and you filled the palliasse - it was a mattress - and you put a blanket on top of that, rather two other blankets

28:30 they were tin huts, they were unlined which meant that in the winter when you were there in the winter condensation occurred at night and it can be really cold in Seymour and icicles used to form on the roof and when the sun struck the icicles used to melt, sometimes they used to melt while you were walking around the hut. Resting in the hut.

**So what was your training like once you were there?**

29:00 **Training was a lot of route marches, many route marches, rifle drill, squad drill but in the main route marches, when we had more tanks bought we had operations of troop movements through the countryside, even bivouacs [camps] out at night time, treks through the Strzelecki Ranges, camping out at night under canvas or in the trucks.**

29:30 **Or under the trucks, generally about three or four days in duration.**

**Where did you think you would be going at that stage?**

Rumour had it we'd be going, started going round about late September, right through until we left. Even then they were very prolific before we left. Particularly after we came back after final leave.

30:00 **Can you tell me about the rumours about where you were going, what the big rumours were?**

The big rumours because France had fallen and one Brigadier, John Norwrenman [?UNCLEAR], the big rumours were Egypt or Palestine.

**In your training or preparation to what extent were you being conditioned for a desert campaign?**

Mainly for

30:30 any campaign we were conditioned for because of the route marches and things. The real conditioning for the desert took place at Palestine I think, when we had route marches over ploughed paddocks, certain parts of Palestine in sand dunes we had troop marches there. And going out on a days march with a bottle of water and a cut lunch.

31:00 That was probably the hardening up process.

**What did you know about even back in Puckapunyal, what were you told about the Italian German armies and the equipment and their skills etc?**

Not much about the German Italian army because not much was known about them at the time, but all

31:30 about the air force because we knew of their capabilities. But mainly we had a lot of lectures on health, on the field, in action, out of action, health on leave, not mixing to quickly with the local population, being very careful about who you went with and things like that.

32:00 **What did they tell you about the local women and the brothels?**

Very, very much about the brothels. That you take a 'dipsey dip', if you go to the brothels, what they called a 'green light' outfit with you. And they explained what you had to do with treatment and everything. And then ah.

**What was the green light outfit?**

It was a self-treatment after intercourse.

- 32:30 Then you had to follow it up with a, go to a green light area, sorry a blue light, blue light area. But then you were told you were on the dangers with the wood alcohol which was in Palestine was called Arak which was very similar to the one thing which was of course ouzo [spirit], grappa [wine] and
- 33:00 the ones in Turkey, which like the ones in Palestine were very clear, when you put water in them in it became like a milky substance. The Arabs make it with heating an orange. Orange in one hand and the raw Arak in the other in a glass, its funny the glass is about this big, like a very small liqueur glass. That was more frequent, the troops enjoyed that mainly, in Lebanon and
- 33:30 Syria where they were known as the RAF, everybody was on the RAF, they were called. The Royal Air Force but the Royal Arak Fiends. That was arak [spirit], not to be confused with the August part of the Royal Australian Air Force.

**What did you do on leave in Puckapunyal?**

Every two weeks we'd jump down to Melbourne.

- 34:00 I was fortunate I had my car up there so, an old '91 Chev [Chevrolet] National and I used to take three or four of my mates on leave with me then jump back, then jump back to Puckapunyal, sign in, that was it.

**So when you were on that final embarkation leave what did you do?**

We went just to meet at

- 34:30 the hotel in Flinders Street, at an old hotel, it's now gone, it was down the road from where Chloe [nude painting] is, at the Flinders Hotel [Young and Jackson's]. Corner of Flinders Street they called it, Flinders and Elizabeth Street. But we'd have a few drinks and then go around walk around Melbourne and go home to our families or go to a dance that night.
- 35:00 But the week went very quickly. We generally used to meet up every day together as a group. Pretty hard when you'd had it together as a unit, even though it was just six months that we'd been, just to stay away from each other. You form that mateship and bond.

**Who were your mates that you had formed close bonds with?**

Terry Arist [?UNCLEAR], Teddy Burge, Lal Mathews, Snowy Waite, Ken Waite,

- 35:30 Ernie Jacobs, Jimmy Harris, 'Bonehead' Gibbs - Frank Gibbs, Dinny Ryan, Bill Scott, Bert Nugent, Jake Blackman, who ever you want!

**Did you have a girlfriend when you left Australia?**

No I was in-between.

- 36:00 You had the right to two, that's all. But I started going with a girlfriend on my first leave. It was one that my family we grew up together went to school together, played pool with her brothers, played cricket with the brothers, basketball with the brothers, she played basketball with my sisters, rounders with my sisters.
- 36:30 We went to the same church sort of business, went dancing together, but it wasn't until the leave when I came back from the Middle East that, we went out once that's all.

**So can you tell me about getting that final notice about going overseas and what you were told about where you were going and what happened?**

We never knew where we were going, we were just told we'd be catching a train at Dysart [?],

- 37:00 which is a railway station near Seymour off the main line, and we'd train there getting on the train and so many compartments, which they told us we'd all just move straight off the platform into the train. The train would go to Melbourne and when the train eventually came in it came in back to front so utter confusion reigned.
- 37:30 Cause the carriages were wrong and everyone had to move around, get in a carriage. So we went to Melbourne and when we got to Melbourne we shipped onto another train and trained to Adelaide, Port Adelaide. We travelled through the night got to Port Adelaide, think it was about some time in the morning.
- 38:00 At Port Adelaide we drew up on the wharf there on the harbour, where the Stratheden was boarded. We then had demarcation numbers and because my number was 8252VX I was on first page and consequently we went down and we were told to board the ship, it was on the boarding ticket. And I was

- 38:30 down there early and waited for the others to come on board and we set sail at night from Port Adelaide and then the bite, we caught up with the Strathmore, which had loaded troops in Sydney and the Orion which had loaded troops in Melbourne, sailed from Port Melbourne and the Polish
- 39:00 ship called the Pretoria which had come from New Zealand with Kiwis [New Zealanders], a mixture of Maoris and other New Zealand troops. And we all then went down to Fremantle. At Fremantle we were in the 'roaders', they called them and we were moved into Fremantle because at that time when the ship had been sunk in the Indian
- 39:30 ocean and one of the navy officers was detailed to. was posted with the convoy out to the ship. They held the ship in Fremantle until they got the all clear that there were no radar, German radar in the Indian Ocean. So we were fortunate enough to get a weeks leave in Fremantle, not a complete week but we came back to the ship every night and we had a route march in the morning then
- 40:00 from one o'clock we had leave in Fremantle which was very enjoyable, a lot of us got invited home to other people in Fremantle and we enjoyed ourselves.

**Can you describe what Fremantle was like then?**

Yes Fremantle was a very, very small shipping part of Perth, probably I think ten miles from Perth, maybe less. They connect in Perth

- 40:30 with an overhead tram system bus system, tram lines with the electric lines up top. Similar to what, they've got them in Geneva now and actually it was a very good system. And these ran between Fremantle and Perth. But Fremantle itself was mainly a shipping port,
- 41:00 very, very small township. Different to what it is now. Perth was where we all congregated and went to, Perth was only a very small town compared with Melbourne or Sydney in those days.
- 41:30 End of tape

## Tape 3

- 00:33 **You mentioned training in Puckapunyal, what kind of equipment did you have there, were you well equipped?**

Originally there weren't enough rifles to go around so there pick handles. That's the handle of a pick, used to slap palms with that and things like that. And there were also horse troves there, what the

- 01:00 horse troves there I don't know, because most of the light horse units, but it was training, used the top of the drag ropes on those and they were set in concrete and the sergeant would say taut heave and you'd try and pull the horse troves out of the concrete. That was all part of the fitness campaign I suppose you'd call it.

**How difficult was it training with little equipment?**

- 01:30 You made do. Served us in good stead because all the way through until after we came out at Tobruk we had to deal with makeshift equipment.

**You were in Fremantle can you explain where you went from there?**

Well Fremantle being such a very small town in those days everyone caught the tram to Perth and if you were fortunate

- 02:00 you were invited to the local people and they took you on trips and things like that.

**And what was the atmosphere like in Freo [Fremantle] in that time?**

Very, very happy, everybody seemed very content with life, there was no, no sort of lights out or anything like that, no war restrictions at all

- 02:30 in Fremantle. Everything was just normal lights on the street and things like that.

**How much troop movement was there at that time?**

Not a great deal because November 1940, I guess going through there, every month probably a convoy would go through. But most of them would probably stop at Fremantle and reassemble and go straight out. Whereas

- 03:00 we were, being there for a week because of the radar out in the ocean. We had the weeks leave there or six days I think it was.

**Could you describe the journey over to the Middle East?**

The Middle East, I forget how many days it was the first port of call from Fremantle was Colombo. Had

these bum

03:30 boats or whatever they called them, came out and they surrounded the ships, four ships and they were, they would throw ropes up and if you wanted something you would throw cash down and they'd send the things up if you wanted them. Although sharks were circling the ship at the time, they'd still dive off the side, some of these natives.

04:00 But we went ashore up about half an hour, we grabbed some leave and we went ashore by barge and taken the Galle Face Queen, which is opposite the Galle Face Hotel, and once again three of us were very fortunate we walking along the street and an old Rolls Royce [automobile], I wouldn't say old, say 1932,

04:30 with a driver, a chauffeur and a woman in the back and it sort of stopped and the driver couldn't get it going so we three of us pushed it and it started and the woman got the driver to come out and he was a British soldier and she happened to be the wife of the commander of the Colombo garrison, the British, she took us home to her

05:00 place and met her home and she had these natives with this pukka pukka leaf, I think they called it, the fans, these big broad fans that they moved to circulate the air. We had morning tea there and for the rest of the day she put the driver and the car at our disposal. He took us up to Kandy and we surprised a group of officers who had come out of a

05:30 taxi, two taxis and we were, got out of this Rolls Royce, we were only three gunners at the time and he showed us around Kandy, went back to Kandy, and we visited a mosque and then he took us to a bazaar and then he took us back to the green where we had the foreman and we met up with the others and went back to the ship.

06:00 it was a very good day in Colombo.

**Could you describe your impressions of going in to the bazaar [market]?**

Oh the smells and the very exotic smells and strange smells I guess, but very enlightening, the wares on offer, seeing them work on jewellery, sort of beating metal,

06:30 very, very interesting.

**What did you know about that part of the world?**

Very little. Could sum it up by saying, put it in a nutshell. Only what I'd read that's all about the cricket fields and they were tied to the British Empire and things like that.

07:00 And they also grew tea, a lot of tea came from Ceylon or Sri Lanka as they call it now.

**What were your impressions of the architecture in the city?**

It was very mixed, Colonial style you'd call it I suppose. Apart from the natives of course you know and the introduction to betel nut which they spat all over the footpath

07:30 all over the, you'd have to be very careful otherwise, you'd have a red stain on you. They didn't, they didn't care though. Also it was the first time I'd seen cigarettes sold, what they call a stick sale, where you buy cigarettes one at a time, from a box of cigarettes and they'd sell them to the natives. I don't know what the price was but one

08:00 at a time. That was interesting.

**Could you describe life on board the ship before you got to Ceylon?**

Life on board the Stratheden it was amazing. We lived like lords. Apart from living in hammocks, we ate in the original dining room of the ship on their original ships

08:30 menu, we had various sittings, the gunners, the sergeants and the officers, all sittings. And you had fruit juice, quite a change from Puckapunyal choice of about three fruit juices. Tea with or without milk, coffee with or without milk, brown sugar, white sugar, choice of fresh fruit

09:00 all types of cereals, scrambled eggs, fresh, boiled eggs, fried eggs, poached eggs, toast, white or brown toast, bread, butter margarine, strawberry jam, plum jam, marmalade, honey,

09:30 even vegemite. That gives you an idea of the meal situation, all meals were the same. Fabulous. But we spent most of the time at night time on deck, until the lascars came around and washed the deck and you knew it was time to pick up your bed and go down to the D deck where our hammocks were.

10:00 But that was the last voyage the Stratheden made of that type of troop shit, went back to Britain after that and was outfitted a real troop ship. But a very good ship.

**What was the reaction of the men on board to see such surroundings and such food on offer?**

Couldn't believe it. They thought all their Christmas's had come at once. But they were warned by the

officers of the

10:30 ship and the unit that that was not what they did in the army from then on.

**How did you pass the time on the ship?**

You got exercises, boxing events, the game, what do they call it, quoits, quite a lot of quoits. Quite a lot of time in quoits, quite a

11:00 lot of time I spent in physical exercise, PT, in the boxing tournaments, marching around, cause you had to wear sand shoes because the decking was still the original timber deck, everybody wore sandshoes to protect the deck, it didn't become an iron deck until they moved it back to, after they took it to the

11:30 ship yards in England.

**What had the ship been used for before the war?**

Cruises. All the P & O [Pacific and Orient] line. Stratheden, Strathaird, Strathnaver and the Strathallan, well known cruise ships and they were very, very comfortable.

**Was this the first time you had been aboard a ship?**

12:00 Apart from the river trips on the Maribyrnong River, down the bay in Victoria on Phillip Bay, on the old barge and trips down to Queenscliff. Day trips and things like that.

**What was the feeling for you as you pulled out from Australia and you were out in the open ocean?**

Ah,

12:30 very mixed I guess. I guess we more or less educated to it by leaving Melbourne on the train then going because we had, we had possibly twenty-four hours I guess nearly to think about it on the train, that we were eventually going to leave Australia. And when we got onto the ship there was a bit of excitement --

13:00 exploration, finding out about what things were on the ship. And then when we got into the bight, don't know whether you know the bight, next to the Bay of Biscay, are two of the most roughest you can experience. Even though it was blue seas getting into the Bot the Bot still had a little bit of turbulence so unfortunately quite a number of the troops had to go over the side

13:30 and do the normal thing. But things settled down. but that was possibly caused by when the wet canteen opened the beer hadn't been chilled and the beer was a bit warm or so. I think that helped the sea sickness part as well. But gradually people settled down to life aboard the ship and particularly the Stratheden because I think the distance.

**Did you get seasick yourself?**

14:00 Yes just for a short period of time. But I went back and had another beer. I think it was beer.

**So after you left Colombo could you explain where you went from there?**

Yes we went in convoy, up to the Red Sea, through the Red Sea where we had an aircraft take warning

14:30 which didn't eventuate, into the gulf and into the, can't think of the name, man made, the Suez Canal yep. We anchored in the Suez Canal off Ismailiyah which is on the Egyptian side

15:00 then we transported the barges, went over to Kantara which was railhead, got onto these horse containers where there was forty-four hommes, or fourteen horses. That's fourteen men or fourteen horses. We travelled to Beit Jirja,

15:30 which is in Palestine. We transported then by truck to Qastina, also in Palestine, that was where our first camp in Palestine was. That was I think we arrived at two o'clock in the morning and we travelled in the open trucks about three maybe three and a half hours to Qastina and that was our

16:00 introduction to Palestine. Qastina.

**You mentioned that there was an air attack warning as you were coming in, on the ship**

That was in the Red Sea.

**The Red Sea, what happens in this instance?**

Well they had a twelve pounder aircraft gun, that was about it and the troops were told to just get below deck and an idea of protection like tables and things like that. Probably called

16:30 the all clear and it was back to normal.

**How many ships were in convoy?**

Plus the escort. Two, a cruiser, a destroyer and an escort.

**When you are travelling in convoy how close are the ships?**

Probably sixty to eighty yards apart. Probably about a hundred yards

17:00 beyond, two rows of two. One ship and then a hundred yards and then another ship, maybe a hundred yards, sixty or eighty apart.

**So you are travelling on these open trucks to Palestine. Could you explain what the scenery was like.**

Was dark, no scenery. Two a.m. in the morning to three thirty I think, four o'clock.

17:30 When we got off we just saw the tents, you know the background of the tents. There were marched off in eights I think then, the tents.

**So as the sun came up what did you see?**

A lot of other tents, a lot of men moving around and things. Trumpeter came at six o'clock really and then we were on parade. It was just to,

18:00 Palestine, conditions, more or less a lay day then to settle in. Each of these EPIP [English Patent, Indian Pattern] tents had a cane made bed around about six by six feet might have been thirty inches which the palliase put on top because when it rained in Palestine, it really rained. A lot of the camps had been

18:30 made built with the tents and set up with the tents, the trenches around the tents hadn't been probably dug, so that was the first duty to dig appropriate trenches around the tents to take the water duck ports across the entrance of tents so that the water flew out down the channels because the mud and puddles just stuck to your boots and you were walking about two or three feet higher than you normally would.

**19:00 And what was your role at Palestine, what were you told to do?**

Route marches because we didn't have any equipment. Route marches, picket duty which is in-line picket, in case the Arabs came along and stole your boots, and an outline picket which was a regimental guard. Then followed a period of small arms training

19:30 and rifle drill. There weren't enough rifles to go around so you drew your rifle from the army each time you needed it. And group marches over paddocks and sometimes through the olive groves and orange groves which was very, very helpful because you were able to take a few oranges off the trees as you went past.

20:00 take a few home and eat some on the track, grapefruit were another fruit, but all and all with training, mainly route marches. Some sand hills we went over and later on we got some leave to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, some of them went to settlements, some of the settlements they

20:30 are, one settlement was a trial marriage settlement, but ah you lived together for twelve months and if you felt that it was a goer you got married. Otherwise that was the end you went back to your home settlement. And the other one which was nick-named the love colony. You could live there but you didn't have to get married. But all and all these settlements

21:00 Kibbutzes they were called, they all produced some type of merchandise like they grew wheat or barley, olive groves, orange groves, grapefruit, they ran vegetable patches potatoes. The thing is about the Jewish

21:30 settlements is that how they expanded which is different from the Arabs, there was very little development to their land and it was left to the Jews to develop their land and as these villages sprung up they became more self sufficient. They had developed a barter system, sometimes they didn't use any money at all these just used a barter system, where they traded goods and one set of goods

22:00 goes for another set of goods.

**What contact**

**22:30 did you have with the local Arab population while you were in camp?**

We had very good contact because in Constantine the village had just been formed, otherwise it was just a stop on the road. There were a lot of refugees setting up the village. And they came to these villages or areas where they established the village, had these huge packing cases which became the side walls for the shops and the villages

23:00 and I guess they must have got building materials from somewhere because they also had houses. And back behind this new part of the village there was an older established village. And they had little industries like cottage industries, like photographers and interpreters, secretarial duties and things like that.

23:30 But even in the new part of the village they established a café and the troops used to go over there, they

were welcome over there, a lot of friendships developed between the local inhabitants and us. It was never out of bounds and they used to have little dances and things like that which we would have a look at. But of course we had our own open-air cinema down the road which we used to frequent. On the odd occasions

24:00 there was a concert group, a Jewish concert group came along and they played us what you could call classical jazz like the Flight of the Bumble Bee and things of that nature, not real high class classics but things most people could understand, they were very good musicians.

24:30 **The camp itself could you explain how that was set up there were tents and**

Yes there were EPIP tents, there was a timber mess hall, timber sergeants' mess, timber officers' mess, at [UNCLEAR Qastina] camp we had timber, treated timber like a red ochre treatment on the pine board.

25:00 The guard up was all the same type of timber and the officers headquarters were all that, and they were all in sections probably in rectangles to contain probably up to a hundred of the EPIP tents. With little pathways between them, probably over a couple of

25:30 acres of ground. Then there would be a space with another unit like a big kid village.

**You mentioned that you went on leave to places like Tel Aviv and places like Jerusalem. What were your impressions of those places? What do you remember?**

Went to Jerusalem first and being the holy city we went to the two main churches there but

26:00 the deathly part of Jerusalem was that everyone walking around the streets had three stripes up. First duty you did when you went on leave if you weren't a sergeant or an officer is you went to the little tailor in the hotel you were staying at and he used to sew three stripes on your shirt, because to actually go anywhere in Jerusalem, practically everything was out of bounds, to the troops. They were in-bounds to sergeants and in-bounds to officers, but very, very few

26:30 cafes or restaurants available for the troops, so consequently everybody had three stripes sewn onto their arm. On the way back they were cross stitched from the sleeves. Very hard to find a private or a gunner walking around. But mainly they visited restaurants and there were a few interesting ones there, run by Polish Jews. French,

27:00 Russian, all with different accents you know. But they could speak, most of them spoke a broken English and they could [UNCLEAR]. And then we were starting to learn a smattering of Arabic as well, not too much Hebrew language but a smattering of Arabic.

**Can you remember any of the Arabic that you learnt?**

Oh, Arabic, sita saba,

27:30 can't think of eight, but nine ten. They used to have a word, like saying eighteen it used to be arbaat or some name like that which meant instead of fourteen, four would be fourteen instead of fourteen in Arabic.

28:00 Not very well, I can't think about it, but ah no but maleesh was never mind, imshi was sort of give way, and ana miskin I have no money, inta rani, he's a rich man. shufti, show me,

28:30 sekina is knife, wallad was boy, bint was girl, it'll come back to me sometime.

**What were you warned about when you went into the**

29:00 **cities?**

About the dangers of drinking , about the dangers of women folk, the dangers of disease, every time we went to the city they would say, I think it was sort of a routine and I think everyone repeated parrot fashion, you know after a couple of years.

**So precisely what were you told about women and diseases?**

29:30 Well there was dangers of disease and that the Egyptians they suffered a lot with the sexual disease, with the gonorrhoea and the other one that effects the eyes. See a lot of them with weeping eyes which was all part and parcel of the disease. And they warned people about the possibilities

30:00 of contracting these diseases.

**Did the army issue any kits?**

Yep, called the blue light outfit.

**What would they have in them?**

Had ointments and I think it was a bottle of some treatment sort of antiseptic and the ointment was supposed to go inside.

30:30 But you were supposed to report to the blue light centre, which had a blue light around it and quite a few people there, doctors and male orderlies.

**Was that back at the camp?**

No that was in most of the cities. And generally where there was a military police area or station there was a blue

31:00 section.

**So would people report there to pick up the kits or would?**

The kits you were supposed to take with you, or you could if you stayed on leave a long while I guess you could go back there and replenish your kit if you wanted to.

**And the availability of brothels, how obvious was it, where the brothels were?**

Brothels

31:30 were always advertised by word of mouth. I guess passed on down from the 6th Division down to 7th and 9th and but there was also in Cairo that goes back to the First World War that had been printed in the books and was called the main one in Cairo, was I think it was called

32:00 Sister Street. The main one in the 141 was the Berko, then there was, became known as the Berko. Top of the Berko was number 99 so when they played Housie Housie when 99 came out it was top of the Berko so 'housie housie', it's like bingo, where you play with numbers,

32:30 fill them in on the sheets. 66 clickety click, number 1 is Kelley's eye, number 9 is doctor's orders, that's just someone that went to hospital and your bowels weren't working. The doctors used to give you a horrible green tablet called, which everyone named it a number 9 it was supposed to give you dysentery.

**So did people play this game in the desert?**

33:00 Not very many just a few, it was part of the in the huts, somebody used to set up a hut and then there were YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] hut and a lot of the gear in the huts was subsidised by the association, by the parents of the troops overseas. We had a very, very strong association. And the wives, not the wives, the mothers, fathers

33:30 used to run things and there was a fund which gave us an amount of money and we just had to send to the CO. And he administered in Preston, so Constantine in the hut. We were able to buy a piano and we had about half a dozen guys who could play the piano, very good pianist, writing paper and got a few radios and later on we got

34:00 primuses [stoves] for the tents and things like that, all coming from money from the parents association in Melbourne. What we eventually made these huts supplied by the wives and the Salvation Army made them very beautiful, it was a centre where movies were. You know played games, card games, two operatives, generally outside somewhere, not in the lines, away from the officers.

34:30 **You mentioned going into Jerusalem and sewing on a couple of stripes. What sort of punishment would you receive if you were discovered doing that?**

I think the officers turned a blind eye. Surely they must have seen a lot of the troops. Because I'm sure the sergeants did because they were sergeants on leave with us.

35:00 I noticed when I became a sergeant it didn't worry me as long as they had them off when they came back to camp.

**What are your memories of going into Tel Aviv?**

Tel Aviv was a very, Tel Aviv was only twenty-five years old when we were there. It was very clean all the buildings were white, cause they quarried

35:30 all the white stone from the area and every building was white stone. And the streets had only been down twenty-five years, they were very new. Very clean actually, the comparison with next door in the old city of Haifa, or Jaffa as they called it, that's the name of the oranges, Jaffa oranges, that's also the port of Tel Aviv,

36:00 but that was very, very old Arabic and very old buildings and very narrow streets on cobbled stones. Everything going down the gutters outside the buildings, no, very little hygiene at all. Whereas Tel Aviv had sewerage plants and things like that. Up to date restaurants and you name it.

**How would you pass your time when you went into these cities?**

I went sight seeing.

36:30 Sight seeing around the, bearing in mind we only had two days off and sometimes three. By the time

you'd travelled and, but alright, always time to fill in. By visiting, theatres, cinemas, most of them were in Arabic or in Hebrew,

37:00 you watched the picture if you wanted to. But there was Hebrew meeting places, also the mosque that was there and there was also a concert occasionally on where you know there orchestras played and you could go there. It was

37:30 reasonably priced, but generally between going to a restaurant, having some wine which you didn't get in camp and having steak cooked by someone else instead of your own cooks. And vegies [vegetables] which, we always found something to do. Tel Aviv is also on the ocean, the Mediterranean

38:00 you couldn't find a better place for swimming as that. That was as good as Clovelly, the Med [Mediterranean].

**What kind of food did you have in camp?**

Fresh food with a mixture of bully beef and tinned food, but generally fresh vegetables. Soy sausages which I believe were invented by two Australian brothers who stayed on after the

38:30 first war. Instead of adding meat they added soy beans but you couldn't taste the difference between the soy beans and the meat. And they cooked like sausages and they fried and they tasted like sausages. Apparently they are very healthy but they were quite a change in the diet. But I believe it was there were two chaps, the '14-'18 [First World War] war started and they never looked back.

39:00 I'm told that the original, two guys are still there now. Probably it's been privatised, it's probably a massive company now. Global company.

**When you were in camp were you told anything about where you would be heading?**

No, only that we, knowing that the 6th Division, 6th Division took Derna and Tobruk

39:30 while we were in Constantine in January '41. January '41 that's correct, and they moved up and then around about February, towards the end of February we knew that we were going up to the desert because the night division was started, that's was formed partially in

40:00 October in 1940. A lot of the troops came from the 7th, 8th Division who were already over there in Syria, very few I think only 1 Battalion actually formed, that was the 32nd Battalion, that were originally night division and consequently when the 18th Brigade which was in England came to the Middle East

40:30 in late December, early January, we knew that we were going up because they also bought with them the 25th Brigade I think it was called at the time. And they became the 31st, 32nd, 31st, 32nd, and 33rd Divisions. The 32nd was attached to the 9th Division, 13th, 15th and 17th Battalions

41:00 from 7th Division, 20th Brigade, they became 9th Division, 23rd, 24th and 48th Battalions from the 8th Division became the 26th Brigade night division, 32nd Battalion, it was already night division together with the 28th and 48th Battalion,

41:30 we tried 8th Division, they became 9th Division. And the other division on 7th and 8th became 8th Division and went to Singapore and Malaya.

**So how long were you in camp at Palestine?**

We were at Palestine until March, some units already left Palestine and went off to the 6th Division which were on the way down to Egypt to go to

42:00 Crete.

## Tape 4

00:34 **Mr Widdows, were you able to play sport while you were in the desert?**

Yes, Puckapunyal we had football, every regiment had a football team. And a cricket team, that carried on right through my army time for six years.

**So where would you actually play cricket when you were in the desert?**

01:00 You made a pitch and Palestine we had a pitch and the compass fund supplied us with wickets and bats and balls, footballs, every unit, a lot of the units had there own football fields, some of them pretty had rock and things.

**And how did you actually make the cricket pitch?**

I just dragged a, engineers helped you know with the blade sometimes

01:30 to run over the top of it but the compass men put matting down on top of it, that came from the comfort fund area.

**And how would the competition work, who would you play?**

You select a team and they had troop competitions, battery competitions and then you had regimental competitions. So, in a battery like in an artillery unit there's

02:00 two troops to a battery, two batteries to a regiment, three batteries to a regiment, later on, three batteries original. The British army changed the whole series, first of all they started off with four troops and two batteries, one regiment. Then it became four troops

02:30 in two batteries and six guns in each troop, making twenty four guns to a regiment. Then they made it three, two troops to one battery and three batteries to a regiment. Same number of guns, more troops and more batteries. So consequently you had more cricket teams and football teams.

**Were there ever any**

03:00 **cricket matches with British soldiers?**

No, no, no. Because when we were with the British there was only action, at Tobruk and El Alamein. There was no sporting in those days.

**Can you tell me about the dog you adopted?**

Dogs, we adopted a dog yes. That was in Palestine,

03:30 little black and white dog, half starved when we got him and we took him up, we got him in Palestine in Constantine, took him up to stay with us in Lebanon, we were in Lebanon at Jdaide where the camp was, he travelled with the, one leg had bruises all over it, training manoeuvres then he went to Egypt with us

04:00 he went into action at El Alamein with us but unfortunately he went missing at the third day at El Alamein think the noise got to him, upset his mental balance I think. So the last we saw of 'Pisser', that was his nick-name, his name actually, because he never stopped pissing near you. He must have had a secret supply of water I think.

04:30 **What did you feed him?**

Oh he ate what the gunners ate. He was half starving when we got him I guess. He wasn't used to much in the way of tinned food there was no Pal [dog food] in those days, he ate whatever was left if we had vegies or bully beef, or bones if we didn't have fresh meat. He was well fed don't worry about that.

**Where did he sleep?**

05:00 Oh generally in somebodies bed. He was not selective, just anybody, he'd sleep with anybody.

**Can you tell me about getting orders to move?**

Getting orders to move. Well I originally, one thing at camp at Palestine when they moved to Egypt,

05:30 because I, there was a group of us, forty of us went to a place called Tel el Kebir. We were there that's when we moved up to the desert. What I have heard is that they received the unit, received orders to move to Egypt, some went by train some went by truck to a place called Amiriya and then they went to another place further

06:00 in to the west, Ikingi Mariut and that's where the regiments stayed most of the time I was in Egypt, but I never, never there, Ikingi Mariut.

**So can you describe what the atmosphere was like in the desert in terms of the progress of the desert war in terms of what was happening at that time.**

06:30 **From when you were in Palestine?**

Well I left Palestine at the end of March and we had a week in Al-Tal Al-Kabeer where we ferried trucks from Port Said to Al-Tal Al-Kabeer, then they we drew, they wanted seven people to take five trucks up to Benghazi up to the desert, everybody volunteered in the group

07:00 I was in but we only needed seven and we put the names in the hat and whoever drew the short stick, and seven names came out and I was one of them. The first time there we went to the Massawa Caves where the artillery stored shells and ammunition charges, loaded the trucks up with ammunition to be taken to the wharf at Alex

07:30 for transshipment to Greece and then we went to the railway station at Alex and picked up ammo equipment for the 7/11th Field Ambulance to take to Benghazi. On the way to Benghazi we stayed the first night at Mersa Matruh, next morning there was camps

08:00 in, there was a very bad desert storm you could only see your, during the night this was, sorry, even in

moonlight you can't see your hand, more than twelve inches in front. But in the morning that cleared and we moved to the west again, but after fifty miles one of the trucks broke down I think, the number three truck in the convoy, I was driving number five and I had the MT fitter with me

- 08:30 and he fixed the truck up with his, by the time he fixed the truck up, the drive got under way, by the time Peggy Smith, the MT fitter packed all his gear and he had quite a bit of gear into the truck and we got our truck organised and went on the road, unbeknown to us the rest of the convoy had been turned into Tobruk. So somebody had forgot to tell them that
- 09:00 another truck coming along. So they had packed up and went to where the 2/11th and (UNCLEAR) were. We went on our way and I guess we got about twenty, max [maximum] twenty-five miles east of Derna when I came across a group of Australians on the side of the road and they were the first pioneers, a company, so I said get in here and we decided to bed down with them that night, which we did
- 09:30 and had an evening meal with them and at about two o'clock in the morning I woke up and heard the sound of gunfire and rifle fire down towards south. So I got up and went looking for the in-line picket and asked for the officer. He said, "That's the Indian army on manoeuvres, don't worry about that." I said, "OK," and went back to bed and in the morning we had breakfast with them
- 10:00 we had it about seven-thirty and went west again towards Derna. Before we got to the Derna Pass we came to some artillery, British artillery built into the side of the road with six twenty-five pounders. They in turn were firing and I went over to the GPO to find out what was going on and he said well
- 10:30 this is the rear guard action, he said the thirteenth battalion are up ahead of us, he said he could see them firing and before in front of those people are the Germans guard, a vanguard. Which suggests to you get back to Tobruk. We promptly did. So we got back on the main road travelling, past them, on our own,
- 11:00 until we came about sixty, seventy miles and then trucks started to come all past in the desert and that was the commencement of the first vanguard in Antica. And we got back into Tobruk on the 7th of April and I remember that because it was my birthday. And we went through Tobruk, there were guards on the gate past and towards the fortress part,
- 11:30 after about a mile and a half saw one of the trucks, very similar to ours on the top of an escarpment. So I took a bit of a punt and I followed the track to the escarpment and down, onto the escarpment which was overlooking the airfield at the time and came across the 2/11th Battalion and Ermera which is where the other guys were. We thought maybe they'd been in the bag [killed], they thought maybe we were in the bag.
- 12:00 We actually had a reunion together and everybody was OK.

**Can I just ask what did you know about the advancing army when you were told to go on this mission?**

Nought. Nought. We were going to Minyarti. It all happened so suddenly, we didn't know, I guess we didn't know at Al-Tal Al-Kabeer.

- 12:30 Because only the base orders depot and they wouldn't be, you know, but I guess back at ninth headquarters and back at our regiment headquarters, they would have known. Because when we left Al-Tal Al-Kabeer and they didn't hear from us, we were posted missing. They set an alarm so nobody in the unit knew where we were.

**Those Australian pioneers that you saw, where had they come from?**

- 13:00 They had been in Tobruk, they'd been up with the 6th Division. They'd fought in Tobruk and also up to Derna and then up to Tobruk and then further up to towards Benghazi with the 6th Division. But they were on the move back but the forward elements were still further up, but they didn't tell us they were the retreat. What we only met them at the,
- 13:30 they possibly thought we knew. You see the actual, we found out later, this firing at the Germans when we were south was actually the battle of Achille, where the German troops came down inland and they were cutting off the 20th Brigade coming down on the coastal section.

**So if you hadn't run into those British soldiers you would have driven straight into the German army.**

We would have come into the thirteenth battalion, yeah.

- 14:00 and then the German army yeah. The advance charter. But I think we would have turned around when we saw the rifles firing in the opposite direction.

**What did you know about Rommel [German General] and his mystic?**

Nothing. Nothing was known about Rommel until we didn't even know, there were some whispers that some Germans had landed at Tripoli and Tripoltania in February,

14:30 late February but according to everybody it was supposed to be the Melanesia, it was taken well towards the end of March before he'd be able to get on the move.

**So when you'd gotten to Tobruk, can you explain how it was guarded when you first arrived.**

There were some military in Tobruk at the time. I think elements of the 18th Brigade and also

15:00 the 24th Brigade I think probably the 28th Battalion and the 48th Battalion because I don't think the 32nd hadn't got in until some time in May. 26th Brigade they were between Tobruk and the Germans and also the 20th Brigade were too also.

15:30 I think the 20th Brigade were the last into Tobruk. And that's when the siege commenced on round about. I think the gate was shut as we call it on the 9th or 10th of, 9th of April and the first battle took part on the 10th of April.

**Can you explain what Tobruk looked like as a town, city?**

It had a hospital,

16:00 church. A whole number of buildings in white stone, mainly white stone, quite a number of buildings which were like a big open garage which had been taken over by the work shops who had come up to Tobruk following the 6th Division up and they had established work shops there. The hospital was run by the 2/4th AGH [Australian General Hospital] and

16:30 the nurses had been taken out, mainly male orderlies and doctors, the church was still being used, there were some barracks somewhere I believe, forts, coastal forts on either side of the harbour. And a few shops and houses, that's about all.

**In terms of it's size what could you compare it to in Australia?**

17:00 Size in those days. You know, Welshpool in Victoria, where that bloke used to go from Tasmania sometimes, like that. But not that particular type of harbour but a bigger church and probably

17:30 a population of about a thousand, I guess, you know Tobruk in it's civil time.

**What were the locals doing when you arrived?**

Sennussi [Libyan tribe], they were, they were in the shops but they were mainly in the desert. I don't think any of the shops were operating when we got there. Probably operating when the 6th did for a little while, and then I think they would have been told by the town

18:00 picket or the town marshal to leave because it was a dangerous area. They were friendly and very calm and gentle person, St Issis.

**What sense was there that it was going to be a siege point, do you think?**

I think when we shut the gate and after the first attack which was regiment VC [?UNCLEAR]

18:30 and I don't think it was 1 Battalion then, but I thought then it was beginning to be a siege. And then I think it was promulgated a few days after, that we would hold it for two or three weeks. Then it was gradually two months and then there was a Morse sent that said we would hold it until they surrender and we'll go out, we'll fight our way out.

19:00 So that's when it all happened.

**What sort of existing fortifications or trenches were there in Tobruk?**

That's a very good point because the defence of Tobruk was same as it was when the Italians had it. There was a red line on the corner which was the outer defence with a very comprehensive formation of pits, sands,

19:30 eating areas, sleeping areas. They were distanced probably about four hundred yards or maybe less or more between each post but there was a series right around from coast line to coast line from the west, the point from the central, the centre of Tobruk to the outer circle I think would have been about seven

20:00 miles. And if you can imagine a circumference running right around an outer circle to the road going east to Derna, sorry the town, Bardia, in the east. From Bardia road then to the coast to the Scrag Wadi [?UNCLEAR Wadi Audi?], which was a big deterrent in its own and it had

20:30 man made dug-outs in it, when I say man made dugs, dug outs and things with fixed lines and anti tank guns there.

**Can you explain what a wadi is for someone that doesn't know?**

A wadi is a dried out water course, sometime like a deep gully, the waddies over there range from about very steep, probably about thirty/forty feet maximum, thirty feet,

21:00 some with a gradual incline some with a very steep, like cliffs, like a cliff, but that was caused when the

heavy rains came they over the many years they'd been formed.

**So once you met up with the other trucks what happened?**

Well then we were sent back, we stayed a week with the ambulance group going out on various missions to help the medics holding blankets

- 21:30 up when they operated out on the field like with a blood bath. That's was then we they didn't have any sterilising fluid, they'd just cut the veins, operate, get the strap out then stitch up again with a blood bath, we'd hold the blankets while the doctors did this. This was two or three days and then they had a lot of shelling by the enemy but ah
- 22:00 there was a bit of a lull there and we went to staging camp where we were given a bayonet and told we were going to the twenty third battalion, who'd been knocked about that night, their band was going up also. But just at that time we were, an officer came from the 51st Field Regiment, an artillery regiment, and wanted to know if there were any Australian gunners there, which we approved
- 22:30 and said yes so we went to this field artillery regiment, 51st Field Regiment, twenty-five pounders. We stayed with them for a week and together with another four from the 7 Medium Regiment, seven of us and about twelve from the 51st Regiment we formed a section of
- 23:00 sixty pounders, which we fired from a point called Point Palestrino, which is about half way between the town and the red line. We had two guns pits taken there and fired from there, otherwise we took the two guns up to the forward infantry posts where we fired fifty rounds from each gun at the
- 23:30 enemy airfield at, gun positions or the enemy airfield, I'll think of that later.

**When did it first become clear at Tobruk**

- 24:00 **that the enemy were advancing and the gate needed to be shut.**

The shots were fired as soon as the troops were in Tobruk when the Germans were coming down. A bit of gun fire and they decided then that the troops would be better off with a fortification in Tobruk itself. And that's when the wire was put across the road and everybody bought back inside.

**Can you describe what**

- 24:30 **the noise was like of the advancing German army?**

The shots were fired you know but nothing very, not a great amount of noise because there weren't too many weapons, it was mainly a probing feel. But it wasn't until we were attacked by this small group, a section of the 17th Battalion I think it was the morning of the tenth, eleventh that you knew there was something going on because of the consistency

- 25:00 of the rifle firing and the machine gun firing and the shelling and the anti tank firing and things like that.

**What were your impressions of the British at Tobruk?**

Excellent, yeah. There is a big, there's a firm friendship that exists today between the British artillery and the Australian, the Australian forces in Tobruk, because it's felt without them, the British artillery

- 25:30 and the Royal Australian Navy and the Australian infantry, Tobruk would never have been held. It needed those three combinations to do it.

**So what sort of support were you getting form the Royal Australian Navy?**

The Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy, they were bringing all the troops and supplies in because Tobruk was like cut off from Vote [UNCLEAR Bardia] to Derna. Derna highway and the Bardia highway,

- 26:00 east Derna and the west. So consequently everything had to come in, by ship, the wounded went out by ship and the reinforcements came in by ship, right throughout siege. Ammunition came in by ships, food came in, there was also another group called the Small Ships Flotilla they were small types of slips and that guy called Peter Palmer was captained one of those, they bought a lot of small

- 26:30 equipment in and ammunition and foodstuffs in.

**Where were the injured being cared for in Tobruk?**

In the hospital in Tobruk and they also had a another auxiliary hospital called Beach Hospital which was taken under canvas on the western side of Tobruk I think from memory, no it was taken out to the 4th AGH and then shipped from the 4th AGH onto the jetty

- 27:00 onto the destroyer. Which only spent about an hour in, the turn around they had to be well clear before the aircraft came over.

**Where were you sleeping?**

Hole. Everybody had their own holes, sometimes two people slept in an individual hole. Sometimes we had three in a hole if you took over a jump position, we had three or four people and radar.

27:30 A very, very secure, and by that I mean even telegraph poles on the roof and sandbags above that, even though they were full of fleas and scorpions and you know, rats, you'd still go there because they were very, very strongly built. Dug out or fox hole or bunk hole, you call it what you like.

**So you slept with your gun?**

Oh yeah, right beside you, yeah.

**So can you explain to me**

28:00 **in as much detail as you can, the first action you experienced at Tobruk. What you were firing at and what enemy fire you experienced?**

The first action, yes through to the 51st Field Regiment. We were doing cattle factory fire there, which means that you are firing at the opposing enemy artillery and

28:30 also firing at the German strong points and also a point there where the German troops were advancing on the Australian infantry. That was what we understood from the GPO officer. But that was mainly harassing fire which was on targets, or just keeping the enemy awake. But when we moved to third position with the two sixty pounders,

29:00 we were mainly firing on direct targets and the name of the airport was Aladdin, which was about ten or twelve miles from Tobruk and by moving the fifty pounder up to the front line we could concentrate on the, at Aladdin on the north east.

**What sort of presence, aerial presence was there of the Luftwaffe [German Air Force]?**

29:30 Very, very strong, continually being dive bombed by the stickers, and they're high up planes, what I call '88s [Junker Stuka 88 dive bomber], plus supported by Messerschmitt 109s. Who also on the cessation of bombing came in with the machine gun firing, over the trenches and that.

**What sort of anti-aircraft support did you have?**

We had British artillery, heavy, two regiments, very, very good and some

30:00 very good anti aircraft, light aircraft, one battery of Australian which were very good, two regiments of British fighter planes. But the whole artillery component in Tobruk was mainly British with the Exception of some batteries of anti Jack from the third, 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment of Australia, two of them were in Tobruk and

30:30 the others came in from Achille, they fought the rear guard action out at Achille. The other battery was at Mersa Matruh I believe. The Royal Horse Artillery they supplied a regiment of artillery, eighty tanks, my own regiment didn't come in as a whole until during May, they came in piecemeal through battery by battery. Don Troop [D Troop] then

31:00 Ack Troop [A Troop] and then Beer Troop [B Troop], Charlie Troop [C Troop] then Eddie and Freddy Troop [E and F Troop]. But at the same time the end of the 32nd Battalion came in, their regiment were in their entirety, but without equipment.

**Can you explain what a rearguard action is?**

Rearguard action is protecting a retreat. They have troops, a group of troops fighting and retreating at the same

31:30 time. Fighting the rear guard action, where the rear, they are retreating to get a better position. You've got a holding force to restrain the enemy from advancing, getting the troops retiring a chance to put together a defensive situation.

**What sort of casualties were the artillery gunners suffering at Tobruk?**

32:00 Some got more than others, some of the British field regiments got horrific casualties, suffered horrific casualties, because they're mainly, 1 RHA [Royal Horse Artillery] they were at several tank battles fighting as an anti-tank and they were firing at say a hundred yards direct at tanks who were firing direct at them. Some of their guns were knocked out complete with their gun crews, but we in Australia, we didn't have that equipment in the

32:30 12th Regiment to fight anti-tank, anti-tank, that probably comes up later because we had all antiquated parts from some antiquated Italian, Australian, English equipment we used also antiquated Italian equipment.

**So in your gunnery crew in Tobruk was anyone killed our injured?**

In my crew, yeah, one killed yeah.

33:00 **Can you explain to me what happened?**

Well the whole troops were, this was later on, when was this? Probably early June late May, early June, we'd been pinpointing where the guns were, and we'd fired quite a number of rounds into this position and we'd been shelled back after a few days

33:30 we got more shelling back and we got bombed. And the day we suffered the casualties was we'd had a heavy concentrate, we'd fired heavy concentrations and the heavy concentrations fired back at us. Guns like shells landed on the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] where the corporal RAP was killed and his RAP was blown up that was Richmond A Post,

34:00 the command post suffered several hits, another gun crew was hit and suffered several hits, number two suffered a casualty, number three gun had the wheel gun blown off it, no casualties and number four gun I think missed, but a lot of close shots around it. It was over a period of about an hour, shelling.

**Was that the first time you'd seen someone killed in action?**

Yes.

34:30 **What sort of impact did that have on the gunnery crew?**

Mixed emotions, you were very sad because you lost a mate, but I think in those days you sort of grew up very quickly and you realised that it could be you or it maybe your other mate or something.

35:00 It reinforced a colonel's instructions earlier, dig and dig deep, make sure you're covered.

**Can you describe what the climate was like in Tobruk and how you adapted to it?**

Climate, very hot, very dusty, fleas, flies

35:30 no mosquitos fortunately, but scorpions in the ground, rats, dust in the camp scene so, and you existed on half a bottle of water, a day. That was for cleaning to shave to wash to put something to make a cup of tea, have a drink.

36:00 **How did that effect your physical condition?**

We lost a lot of weight but, I think, but if you took your ascorbic tablets apart from breaking out in what's called dreaded sores, worse when a fly got in there infect them, they were nick-named rock sores they

36:30 became very bad and you had to keep your hands, I was fortunate I didn't suffer with rock sores, my blood must have been OK because I didn't know whether I healed well but didn't suffer, even if they got cut they just healed up quickly.

**How were you adapting the uniform to the heat?**

Well the uniform such as it mainly wore a fur

37:00 felt hat or a tin hat, with a pair of shorts, no underpants, and a pair of boots, no socks, because the socks and the underpants would create perspiration and that would lead to tinea and stuff like that whereas the shorts even though they were called Bombay Bloomers there was a fair amount of air circulating, and your top, the perspiration

37:30 dried off the top, and the socks, your feet were pretty dry without socks. So that was the gear.

**How did you go to the toilet?**

Well, they had a, most troops had a toilet just in front of the gun, a cartridge case with a round hole and a hole dug where they threw

38:00 chord in everyday to burn it out and keep the flies away. And you took a chance when you needed to go and when you heard a shell you went to the ground. Regardless. I guess you called it hit and run or sit and run. But

38:30 ordinarily just to pass water you just stood out in the open, nobody around to be offended or anything.

**Was that dangerous though?**

Well you didn't stand long, not during a shellfire. If you were on the ground, you generally had an old tin or something which you, you know like peed into or when it was quiet you just put it out the top.

**Can you explain how the**

39:00 **timing worked in terms of the firing, like how frequent was it and how long would a lull in firing be?**

You mean from the enemy? Well that depends on the movement I guess, unless they're going to register a target the artillery would, might find a water

- 39:30 tank or something in the opposing area, then go for a registration, send a number of rounds at that, then if you saw any movement by troops from that, bring that fire there, which you actually never knew when the enemy were going to actually fire at you, unless of course you were in the lead or attacking yourself. Being in the pit party in the artillery, or the leading infantry or in a Bren gun carrier or a tank or anything like that.
- 40:00 But troops behind like artillery position I never knew. Unless of course they fired themselves they would expect return fire coming back at you.
- Did you ever experience any enemy propaganda in terms of being encouraged to surrender or anything like that?**
- Several times there were a lot of leaflets dropped on top such as,
- 40:30 "Aussies, the Yanks [Americans] are in Darwin, you're here, the Yanks are with your girlfriends in Australia, come out and surrender and you'll be repatriated back home," or, it turned out they were what you call air drops but nobody took any notice of them. More I think they want returns, I don't know why they were interested in Tobruk. But they were very valuable as souvenirs later on.
- 41:00 And there was always Lord Haw Haw [German propaganda broadcaster in English], like exhorting Australian troops that they were surrounded and put their hands up and surrender, nothing would ever come of it, just one of those things I guess, you learnt to live with it. Same with the flies and scorpions and things and the dust.
- 41:30 End of tape

## Tape 5

- 00:32 **Mr Widdows, I just want to clarify something with you, when you were talking about the attacks you were doing on the airport were you actually in Tobruk at that point?**
- That's the time we sued to, with those two sixty pounders we got them at Palestino which is a point on the map in Tobruk, it was an old fort there. But we used to take these two sixty pounders up
- 01:00 behind the forward infantry to get the extra mileage to get onto El Alamein airport or airstrip.
- How different was it using those guns?**
- Those two sixty pounders, they are very, they were modified from the ones we had back in Australia. They were probably the ones they used in France, probably of a, the piece they used themselves, that's the barrel, probably 1918 vintage,
- 01:30 but the carriage themselves would probably be a 1934 vintage. And they were an average sized wheel on which you could travel ten or twelve mile an hour. We used to haul them up there and fire.
- What position were you on the gun?**
- Gun layer. Or ammunition number. We rolled, took it in turns.
- Could you explain how**
- 02:00 **that system worked?**
- Number three is the gun layer, number one is the gun sergeant, on a sixty pounder number two is the bridge, works the bridge, number three lays the gun, number four rams the shell home, number five puts the cartridge in,
- 02:30 number two then slams the bridge and then the ammunition number brings the shell up on the carrying platform ready for the next one.
- How heavy were those shells?**
- Sixty pounds. That's how the guns gets it's name. They're roughly about four and a half inches in diameter though, the bore, or getting back to millimetres about hundred and five millimetres.
- 03:00 **And when you're in the pits in Tobruk when you're in the trench there in the protection, how did it work with the gun, how was the set-up?**
- Well you fired the gun in the pit but when you had to lay down or stand easy they called it, generally you went back to, once you'd cleaned all the cartridges you made the gun pit ready for action next time you just cleaned up around the pit
- 03:30 and had a bit of a rest. Or if you were on cooking duties, mostly in action that's gun crew cooking, even though you may be a gun sergeant you take your turn at cooking, so everybody had to cooking, or

brewing up we'd call it.

### **What would you cook?**

Cooking is very simple, to make porridge you'd soak the biscuits

- 04:00 and if you had a, try to think of it, the gadget you put a pricker in. I mentioned it before. We didn't have one of those, we had a probably a some round tin with some
- 04:30 fat or something in it, with a little cord and it became a heater, although we had another one which was especially prepared with the methylated spirits in it which you lit and put a dixie [pot] on top. Heat that up. But the other way you put a dixie on with some biscuits on and put some water in and make a sort of a mash or porridge out of it. Otherwise you'd cook a bully beef, heat it up
- 05:00 and a beef stew, came in a tin, heat that up so and put a billy on a stand too and just heat that up. Wasn't very, very, wouldn't call it French deserts though!

### **Did you have enough food?**

No, we had a tin of bully beef between three men, it was basic rations that's all right through and biscuits,

- 05:30 the food was never ever, never over-supplied with food. Because it was same as with ammunition, artillery ammunition, all the twenty-five pounders, the twenty-five pounders, were on rations because limited numbers begun and this would allay a bad situation, because depending upon how much the storage could get in.
- 06:00 Where as we and twelve regiment being equipped with lot of troops were equipped with Italian equipment, we'd use the all the equipment left in, left in Tobruk, there was quite a bit of that, so consequently the troops in 12th Regiment would use Italian equipment that a lot of us were firing, or a lot of the work. So food was rationed depending
- 06:30 on income from the ships.

### **How different was it using the Italian equipment?**

Oh very, very, all the line of sight and measurement equipment were all in Italian where as all the English equipment was in degrees in and seconds.

- 07:00 around the dial sites. Same as the range they were all in metric whereas Australian measurements were all in imperial yards, so consequently we all had to be chance, what's the word, transformed back
- 07:30 into Italian measurement back into English or imperial measurement. And our CO who was a fairly good mathematician together with some other officers who were also amongst the leading observation act people, they were able to come up with a converted race table and convert a table to adjust all back from the English metrics and back to the
- 08:00 from the Italian metric system back to the Australian imperial system which made the gun laying and everything a little bit easier. But still had the mills and the other measurement on their dial sign, but at least we knew where we were going. And their range tables and things like that we were able to convert. You get the elevation on the 75mm [calibre] guns, cause they
- 08:30 were mainly 75 mountain guns. We had to dig the trail in, that's the tail of the gun, the pit was six feet down at the back and two foot six the platform where the wheels were. So consequently you had one leg bent when you were working the gun and to do that to get the extra elevation to fire the projectile further. Other wise you were limited to a more or less flat range. To get to the targets
- 09:00 we wanted to, that was the way, with the conversions, because the Italian guns we had more angle of depression and angle of elevation. So all that had to be worked out. We had a very good CO fortunately.

### **When you were in the pits and guns were set up, how were they positioned and what were you told to aim for?**

Well you had an aiming point which could be a

- 09:30 tree or any fixed thing object that was sharp defining object, so you get the hair of the guns, the dial sign fixed on that perfectly, you could even lay a rear on special, I forget the terminology now but each gun we'd have a pair on each gun and one gun person
- 10:00 would run out with them and we had numbers on those to correspond through the dial site so you had two number fours and you would lay on that, that was where you would register your '0', so any orders you got back they write two, four, six degrees you would put that two forward then move the dial back onto that aiming point. Back or rear whatever one you were using. Night time you'd use the conceal light which you laid back onto which is on the aiming post with
- 10:30 the ones I was referring to before. or there could be an aiming post in the rear, as long as it was fixed, guns have been known to lay on the north star which doesn't move very quickly, but that all had to come

from the command post, the gun position, in turn the orders and on an opposition gun or the enemy, came from the OP [observation post] pit

11:00 which in turn was relayed back to the gun position, where the gun was.

**How was this communication working?**

Either by voice or by Tannoy system. Each gun had a Tannoy which is like a little amplifier and if the gun, if the troop was under fire the operator would give orders through the Tannoy speaker, if not he would stand in the gun pit and give them from the megaphone

11:30 verbally across to his gun sergeant, so he acknowledged that they were received. And they would give the order to the layer.

**So how many gun crews would there be?**

One crew to a gun, four guns to a troop. The latest figures, four troops to a, sorry, four guns to a troop, two troops to a battery, three batteries to a regiment. That's twenty four guns to a regiment.

12:00 **What was your mental state and your adrenaline like when you were in battle?**

You felt it a bit. You smelt the cordite, that's clear and the noise, but I guess after two or three weeks it's the same to you, it's a trade

12:30 actually what you have to do and what you do. You do it automatically. You know it's all a set piece. Everything, your whole body reacts to the situation.

**Did you have time away from the pits at Tobruk?**

Yeah sometimes we'd go for a little swim down the Med.

13:00 Not very often though, because by the time you got back you were just as dirty as ever because of the dust. The truck turned up and somebody had to be there most of the time because you never know when gunfire is going to be called. And even though there's always somebody around the pit ready to go into action.

13:30 **What was the first sign you would have in the pit of incoming enemy fire?**

Oh you'd hear a noise and you'd cock your ears and hear a whistling of a gun but with an 88 all you would hear is you'd see the flash, first thing you'd see is a flash, if you are high enough to see it. Then

14:00 you see, then you hear the bang and you hear the whistle and the noise but with the 88 [calibre gun], there'd be the flash the bang on your end and then their bang. Very high trajectory and very fast trajectory. I forget what the measurement was. It was measured

14:30 so many yards per second but it's very, very, very good gun.

**How far away was the enemy firing from?**

Depending on the size of the equipment, the 88 would be, the 88 could be behind the infantry or well back. Because the 88 was used as an anti-aircraft gun, also as an anti tank gun, three way usage and very, very good, it was very similar to

15:00 our three point seven anti-aircraft gun, but the anti-aircraft gun was three point seven but for some unknown reason was never used three ways, could have been a very damaging weapon. It was used by our battery once in Borneo to, when we were on Labuan to bombard the British, North Borneo. But to my knowledge it was never used in the desert.

15:30 But going with the medium artillery was possibly about five hundred a thousand yards behind the infantry. And the heavy artillery another thousand yards behind that.

**What was the atmosphere like at Tobruk being at this siege?**

16:00 What amongst the troops? Oh mateship, that was the best way to describe it. Didn't matter whether you were infantry, AFC [Australian Flying Corps] or engineer, artillery, tanks or whatever, you were in Tobruk, you were what Rommel described, rats in little holes. That's where the name rats came from

16:30 and a rat was a rat regardless what branch of the service he was in. He was a mate.

**Was there a particular impact psychologically being bunkered down that way?**

You mean did it affect people differently? That I think depended on the body

17:00 chemistry of a person and the make-up. Some when they came in they were very emotional right from the start, you could see that they were not going to be able to stand up that they were going to have to be evacuated. Unfortunately that was a problem in their case, and they were,

17:30 but it wasn't that they were frightened or scared, it was just that their - you could either take it or you couldn't take it or with the group you could take it. Everybody is different I don't think. I don't think anybody really knows until the actual breaking point takes a part and unfortunately, or fortunately I didn't suffer breaking point and none of my friends did but we did have friends that did,

18:00 and to what degree, or what there was no timing, no timing when you can tell that will happen to a person. Just happened.

**What would happen to someone when they reached that breaking point?**

They'd be taken out of action. If it was possible, or the nearest possible time and sent back. And they'd go further back and

18:30 treatment you know, depending on the psychiatrist. You know some of them never recovered. Some did, some came back to the troop, or the battery but most of them didn't. It was just one of those things.

**What kinds of signs would there be that someone was having difficulty?**

Difficult to say, it's very difficult hard to pick.

19:00 Some signs would be some people turn grey very quickly, yep, we had a chap in Komodo he went grey in a matter of a week I think it was. It was only a matter of two or three days before he was taken out. I think it's

19:30 very hard to describe because we'd be, getting bomb happy we described it. Sheer fact is person acting strangely they'd be, just indicates, a difference from what the person is normally and some could pick it some couldn't. Just, you know your mates, you study with the gun crew.

20:00 I think it became easier for a gun sergeant to do it because you live with your crew all the time and you know when someone was becoming effected and there was a change of attitude and you watched that. I was fortunate I think in that.

**What kinds of signs would the sergeant the gun sergeant look out for?**

20:30 Any change in the persons method of, way he spoke or even the way he walked or, the way he acted, a slight noise and he got upset, slight noise or he'd rustle his leg, or he went like that or you see the shakes

21:00 and difference in, any slight difference in a person. It's just something that happens and you think did he do that before or not and you think back and can't remember and it happens again, and you say, "Gotta watch him," you know. Things like that.

**What kinds of things could you do for someone who was in that kind**

21:30 **of state?**

Oh there's not much you can do at all. They can, talk, "You OK, Leo?" "Right, Jack?" and they say, "Yeah I'm right." and you accept that. Or "I'm right, mate." Used the word 'mate' a lot.

22:00 Some things just came into your mind automatically, you said it just to see what the reaction was. Hard to describe.

**How long were you in Tobruk for?**

7th of April I came out, early October, May,

22:30 oh about five and a half months I guess. Only five months, yeah, early October. April, May, June, July August, September, six months yeah.

**And how were you told you would be leaving?**

I was under, their were rumours going around for two or three weeks before, when the 18th Brigade went out they went back to the 7th Div [Division],

23:00 that was in early August I think, the 51st Regiment, there was a feeling that some of the Australian troops would be released. To what degree was not known, but then the next month, September, more troops went out. And then we sort of realised that this was a period when 9th Division were being relieved.

23:30 And I think I was one of the last out of our group which was 30th October.

**What were your feelings on leaving Tobruk?**

Mixed, I guess, we left the battalion in there and we felt you should go in and go out as whole you know.

24:00 And the other thing was that, we'd seen it so far why couldn't we see it to the end, bearing in mind we thought and we were sure the Brits [British] would have power, and the South Africans and the Kiwis,

that came up and relieved us. But also a sense of relief, like I say, mixed emotions.

24:30 But it was very good to get back to Alex and get some fresh water and stand under a shower for about half an hour.

**How did you leave Tobruk?**

I came out on the HMS Hotspur, the British destroyer. I think only three or four regiments were on that. A lot of them came out on the nine May one.

**What was it like getting on that ship having been in**

25:00 **been in Tobruk?**

As soon as you got on board there was porky-pies [British], there were other Australians with me from, with us, from other units, but the British sailors just put us down on the deck, put your thing on and bought us a cup of hot cocoa straight away. And as we wanted a hot cup of cocoa they kept bringing it all the way back to Alexandria. They just kept moving amongst us

25:30 and if we wanted anything. And then we got off at Alex, weren't very welcomed by the locals though. They were pro German already and they were getting ready to welcome the Germans in.

**So what did the locals do when you arrived?**

Made signs across the throat. There were even some swastikas floating from the buildings you know.

26:00 Not a very good sign, but still. It was OK.

**When you left Tobruk did you have a feeling then that you had been a part of something that was momentous.**

Well you knew I think that from the first couple of weeks, every felt that this was part of history,

26:30 it's a strange feeling I guess being in scenes where you know the only way you can get out is fight your way out or get relieved by sea. I don't think there was anyway the Brits could have relieved us by sea and you get to accept that sort of, the idea that you are there. And once again you're bonded by the mateship.

27:00 By the Brits and the Australians.

**Could you tell me what happened once you arrived in Alexandria and what happened from there?**

Alexandria, we got the shock of our lives. The regiment that relieved us, 144 Field Regiment Royal Artillery, they'd been fighting down at

27:30 in the, at the Italian part of Africa down Abyssinia, Eritrea, where there group of India - where the division of Indians, and they fought their way up from Olear [?UNCLEAR], to back to up Aisle [?UNCLEAR], and they left their gear at Alex. That means their trucks and

28:00 their weapons. And we left all our weapons and things in Tobruk and it was swap, we left them the greatest assortment of clapped out artillery and trucks anyone would ever seen in their life and we inherited all this relatively new twenty-five pounders, Humber scout cars, quad vehicles, four ton trucks,

28:30 complete field regiment of artillery equipment. We were the first artillery equipment regiment in Australia I think to have all that equipment. it wasn't very long before it started to be taken off us. But at least we had it for a while, very good feeling, we felt very sorry for the friends back there, back in Tobruk.

**And what were you told that you would be doing at this point?**

29:00 Reinforcing, re-training, and back to Palestine. Which we did we left Alexandria, went back across the Sinai to the regiment of Conroy, got back to Palestine about two days later I think. Might have been three. We went to a place like, I think it was

29:30 Hell ninety five I think they called it. For a couple of weeks and then we went back to Constantine where we started from. After being there for a couple of months we went to Lebanon where we took over from the 7th Division which went back to Australia. And then we became the garrison, 9th Division became the ninth army garrison of Syria and Lebanon in case the Turks

30:00 coming down from close to Germany, came through Turkey. We built fortifications there and trained in mobile warfare, anti tank shoots and until Tobruk fell and then we were called back to the desert. So we left.

30:30 **I might just ask you about being based in Lebanon before, what was that place like where you were?**

Beirut, Lebanon was very, very friendly, we were in little village called, it ran off Jdaide, it was on a track that ran from Tripoli through Zghorta on the way to the Cedars which is a top snow resort in the Lebanon, for the Lebanese.

- 31:00 About half way up there past Zghorta, there's a little township called Jdaide where there's a monastery run by the, not the Marist, anyway another order, and brown habit, and that was made our regimental headquarters. they were still doing their thing at the time they were moving around in the monastery.
- 31:30 Regimental head quarters there was the CO and his assistants the adjutant, sig [signal] officer, and the guard up was outside but the troops were in sort of an open area near an orchard and in a village called Zghorta. Jdaide was only about two hundred yards from Zghorta.
- 32:00 That was where we had the guns and the park and the tents and we carried out our regimental duties. And the local people used to come down every morning wanting to know if they could do washing and things like that. Which the troops used to give them and they'd take it away. A tin of bully beef would get the tents washing done and they became quite friendly and you'd get invited up to their village for a
- 32:30 meal, they'd charge you. It was equivalent currency there was the Australian pound there were twenty-five English shillings, no twenty-five Australian shillings to an English pound. There was an Egyptian
- 33:00 pound at the same time. Two and seven pence was the Syrian piastre, I think they called it, and one hundred mill to the piastre, but that was equal to two and seven pence. All the meals they supplied to you, a bottle of beer or a meal was one and seven pence Australian if you got two it was two times that, you know.
- 33:30 That was the basis they used their charging fees on so it was reasonable.

**What was your unit's role in Lebanon?**

First of all we started to dig this massive fortress, gun fortress, which was going to be concreted in on the top, with a aperture so you could fire at I think a hundred and sixty degrees, with an elevation

- 34:00 of quite a bit, came to be a very strongly fortified line and then they realised this we weren't training so they employed some Arab labour to do it and then they realised they had to put guards on the labourers because they were taking all the cement back to their village and iron sheeting and all that and we were busy out that way and then they, we had to put guards
- 34:30 in there so troops had to take it in turns for the training. We did anti-tank shoots and brigade manoeuvres, battalion manoeuvres, getting ready for full scale divisional manoeuvres in the desert.

**Was there much evidence of how the war was impacting on the local population in terms of their lives?**

They were very happy. I think they were, they'd been under Turkish rule

- 35:00 and maybe French rule and now they were under the sort of British army rule and they quite enjoyed it. But amazing with the children, even the five, six year olds, they could speak a good smattering of English, Arabic, a little Hebrew, French and a little bit of Turkish, it had all been handed down. They had a very good education system there.

**35:30 And how long were you based in Lebanon for?**

About five months, five and a half months.

**Did you have leave time when you were there?**

Oh yes yes, we also responsible for carrying a lot of in line pickets in Zagorda. And like camp marshals they didn't like pickets

- 36:00 in Tripoli. But we had leave to Tripoli and leave to Beirut. Leave to Damascus, I didn't take leave to Damascus but went to Beirut on two occasions. Beirut was a lovely city. And the thing about Beirut you could walk down the street and frequently hear English spoke. It was the only city in the Middle East you could do that.
- 36:30 there was an American university based in Beirut, which was right in the city of Beirut and the students basically learnt English there and had been doing so for many years. Consequently English language was spoken on the streets of Beirut. But the people were friendly and it was the restaurants were mainly predominantly French, there was a French
- 37:00 presence there for many years. Wine, probably more wine drunk than beer. Until the Australians got there, but over all I think everyone enjoyed their leave in Beirut and once again you could go swimming in the Mediterranean.

**What knowledge did you have about what was happening elsewhere in the Middle East at this stage?**

Well reasonably late,

- 37:30 say June, everything seemed to be going alright, but there was sudden collapse.
- 38:00 **You said that all of a sudden things changed.**
- Well we had no idea that things were as bad as they were. We were at, [UNCLEAR] one of my learns [? UNCLEAR] in Beirut that Tripoli that Tobruk fell and we knew there had been a few advances down Benghazi and places like that but nothing as
- 38:30 traumatic, and we thought well they'll get to Tobruk, there was a division of South Africans there and some other allied troops and they were thirty thousand troops I think and they were well stocked with ammunition, well stocked with supplies, it was a big depot. We thought well at least they will hold them up there but it fell in one and a half days. And that was the greatest shock to everybody I think, we were just, well we were just sort of numb for
- 39:00 about it took probably an hour and a half for it to sink in, you know the longest siege in British history. The whole place collapsed in a day and a half. We had the same fortifications there when we were there. Same Italian red line the same, secondary and third line and better artillery, more modern artillery,
- 39:30 heavier stuff you know, more tanks, unbelievable, but still then you just had to get used to it. So then we thought well we didn't have problem to wait for you. But the strange thing was when we broke camp when we were in Lebanon, in Jdaide, we headed north up towards the Turkish border,
- 40:00 we were told no fur felt, they were Australian hats all the badges had to come off, we had to hide our tan boots because everybody else, the South Africans the Kiwis, the British wore black boots but the Australians wore tan boots, but when we were going the kids around the camps were saying, "The Aussie go bomb bomb." And we'd say no just manoeuvres be back next week, "No bomb bomb."
- 40:30 They knew, or they purported to know, that we would not be coming back to that camp. We went north, or rather we turned south down a little back south, outside Damascus straight down through the desert, then cut back in to the Sinai and then went through the Sinai to this
- 41:00 side of the canal, cross the canal to Cairo and we stayed in a camp there near the pyramids and the next night we went up to Amiriya, through Amiriya. When they got half way through the road from the pyramids to Amiriya we started to
- 41:30 meet all the other troops coming down. they were all the air force squadrons, all their, their mechanics and things like that from the squadron, not the pilots. But all the people, the cooks and rear echelons they called it. The rear echelons of battalions, regiments AFC groups and went a lot further than -

## Tape 6

- 00:32 **Mr Widdows, can you tell me how or when you heard about Japan entering the war?**
- Japan. December the 7th 1941, yep. We had just got out of Tobruk and we were sitting at a, oh about a month or so, sitting and a chap came over with the news.
- So given what was happening in the desert and**
- 01:00 **the progress, once Japan was making progress through the Malayan Peninsula, what was the mood like amongst the troops in terms of winning and losing the war?**
- Don't quite get that one?
- How did you feel about how well the allies were doing in the war once you found out about what Japan was doing in the Pacific?**
- 01:30 We were very interested to find out what was going on, but I don't know whether you are leading up to should we have been home or -
- I guess what I'm saying is -**
- 02:00 I think the major problem was when the 8th Army collapsed all of a sudden not the 8th Army, the 8th Division, in Malaysia, because what we'd heard, I don't know whether they were right or wrong, but there was one brigade there, and they didn't seem to be very well organised and all of a sudden they collapsed and we were worried I guess
- 02:30 about what way things were going to go there, but ah I think at the same time we're also concerned about how the war in the desert was going to go, because after Tobruk collapsed which had been pretty much a victory for us, although it was a siege, we couldn't reconcile with the fact that we lost so quickly and what was going on

03:00 but we were quite happy to be where we were at the time and I guess we realised we would be called upon to get back up the desert, which I don't think anybody sort of worried about that.

**Were you still optimistic about winning the war?**

Sure, yes.

03:30 **So can you tell me about the campaign at El Alamein and your preparations and how you incorporated into working with the 8th Army.**

We moved up on the, remember it was the 7th of July I think it was, from Al Shamma, which was just a little bit west from Amiriya which was where we were camped outside Alexandria. Together with the 26th Brigade

04:00 we mounted an attack on the Italians and Germans and went for about three or four days and the 8th Army advanced quite substantially around Tel el Eisa and there were high points there but one of the main things coming out of it was capturing the forward German signals group

04:30 which were more or less tuning into all the radio talk of the 8th Army and then informing Rommel what was going on. And not only did they get to capture the group but they also got the code books and things like that, which were very beneficial to the 8th Army. Intelligence group.

**Were they in close proximity to you when they were captured?**

About five thousand yards away.

05:00 Because we were firing a bit, charge three, yeah.

**Can you tell me about, in as much detail as you can what that particular front line looked like and how the battle went.**

Well it see-sawed for quite a while there were counter offences and banging artillery, I can't tell you exact things but just reading after,

05:30 but I think at about fourteen sixteen days there were attacks put in and counter attacks and after a period of time it more or less settled down with the 8th Army gaining a little bit of ground but not too much and for a period about two, two and a half months it became more or less static, with artillery exchanges

06:00 until the Germans advanced on the southern front. That was when Rommel put in an attack near the Qatarr depression to come in behind the 8th Army which was badly moored and Germany got badly defeated.

**So where were you in proximity to that Qatarr depression?**

06:30 We were, the Qatarr depression ran across in the frontage, the depression was on the left in the south and the sea was on the north and more or less, not a straight line but I think it was about thirty miles across from sea to the depression and that formed the base of the defence line for the 8th Army.

**So can you explain how the**

07:00 **actual battle line worked at El Alamein, who was in front of you and what was behind you?**

Oh this was the main battle oh, actually shall we say there were three battles at El Alamein. One was when the 8th Army advanced with the 9th Division, that was the one in July. Second battle was the one when the Germans advanced near the Qatarr depression across Alanopa the third and final battle

07:30 was one on the twenty-third of October and the preparation for that for the artilleries part was we went right forward early in the night time two nights before, dug in and we went back, came up the next night completed the digging with ammunition pits and the ammunition had come up prior to that as well under the cover of darkness, the whole thing was shut down with nets over the top and that was

08:00 well in front of where our forward lines were, the 8th Army forward lines. When the battle started at twenty minutes to ten or nineteen hours, sorry, twenty one forty hours, that was mainly an artillery, artillery not a barrage but a pot shot

08:30 every gun, nearly a thousand guns firing on known German artillery positions, known German strong points mortars, machine guns and strong posts, that finished that twenty one fifty five and for five minutes there was stillness and at twenty two hundred hours

09:00 the infantry started. The combined artillery put down a barrage in front of the infantry which went on - a creeping barrage went on and on until two thirty in the morning and they'd been advancing, took most of their points they had to take, there were a couple they missed out on but according to the information we got back a very successful

09:30 advance, 51st on the 9th Division left, also advanced, but struck a couple of bad points as well. There were quite a number of uncharted mine fields which held up the advance to a certain degree and the

South Africans and the Kiwis further over to the left, that whole front went forward.

**How would you know about mine fields?**

Well engineers went in front and they searched out

10:00 the holes and some had been out on patrol before and found out where the mine fields were. But apparently there were a lot of new mine fields planted. And consequently the tracks had been cleared but they weren't completely cleared. To help in the advance they had two Bofor guns mounted on trucks which were firing every now, often with, with lights shining, search lights beaming too for the advance.

10:30 **Can you roughly describe how long that advance was in distance?**

It would be over, or though there were some diversion tactics down in the south where they tanks were and another British division and the free French. I guess the frontage we advanced on we took the thirtieth call which was nine

11:00 Div, 51st Highland Regiment, 8th Division and then, then with the New Zealanders would possibly be nine thousand ten thousand yards. If I had a few moments I could give it to you exactly.

**No that's pretty good. So what would you see of the enemy?**

We didn't see anything because, by that time the infantry had gone through us and they had gone on about three thousand odd yards

11:30 and we were just firing creeping barrage keeping the Germans away from the infantry although the infantry were still being attacked by artillery and infantry, German infantry and Italian infantry.

**How easy was it to move the tanks, move the artillery down - ?**

We didn't need to move because we had coverage. Twenty pounder covered a good range

12:00 and wasn't till about another ten days later that we had to move the guns, you see we were firing very close early but they had arranged from about fourteen thousand odd yards and being that much in front of the infantry when they went through us, every two three thousand yards they gained we still had another ten thousand yards to fire.

12:30 But the whole movement came to a not more or less a halt but a general change in direction when the infantry then went towards the coast. To try and get behind the German forward troops and then we were firing more or less straight in a line like that instead of on a broad front.

**How did the co-operation work with the British army in terms of**

13:00 **command, were you a separate unit or were you incorp - ?**

In control of the thirtieth call, yeah. It went well with Montgomery [English general] being in charge and the command of the 30th I think was not quite sure so I better not say, I think it was Horricks. But everything went through the chain of command OK,

13:30 between all the divisions, particularly good contact between the 51st island I guess that was because we were side by side.

**And what were the levels of casualties like during those three major battles?**

Oh they were very, very heavy, ninth I think, 9th Division had the most and then I think 51st Island Division.

14:00 I think in 9th Division it was somewhere in the order of a quarter of the whole 8th Army, casualties. But that's well documented in historical novels, books.

**What were the reasons for them suffering such significant losses given that the allies ended up winning that battle?**

Speaking from the artillery, you should actually be speaking to a general from the infantry on this,

14:30 but what we've learnt after, where we called fire, Rommel, having trouble on the northern front which was the core front where the infantry was attacking, more or less a crumbling operation there, he was diverting the German troops to counteract the Australian and the 51st Island Division attack,

15:00 therefore they had more German troops and Italian and more enemy troops than down the line. What Montgomery was trying to do was to draw the German troops and the whole of Rommel's force onto the Australians and the 51st Island Division so that then he could effect attack breakthrough in the south which eventually did happen. We didn't see super charge or only saw the result of it.

15:30 **Where were you sleeping during these?**

In the gun bed. Or in the surrounds. We were more or less ready to answer any calls to follow infantry. All the targets on all possible counter attacks were all registered before the battle. They were all code named, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and that the Germans came to a certain area and that was in the

code frame of say Melbourne,

16:00 every gun on that front would be focussed on that and that is what stopped all the gun attacks. They were all pre-registered.

**What sense did you have at the time that the campaign in the desert was all coming down to this, that this was critical?**

Very, very I guess it wasn't until, lets put it this way, we were all very confident

16:30 the whole desert feeling and sense of that we were on the right track then Montgomery took over and made certain statements. Up until that time under Auchinleck there was a general feeling not of despair but there was, "just can't seem to get it right." And then when Montgomery came, he said certain orders and changed the

17:00 people, the whole morale just grew and grew, particularly when he explained what every unit and every division had to do, "and this is what we are going to do to get on with victory," and that's when the morale went up and everyone became, sure we're going to win regardless what Rommel did. We're going to be there and it's going to be the end of the Africa call, which actually happened.

17:30 **Can you explain how those orders worked, would he speak to all the troops or would those orders come down via the**

Came down via the generals. Spoke to COs and groups you know, all the COs of the 9th Div, all the COs of the 51st, explaining the whole battle plan, everybody even the private soldier knew what he had to do. With that well illustrated what we were expected to do and what we had to do.

18:00 **Was there a sense then that, did Auchinleck not operate in that manner?**

No, not to my knowledge no. I don't it ever got passed on, I don't he ever did gave a detailed battle plan the same as Montgomery did. As a mere sergeant that's all I can say I don't know.

**Can you remember what the battle plan was for El Alamein?**

Oh it was so complicated. I don't think.

18:30 Commanders knew the whole battle plan. And because there were changes going on all the time. Changing direction because of certain elements meeting more opposition so that whole thing was, it was a matter of working out the best deal possible at that particular time, best way to go to win.

**What aerial**

19:00 **presence of combat was there, at the time?**

Of the air force, the allies had control there, more or less, very strong air force, the allied air force, very well lead and very capable pilots, both fighter and bomber.

**So how busy were things in the air?**

Very busy, lots of dog fights, lots of bombers being shot down both sides,

19:30 a lot of activity.

**So that battle in October can you describe for me how that progressed and how that finished in as much detail as you can remember?**

Well it went on for twelve days and it was called a crumbling plan where the 9th Division more or less crumbled the enemy against them until finally the enemy broke and

20:00 that was the end of the battle. Although Rommel was told not to retreat he did, against Hitler's orders, to save his troops. He was considered a father figure amongst the Africa Korps and they still consider him the same.

**What did the crumbling plan mean and how did that effect the artillery?**

Well that means that you attack, attack, attack, wear down, pulverise the area, send tanks in

20:30 just a matter of wearing away the German defences.

**So was there any relief in your attacks, did you stop at all, how consistent was it?**

Consistent all the time, yep very consistent. The guns more or less fired most of the time, there were only short breaks and on about probably the tenth or eleventh day we got a little bit of relief from

21:00 firing but until that, mainly until the end the guns fired almost continuously. There was a lot of ammunition spent. It was one of the biggest barrages ever, the biggest barrage ever in Egypt.

**And how would the wounded be dealt with?**

The stretcher bearers looked after the wounded, yep, they took them back to a point

21:30 and then the ambulance met them and took them to MDSs [main dressing station] and advance dressing stations and things like that. First they were treated by their own medical doctors, each battalion had their own stretcher bearers and that and a medical doctor.

**What happened at night time?**

Well night time mainly the Australians attacked and daytime the Germans

22:00 attacked. So it was a matter, in the day time it was counter, counter attacking the allies on night division holding up against the German counter attacks. Supported by artillery concentrations.

**Why were the Australians attacking at night?**

That was the plan. That was the plan. Australians see pretty well in the night I guess.

22:30 No I think it was the plan was to try and attack at night to try and get the better of the Germans and then have the daylight for picking off the counter attacks which you could do with the artillery and the air force came into being then because they would know exactly, the artillery were putting down smoke shells, the air defence, the airport, the aircraft would know where to drop their bombs

23:00 where as at night time the air force wouldn't know where they were. Cause everything is dark and all they see is a lot of flashing lights from guns from both sides and they wouldn't know where the infantry were. So I assume that was why we advanced at night time. So we had the benefit of the aircraft attacks or defence in the day time.

**What were the lines of communication like?**

Oh fairly good, occasionally

23:30 sigs [signals] had to go out and repair the lines but there were radio telephones as well, but a lot of it depended on the land lines but sigs checked those operatives. If a line was broken by shell fire or by bombing sigs would go out and examine it and fix it up. That was both in the artillery infantry or services. Because once you have missed communications

24:00 you have lost it.

**Are you aware of many occasions where people were, where units were cut off in terms of communication?**

yes there was one bad incident that was early at El Alamein when the 28th Battalion was lost. Nobody could get to them in time and they were completely surrounded by

24:30 German tanks and infantry. The OPOs [observation post officers] couldn't get there because of communications and tanks couldn't get there (master tape damage) they were just, the Honeys, the Americans' Stuart [tanks], they were on the bridge where our guns were. And they were just burning furiously all day the next day.

**I think some of those men became POWs, what thoughts did you**

25:00 **have about being taken a prisoner of war of the Germans?**

Well nobody, I don't think, wanted to be taken a POW. But I guess if you can't get anywhere, you can't do anything and you're out of ammunition, there's only one thing to do.

**Was there a surrender procedure?**

Well just put your hands up I guess. The Germans would obey that.

25:30 The African Korps were very good as far as fighting a war, what you call a gentleman's war, not like what happened in Europe apparently. There were no Gestapo [German Secret Police] or no SS [Schutzstaffel] in the Africa Korps. And Rommel was a genuine soldier. In Tobruk we had several truces where the dead could be got out and the wounded bought out on both sides.

26:00 **Can you explain how those truces would work?**

There would be a white flag and someone would advance with the white flag. This is what I believe because being artillery we would never gave it, but somehow ops [operations] saw it and they'd put up a white flag and the white flag would be respected. And I guess would end when somebody fired a shot. Until then a complete truce.

26:30 **What do you think made that desert campaign unique in terms of it being a gentleman's war?**

I think it was both armies respecting each other. And respecting the code of war, if there is a code of war. Very difficult.

27:00 But ah, we still retain friendships with the Africa Korps. We'll be meeting some of them again next November. In a place called Frankfurt. I've been to three re-unions with Africa Korps people. I still

correspond with half a dozen, same with the 8th Army they have a terrific rapport with the Africa Korps, they go every year to

27:30 Rommel's gravesite and I've been there on two occasions, we pay our respects. And there is a service at his grave side and his son speaks and talks about the glad that the allies beat Germany because they came back to a normal way of life, that's the son of Rommel.

**What did you interpret the code of war to mean?**

28:00 Well that the Geneva Convention, prisoners be treated properly and [UNCLEAR] which I think Rommel followed. But unfortunately in other parts of the world it didn't happen that way.

**Can you tell me about how you met the Africa Korps soldiers when you first came into contact with them?**

28:30 A lot in '92 on a reunion back to Tobruk and El Alamein. I was actually in a group and the interpreter from the Africa Korps, why picked me I don't know but came over and asked me that their general wanted to speak to our general, Major General John Broadbank and I knew that General Broadbank had been

29:00 out on a recce trying to get through to the salient area in Tobruk and was having a bit of a rest and I tried to stall him. I spoke to a Colonel Pike and told him what was going on and finally three or four hours later we met up with some of the Germans Colonel Zimmerman, General Zimmerman and General Broadbank had a discussion in English and German and then we decided we'd spoken enough we'd go back

29:30 both the Germans and ourselves would go back and have another beer, so but we've been fairly friendly over there ever since.

**What did you learn from that contact with those Africa Korps members?**

I guess we learnt that, go back to Tobruk they used to sing Silent Night at night time and we used to clap them and things, in the front line that went on quite frequently.

30:00 Hit the bottle over the years I think and I guess people just realised they were doing what they had to do. And we were doing what we had to do, therefore I think after the war, just grew this fond friendship. It was strange, only, to my knowledge, only three groups still keep together.

30:30 One is the Burma group and the Africa Korps and the 8th Army. There is nothing, naturally there wouldn't be anything with Japanese people, their army, but with the even the few Italians go to the Africa Korps gathering. Not a great number.

31:00 **Do you talk about the war when you get together?**

We talk about the war but the good times when we were on leave and a few beers and things like that. Just look at the good side of things, your mates and things like that.

**Can you explain to me the singing of Silent Night at Tobruk, what that was?**

Oh that's a German, German Christmas

31:30 carol. They used to sing it somewhere and we used to sing it back. They'd sing in German and some of our guys would sing in English. It was just a thing. You know, they were men just human beings like ourselves. They were fighting for a cause. They didn't understand what was going on in Germany at the time with the concentration camps and things like that.

32:00 They'd been away from Germany about 1941.

**Given that you were in a war, when you first heard Christmas carols being sung, what did you think?**

Well I thought well it's good. Somebody you know, there's still sanity in the world more or less.

32:30 But we used to listen to Lili Marlene the German song on our radio. Singing the British version to it, just one of those things.

**Just going back to El Alamein, what evidence was there that - ?**

33:00 **that last battle in October had been successful in crumbling the German army?**

When the German army, when the German, when Rommel gave the order to move out and retreat back and followed by the tanks and New Zealanders and that group they followed the tanks through. And they went all the way and they took small townships on the way and then they took Tobruk and then they went up into

33:30 Tripoli and took Tripoli and then they. We were out of all that we were the withdrawn after the battle of El Alamein. We went back to, we were in El Alamein for about two weeks after the battle and then we

went back to Palestine and had a very large long division march past, Alexander, General Alexander who was the twelfth British army and

34:00 he made a very brilliant speech praising the 9th Division and his closing words, I'll always remember that, "under my command for the Australian 9th Division." Remember that for the rest of my life. And he wished us well wherever we went and about a month after that we came back to Australia. Back in March, no end of February, I think,

34:30 we went got leave on the 1st of march back to Victoria Melbourne.

**You mentioned that when you had been in Alexander previously there was a sense that from the locals that things/**

yes, they were very pro German I think. Well I think they'd be on which ever side was winning. A lot of Egyptian don't like being under British

35:00 command. They thought well maybe you might be better off under German command. Or Italian command remains to be seen, but I guess you've got people for Britain you've got people against Britain, you've got people for Germany and people against Germany. I guess we just we just saw the ones that didn't want the Brits.

**Did you have an opportunity to celebrate when you were in Alexandria?**

35:30 No we were at the camp, we got two bottles of beer that night. First night back, we were happy I don't think anybody drunk the two bottles the first night cause it was, this was after Tobruk of course. I think being without beer for so long and being on water restrictions , you couldn't take liquid,

36:00 you couldn't cope with it, take it easy drink plenty of water I think, and a few more beers and things like that.

**What about after El Alamein?**

El Alamein was different because we got plenty of water at El Alamein. The main difference between Tobruk and El Alamein was they didn't have the flies at El Alamein, still had the fleas still had the dust still had everything else, but there was plenty of water. Because we had only the short line of communication.

36:30 Whereas the Germans would have had a longer line. So we had plenty of drinking water, they used to bring them up in jerry cans and things like that where before we only had half a water bottle. Also we got an issue with beer every now and then. We were a bit more acclimatised to the beer than we were in Tobruk.

**And when did you lose Pisser?**

Pisser went off at about the third night at El Alamein.

37:00 I think the noise of the artillery and the bombs and things like that just too much for his little brain just went running around, probably got killed. I think if he could have he would have got back. Cause he loved everybody in the unit or the troops rather. And he was ell though of but, no, I think it was the noise that got to him. He had a bit of

37:30 fox terrier in him, fox terrier, I don't know whether you know, cracker night, they go berserk. Guess that's what happened to poor old Pisser.

**Where would he be while you were in the gun pits?**

Oh he'd be under a truck or something. Probably back at the wagon lines I guess.

**So after El Alamein what did you do in Alexandria?**

38:00 We didn't stay in Alexandria very long at all, only about three or four days, then we went back to Palestine and then, this is after El Alamein? Yeah. Then we went to ah, had this ceremony parade and a few weeks after that we caught the, got on board the Ile de France, we stayed at Mombasa

38:30 and we went to somewhere I think in the Maldives, take on fuel, water, then we went to Perth, Fremantle rather on the over-night to Fremantle one ship stayed there General Moors had got off . He met every ship that went to every port in Australia, Melbourne to Sydney, got a wonderful welcome.

**Can you tell me about that welcome?**

Everybody gave him a 'hoho' when he came to Sydney.

39:00 We were on the Ile de France and Aquitania was the other side of the wharf for me, he was just there he and his wife just there, clapped us - everybody gave him a 'ho ho'.

**What were your impressions of him as a man?**

Tremendous man, tremendous man, tremendous leader he was always, when he could, up the front line with the troops and you know makes sure that they knew he was sharing their hardships as well.

39:30 Very, very well thought of in 9th Division.

**Did you go on shore at Mombasa?**

No, nobody went on shore at Mombasa. We didn't even know it was Mombasa because it was a sort of secret fuelling place. We only found out about it later on. Not Mombasa sorry, Maldives.

40:00 Maldives was the secret one. We knew it was Mombasa, cause that's in Eritrea where we used to speak Italian. No the Maldives was a different thing. We asked the people on the barges they wouldn't disclose where it was.

**What was the physical condition of the men on that ship?**

Very good, yep. Although there was only salt water to bathe in they supplied you with salt water soap.

40:30 You got a bit of a lather up but not great, but at least the water was clean.

**You'd gone over on the Stratheden and you mentioned that you lived like kings, what was it like coming back?**

Oh different because there weren't any luxury dining rooms but we were fed okay and it was a larger ship the Ile de France than the Stratheden. We were on more or less army rations there because so many troops on it.

41:00 Probably twice as many on the Ile de France there was than the Stratheden.

## Tape 7

00:33 **Mr Widdows could you just explain how you came home on the ship who was escorting you?**

There's a couple of cruisers and couple of storers, can't remember the names now.

**What sort of reception did you get from other crews?**

One of the main things that happened on the way home was that we met the British Far Eastern Fleet

01:00 and they formed up in battle formation as we went past. Some of the destroyers went up and down the lines hooting and got a couple of messages from the commander more or less wishing us the best of luck and things like that. Very inspiring it was to see that part of the British Navy, all dressed on the decks standing up there, more or less saluting the 9th Division.

01:30 **How did you feel to see Australian again?**

Coming into Sydney and seeing all the red roof tops, you know the tiles that was very, very emotional. We didn't get off until next morning where we got taken by barge to Pyrmont, then caught a train straight through to Melbourne. Where the guy

02:00 on the engine kept blowing the whistle all the time. When he went through a country town.

**And where were you heading to after that?**

We went to Camp Al and then we had three weeks leave and we came back to Camp Al and we had a march through Melbourne and then we went to Seymour then we were trained at Seymour and we went to, right through to Cairns

02:30 we got the train at Cairns. Then got a little train to go up to the Tablelands. Then we went to a camp at Cooroy near the Barren River where we trained there for two or three months in jungle conditions.

**I might ask you just going back to Melbourne you said there was a march through Melbourne. Could you explain what that was like?**

03:00 Oh it was terrific reception. It was packed with people it was crowded everywhere when you went down Swanston Street and we went down and turned down another street come back. The street was packed must have been thousands and thousands of people, wonderful reception. We found out later they launched a War Bond Appeal, and that was part of the deal. Anyway they gave us a very wonderful welcome.

03:30 **And the three weeks that you had on leave?**

Went very quickly.

**Where did you go?**

I went home and stayed with my mother and father at Essendon and some friends of mine from the air force were on leave to so I caught up with them.

**Did you notice much change in Australia in how they were viewing the war?**

Didn't seem to be worried much about the war? Particularly the workers they just wanted more money. It was very

04:00 disappointing in that respect. I think that you know what we had done and we got back home and people were on strike for more money and wouldn't let in certain ships because of they wanted danger money. That part of the trip home wasn't very good at all and I don't think I should talk about it because I don't feel very happy about that part.

**Was that a shock to you?**

It was a bit of a shock yeah.

04:30 Being an Australian I thought, I thought they'd be more interested in working for the end of the war than working for money. But that's another thing.

**Just generally how Australia perceived the duty you had done in the Middle East, do you think the perception was that they understood what you had been through?**

I think the families of the troops did

05:00 I'm not quite sure about the general public. I think anybody connected with troops overseas, really understood but the people who had no connection with troops overseas I don't think they could have cared less.

**What did you talk to your family about in those three weeks?**

How Auntie So and So was. Mainly family matters. Caught up with my younger brother and things like that.

05:30 **Did you talk about the war very much?**

No, not very much no, we, it wasn't necessary I don't think. I think they had followed everything and they had kept in touch because both my mother worked for the unit association with the parents back here in Australia, cause the colonel used to write and tell them what the unit was doing

06:00 without breaching any security risk or anything like that. And when it was all over they were fully briefed on what had happened. And they knew because people who'd been in the back guard unit from Wornud [UNCLEAR?] they would also come along to the meeting of parents and talk about what had happened. So all the parents of people overseas knew fairly well what was going on.

06:30 **Had you received much news from home while you been/**

Yes always, yep. Always, everybody used to wait for mail and things like that. Most people, most the troops got good mail. There were a few Dear Johns [letter to inform that a relationship is over], but you know that happens everywhere I guess.

**If I could talk to you about the training you did on that Atherton Tablelands?**

07:00 yep, we went from one type of warfare to another, which we'd been involved in open warfare and went to a sort of jungle warfare where you had to even marching on route marches you had to cut through the undergrowth to get through and there were certain vines which had sort of thorns on them

07:30 which clung to your body or clothing, there were leeches in the undergrowth in the water and you had to use a cigarette to get them on the tail and they'd drop off. Generally they were full of blood. They go from a very, very tiny thing to a great bloated thing about that long, fully all blood. But the best way to get rid of them, if you pulled them off you left a scab

08:00 and that could be infected so you'd get a cigarette, light a cigarette on the end of them and they just dropped off. But it was entirely different type of war, we did training mainly in the rainforest up at northern Queensland. Had ear drops supplied by air from, by with food or supplies and some close range shooting which

08:30 the artillery had to be careful because with the descent of the shot it could clip a tree or branch and for all the surround troops they had to take that into calculation.

**How did your equipment change?**

Not very much early, we still used our desert clothes until we got to, to the Islands I think and then we got jungle greens is what, but ah,

09:00 we used the gas capes for water, coats you know, rain jackets, they were very handy, your load became heavier because of the lack of transport. You couldn't use transport in lots of parts.

**When you were based on the tablelands what sort of information did you have about the enemy you would be facing?**

- Oh lectures from troops who had been
- 09:30 against the Japanese and fought the Japanese the infanteers and artillery, there wasn't much artillery there, but mainly the lectures were about the Japanese tactics of having snipers up trees and ambushes and that sort of thing, just different. Different type of warfare that's all which the lectures told us all about.
- 10:00 **Having fought in the desert and being faced with this very different type of warfare, what were the challenges that you needed to address to over-come the differences?**
- As well as keeping dry I think mainly and keeping the ammunition dry, clearing a path for the guns if there was tree in the way. For instance after landing in Lae, you got in there
- 10:30 and you couldn't fire because of the trees or the plantations. You had to chop the trees down to get a field of fire. Also the problem of crossing the rivers which were pretty full flood. Quite a few troops from the infantry were lost crossing rivers. But it was entirely different warfare altogether, but you just had to adapt. Lot more close shooting, with the outfits probably fifty
- 11:00 yards from the enemy. And ah, bring the fire very close need for accurate gun laying, but you know,
- How long did you stay on the Atherton Tablelands for?**
- I think it was about four months before we did the first amphibious operation.
- 11:30 Only about, after Lae only about two weeks before we did the second one at Finschhafen. None of the brigades went in there we would have been close to a division. That was very dicey for quite a while in Finschhafen for two or three months.
- And the camp at the Atherton Tablelands, how many soldiers that were training in jungle warfare at that stage?**
- Atherton Tablelands,
- 12:00 seventeen were there and sixty were there too, be three divisions.
- Could you tell me about getting to Lae from the time you left the Tablelands?**
- I went down to Townsville and embarked on a liberty ship. Went to Long Bay, Long Bay we were there for about three weeks, four weeks maybe
- 12:30 and we went up by LST [landing ship tank] to the landing at Lae. It wasn't really a post but there was quite a bit of air activity there.
- Could you explain what your role was at Lae?**
- We were busy trying to get through the jungle with the gun crews with the guns. And when necessary we were called upon
- 13:00 to fire for the infantry, to protect them or to knock out a strong post, a machine gun nest or one of their pieces of artillery, shelling various Japanese areas where they were resisting. Basically that's, and shelling land cells
- 13:30 until the 7th Division came down to valley, and they were the first troops into Lae and beat the 9th Division by about half an hour I think.
- Can you explain what happens in a landing?**
- In a landing, normally you got the navy support and they bombard the shore. The first wave disembark from the mother ships, we call them, or troop ships
- 14:00 carrying troops down by rope ladders or they come out of the mouth of the LST on barges. Come up into the waves to go into the beach. And then on it's just hard slog with the infantry, going onto shore and getting advancing, getting areas under control and then the artillery comes in, engineers come in
- 14:30 with the artillery to look for mines and things. Matter training all that.
- What memories do you have of your first impressions of Lae?**
- Lae, very hot and humid, Kunai grass up to about six feet that you had to try and force your way through, mosquitos,
- 15:00 mosquitos, creeks and rivers to cross, not that we crossed many rivers because we went around the mouth a lot but the infantry had to get across but we didn't have to cross many because of the range of the guns.
- Could you explain what you had to carry?**
- Well you had your haversack you had to, we used tractors mainly

15:30 bull-dozers as well to get through the swamps if you could or the engineers would lay a track and you would try to get the guns through that. But each person wouldn't carry that much gear, not the artillery, the infantry would, you'd have to carry some ammunition for the guns. That would be generally carried on the trailer of the tray of the field piece of the gun, on

16:00 top of the, where the platform was, on there, some had limbers.

**How difficult was it moving this equipment in the jungle?**

Well it was very difficult to move the guns sometimes they had to be hauled by ropes. Sometimes it might take two gun crews to move one gun crew, move one gun.

16:30 But basically everyone just hopped in and that might have been a bit of digging or things like that, or chopping trees, undergrowth. But sometimes you might need more than one gun crew. More than two gun crews to help get it in the right direction. But they managed.

**So once you landed in Lae, what did you have to do from there?**

17:00 When through this jungle to get there, to get this gun position, but then after Lae fell we had weeks off and then we went to Finschhafen, another amphibious operation. We landed on the beach there and we got into the jungle again and we got to an airfield, an old airfield

17:30 where we were able to put the guns and we were able to stay there most of the time and cover the whole complete action of Lae and then moved to another area, a plantation where we could shoot right around. Because artillery didn't have to do much movement until we had to move to on the way up to CO which was on the Huon Peninsula.

**Whereabouts did you have to get the gun to?**

18:00 Well first of all we had to get the gun into a small plantation there. Everybody had to get their guns in, but that's, but that's the individual hardship for every troop, they all had to find a place where they could put the gun, four guns, then had to clear a path to be able to fire the guns then to be able to move the guns, had to be able to find the tracks and be able to move the guns along the tracks. Unfortunately

18:30 because after they got over the first couple of rivers, they could cover Lae from where they were. And then just fire from there, go for the whole complete semi-circle.

**So what sort of enemy fire was there at this stage?**

Not a great deal only aeroplanes, only bombers. Japanese weren't very strong with artillery, they had their artillery up when the

19:00 infantry [UNCLEAR] more or less, to counteract our infantry. It was our job then to wiggle them out and put them out of business. That was the job of the FPO [FOO, forward observation officer].

**So what were you firing at, at this stage?**

One of the FPO set, Japanese strong points or guns, machine gun posts, or where ever the OPO, observation officer found a target, he would then direct the guns on.

19:30 Also we also had the use of Panther, two boomerangs who flew around and directed the artillery on air shoots on Japanese missions.

**How prepared do you think you were for jungle warfare once you arrived there?**

I think we were well prepared.

20:00 I think it was the experience of the desert that allowed you to be able to cope with what ever the problem was. Whether it be jungle or, you just adapted, lots of things had to change and you just created that change and that was it.

**What was the hardest thing for you fighting in that jungle?**

20:30 Probably, the most worrying thing was making sure you had clearance for the guns so you wouldn't create casualties you know amongst your own troops. That was the most worrying thing. Also I guess you were worried that the Japanese would infiltrate cause they were pretty good at that.

**21:00 How would they do that?**

They'd have more experience in the jungle and we'd only arrived there probably two weeks and they'd been there for probably three or four months. They knew where all the secrets were, where the short tracks were, tracks were covered with vines. They were scouting before we got there. However it was just a wiggle amount. That's what happened.

**21:30 You mentioned that one of the most worrying things was that there was clearance for the guns. Did it occur that there were casualties amongst the troops because of the guns?**

It did on some occasions, yes, but not so much because of the clearance, it was because of the situation

of the infantry and where the Japanese were, in the tall trees. Sometimes you allowed for the tallest tree and a round

22:00 might just clip a tree, a branch and set the mechanism off in the fuse and the shrapnel would jump down on their own infantry. That was always a worry.

**Can you remember occasions when that happened?**

I don't know, I don't think we were involved with all that, our particular troop, I heard a lot of troops were,

22:30 from infanteers not troops.

**What do you remember of the fall of Lae?**

It was just over like that, wasn't a big deal at all. The bigger deal was Finschhafen, Sattelberg, that was a major battle.

**Can you tell me about that what you remember?**

Well we went in as a brigade and we should have more or less the same we had in Lae but we didn't

23:00 and it was touch and go for along while and there was a lot of close shooting artillery protecting the infantry. Finschhafen fell fairly early. But there was, it was the troops around Jevivanang [?] and those other areas where they were very hotly disputed by the Japanese. They had a lot more troops there,

23:30 and MacArthur had all the information indicated. And all the American intelligence was very, very bad.

**What did you know about the status of the Japanese at that point, how the Japanese were going at that point?**

Well they were still, they had been thrown back at Kokoda, they'd been thrown back at Milne Bay, actually everybody was very confident, we'd taken Lae.

24:00 There was something going on at Rabaul, but no, we were quite happy apart from the little bit of trouble we had at Finschhafen. Took a long while to get reinforcements. But some, the high command, the Blameys [Australian general] and the MacArthurs [American general] had their problems.

24:30 They said they couldn't supply shipping to get the shipping to get the troops out, been well recorded by various historians.

**What were the thoughts amongst the men while you were waiting for these reinforcements?**

Just wonder what the hell was going on? What was wrong with their mentality. People higher up. Not Morshead [Australian general] or Wotton [English general] they knew what was wanted.

25:00 Just couldn't convince the other people. Maybe the Yanks, they still believed their intelligence was right when it was completely wrong.

**How difficult did that make your job?**

It made it very hard for the brigadier troops that were there at the time, because it was recognised as one of Australia's best brigades and could have been lost just like that.

25:30 **Could you explain the difference in having enough men and not having enough men and what actually happens in battle?**

Well it was, I can't explain it's because MacArthur's information was incorrect. And even when they had the right information they didn't believe it. It was just a kaffuffle.

26:00 **So when you are on the ground and you know there are not enough men, how does that change the way?**

Doesn't change it, it just makes you angry and more or less determined that you will win. Just a, just a very, very hard campaign that shouldn't have happened. Could

26:30 have happened providing the right information was given and the reinforcements when required were supplied. Would have been quite a good campaign, instead of that it was a very messy one. A lot of lives were lost that shouldn't have been lost. It just makes you angry that's all. More so when you know the infantry guys and what they suffered, because of this.

27:00 **Could you explain what the scene was like on the ground?**

The scene, well you didn't have any actual scene because you were in the jungle. Between the infantry fighting was going on between say fifteen and twenty yards, you're in the jungle, and when a head popped up you took a shot. And when one of our guys put their head up at the wrong time he was shot at. That's it.

27:30 Different altogether than the desert. Mainly platoons and sections, small groups.

**You mentioned that you had gun pits in the desert, how did you set up a gun in the jungle?**

Well as long as you had clearance and unless you were staying there for a long while you wouldn't have a gun pit. And in the jungle it's very difficult,

28:00 depending on where you were you'd be saturated and the water would seep up, so mainly you had to be above ground. Only on the airstrip at Finch we had gun pits. Cause it was more or less open.

**You said there was a lot of shooting at close range - ?**

With the infantry yes.

**How were you positioned in relation to the infantry in the jungle?**

Oh we'd be probably a thousand two thousand yards away from them.

28:30 We'd have an observation officer with them, living with them. He would take his register and he would bring down the fire, very close shooting, possibly twenty-five yards, fifty yards wait for our own troops or the Japanese. That was all done by the OPO troop which would be an OPO,

29:00 hack and sig, might be two or three sigs, with a line.

**What would happen at night time?**

Well you'd always have, what they call in line pickets, Suddenly awake and you heard a noise, you wouldn't investigate it but around the guns you'd wait to hear another noise and just hope for the best.

29:30 I mean you didn't send out patrols at night in the jungle.

**What sort of noises could you hear at night in the jungle?**

Oh you might hear footsteps something like that, maybe one of your own. Not much at all. People used to put little cans out at night with pebbles in them in case someone came in. They'd also put grenades, you know, string grenades around.

30:00 So I've been told, I wasn't with the infantry. But that's one of their methods of protection. We were just, the guns men, each gun would have somebody awake in the night. And would make sure the either guy in the other pit was awake, with a gun. Nothing ever got bad and you could hear the outfits when, well one gun crew,

30:30 one troop was firing over another troop, the Japanese advancing on them because they'd counter attacked around the back so we were firing at them with sights with the twenty-five pounder, the charge one, and that was just around Sattelberg before Sattelberg was taken. When Sattelberg was taken it made a world of difference because troops in the infantry could then advance across against the ridge, through Wareo

31:00 and they already had Pabu Hill, which we then went up the coast after about two weeks, fighting there. And right through to Sio and then we were pulled out of Sio and back to Australia. Then the [UNCLEAR] trained and more training and more reinforcement. Then we went to

31:30 Labuan - or Labuan and across to British Borneo.

**In terms of the tactics that you had to use in the jungle to move the guns around and to move forward, how did that work, compared to the desert?**

Well in the desert you were a set piece you had gun tractors, either quads or forwards,

32:00 but in the jungle you had to work on the premise that you couldn't have one standing vehicle you had to have multitudes of vehicles, ranging from jeeps, sometimes a jeep could tow, if you had a track narrow enough for a jeep to go you could pull a gun with a jeep otherwise you pulled it with man power. And sometimes you had a bulldozer you could use, sometimes you had a gun sector you could use. It was, you had to have the ability to have the right equipment

32:30 at the right time, to move the weapon. Otherwise it had to be done by man power.

**And how many men would be needed to move?**

It depended on the terrain. Could be twenty could twenty-five or it could be ten. Depends what sort of ground you had to go over. Trying to think of somewhere

33:00 if you can visualise a rain forest in Australia with a marsh or something like that. That's the sort of, and maybe a couple of tracks going through it, that's the sort of terrain you had to move the artillery through. It was difficult but it was done.

**What sort of rations did you have at this point?**

33:30 Mainly bully beef and biscuits, sometimes dry rations, what they termed beef that you could soak in

water. Sometimes there was potato powder, egg powder, but mainly bully beef.

34:00 **You mentioned earlier that you didn't get jungle greens for a while.**

We got jungle greens when we got into the jungle. We didn't have them on the Tablelands, the first issue was Milne Bay from memory. Not that that made any difference, they were only khakis dyed green. Various colours.

**Were you given any courses against diseases**

34:30 **in the jungle?**

Malaria, Penalabrum [Atebrin - anti malarial drug] took that at least once a day and you took ascorbic tablets which was instead of green vegetables, you know supposed to, made it necessary to counter act the lack of green vegetables. There was tablets you used to take with the other rations.

35:00 **What kind of illnesses did men get?**

Dengue fever, scrotitis, malaria BT [benign tertian], cerebral malaria, which was a bad one, scrub typhus was a bad one. That's about, malaria mainly, the bulk of the troops.

**Did you ever get ill?**

Not in Asia, no. I had three bouts of malaria in Ravenshoe.

35:30 **So you came back to Australia and you were in Ravenshoe, what were you doing there?**

We trained for about twelve months there because they had an idea, the Americans, that they might need us at the Philippines. The two Australian divisions, but they decided then were going OK and they didn't need us so we went back to jungle warfare

36:00 then we did the Amphibious operation at Labuan. 24 Brigade.

**Could you explain about Ravenshoe, what the set up at Ravenshoe was?**

Ravenshoe had more or less a complete jungle, there were gum trees and undergrowth, been established by the 7th Division I think. But it made it very, very boring,

36:30 nothing for the troops to do but training. Meals were all static, fresh meat was available, greens. A lot of AWL [absent without leave] from the troops just twelve months, training and nothing else. Not much else but boredom.

**Why was there AWL?**

37:00 Nothing for the troops to do and they only had, they couldn't see the reason why they weren't wanted, why they couldn't go on leave for a while. But the reason why is there wasn't transport. Because it was far it was far away Ravenshoe and very difficult to get to places like Brisbane or Sydney or places like that.

**Was there any leave at this time?**

No very limited. Had a bit of compassionate leave.

37:30 **What impact did that have for twelve months on the men?**

Wasn't good for morale, morale went down a bit. The commanding officers were a bit worried about the troops and the morale but it picked up again later on.

**What were some of the things that would happen if you went AWOL [Absent Without Leave]?**

Oh depending on the seriousness of it, they'd get

38:00 loss of pay and twenty-one days CB [confined to barracks] and probably go to a military jail if it was reasonably serious. Mainly pay loss and confined to barracks.

**What was the camp like at Ravenshoe?**

Same as any camp actually. It was jetits [UNCLEAR?] with

38:30 officers' mess, MO's [medical officer's] tent, just a normal, you'd have one back say at Ingleburn similar to that. Without the huts with the tents for sleeping.

**Did the training change for you at this point?**

Well it originally it did, went back to open warfare. Because of the Philippines situation,

39:00 but then they went back after the Philippines went quiet, went back to jungle training, which was what we had already done, for New Guinea in the Atherton Tablelands or at Atherton.

**What was the mood in Australia at this time about the Japanese?**

Couldn't say because we only had that short three weeks. And we were back fourteen months at Raven.

39:30 But the same as before the families used to write encouraging letters to people were complaining about their pay or lack of increases, I didn't write to anybody, so you never knew what they were, you only heard the local news from Cairns, you didn't hear news from Sydney or anything like that.

**So did you have much information about what was going on in the war?**

40:00 We were prepped occasionally by officers. They in turn received a briefing. Where the attacks had taken place and what had happened. We heard about the into the European war and I guess the next good news we heard was when those atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. It meant that we weren't going to lose any more troops.

**40:30 So can you explain the final landings you did from Ravenshoe?**

Labuan? that was the first time ever that two troops of artillery went on shore with the first waves of infantry. Two troops actually, two troops of twenty-five pounders and one troop of four point two mortars. The mortars were used to cover the infantry landing, going forward

41:00 before the guns could get set up and the OP [observation post] troops went forward with the British troops. But as soon as they went forward into the troops, the four point two mortars weren't required. I think it was more open warfare than closed warfare. You could use vehicles off the beach, we went ashore in navigators which are tracked amphibious vehicles, right up on the beach and then we

41:30 unloaded the guns from the elevators and then hooked on the tractors and went straight in there. Then we just used the tractors all the way to the edge of the airport and then we could cover the whole of the island from there. But when we got to British Borneo we had to use the river to transport the guns because once again we were back into true jungle.

## **Tape 8**

**00:33 Mr Widdows can you explain where you travelled to from Australia in preparation for the landings at Labuan and Borneo?**

We stayed at Morotai and we were placed outside the perimeter, there were about eight hundred Japs [Japanese] there but the Yanks, you had to, to go into the perimeter, every point

01:00 every road had a guard on and you had to be clear to go in. And then didn't worry about coming out. But it was mainly coloured troops there. Used to allow us in to go and watch the pictures, all the latest films were shown. But if they had an air raid or an air raid siren went off you had to be very careful

01:30 or you would get stampeded by some coloured people in American uniform.

**So they were guarding the perimeter were they?**

The guarded the perimeter, but it was an American base. There was one couple of squadrons of air force there but mainly it was a big American base.

**Those guards were they armed?**

Oh yes. With the equivalent rifle.

**And can you describe what**

**02:00 the facilities were like inside that perimeter, what was there?**

Well they had all up to date ice cream machine and the normal American gear, coffee makers and ice cream machines, very modern they were.

**What were your impressions of them in terms of their army and the troops and - ?**

Well they were very well looked after by their government. Very well armed, very well fed,

02:30 very well dressed. We just felt like poor cousins.

**Why did you feel like poor cousins?**

Well the, they were living inside and we were living outside on the perimeter on bully beef and that. We were living in tents, in the jungle, you know primitive conditions, showers,

03:00 sewerage arrangements if you were on active service. But I guess you know, that's their way of life.

**Did you see much of what the American soldiers were like back in Australia?**

No, not really, weren't there long enough, you know.

**You mentioned that when you were in Tobruk and the rest of the desert that there was**

03:30 **propaganda leaflets saying the USA [United States of America] soldiers were in Australia racing off with women, how serious did you think that was and how seriously do you think the troops took it?**

Well I think everybody realised a little bit that that was going on but I don't it worried anybody really, much.

**What was the purpose of your stay on Morotai,**

04:00 **what was happening there?**

Well that was just a staging to get all the units ready to go to Labuan. Because we came over piece-meal. We didn't come over with the complete brigade, it was piece meal.

**And when you went to the picture theatre, what did the picture theatre look like?**

Just an open air theatre, on the ground.

**And what sort of movies did you watch?**

04:30 All the, ones at that time, I can't remember now, Betty Harlow was it, Sonya Sands, that era, too long ago.

**Was there alcohol on Morotai?**

Yes there was but we didn't get any. Their boys had it and the Australian air force and the Yanks had it

05:00 but we didn't have it. There wasn't a canteen there, it was just a tent camp.

**So were you required to set up camp?**

Somebody put the tents up for us then left hurriedly. Get out of the way. We dug the ditches around the tents, improved it a bit.

**What evidence of the local population was there on Morotai?**

05:30 Didn't see any. They'd gone probably up to the hills. Just a big American army camp, that was all.

**And what did the landscape look like?**

Just a normal island with hills and jungle in the background. Fairly open where we were.

06:00 But very hot and humid like normal climate for a jungle climate.

**What had you heard about some of the things that the Japanese had been up to during the war?**

Well I guess it wasn't until

06:30 Ravenshoe that it really started to seep through a bit and there were a lot of atrocities committed. It was fairly well broadcast about the atrocities and things like that. But where we were you couldn't do anything about it.

**What did you hear specifically?**

About people being beheaded and everything, that you hear about the Japanese,

07:00 about shooting the nursing sisters, how they treated the POWs [prisoners of war], the rail thing over in Thailand.

**So where were you when the atomic bombs were dropped?**

We were in Borneo. A place called Beaufort.

07:30 **On Morotai what sort of modifications did you have to make to your landing equipment and your artillery?**

Nothing, we were ready, the only thing we were waiting on was the twenty-five pounders. We didn't get the twenty-five pounders so we were going to use the American mountain guns. So we were completely trained really, only waiting for suitable tides and suitable

08:00 barges and that. Waiting for Mr MacArthur to say go.

**Did you have to make changes to the guns beforehand because it was amphibious landing?**

It was always water proofed for an amphibious landing.

**Was that done for you?**

No we did that. There was a special school you went to, certain gun sergeants, I went to one on Trinity Beach above Cairns

08:30 when we originally left Australia. And you did the waterproofing course and came back and instructed your own troops. About waterproofing a twenty-five pounder.

**And how difficult was it to water proof the gun?**

Not very, not very, you had the grease and the masking tape and things before you put the grease on to get a complete seal, on various parts and things like that.

09:00 **Can you describe exactly what the Alligator looked like?**

Yes, do you know a Bren gun [machine gun] carrier.

**But for someone that doesn't necessarily know about - ?**

Well it's on tank tracks, it's completely covered, it's open with a door that drops down and you put the gun in and the door comes up and it's got a

09:30 propeller on it as well as the tracks and the motor combines with the propeller onto the tracks. And then you just put it on the propeller shaft and it's for coming off a barge into the open sea, when you get on land they just change the shaft and put it onto the driving for the tank tracks. The run comes down and you pull the gun off and hook it on to a towing vehicle.

10:00 **So what sort of craft do you travel on from Morotai to Labuan?**

LSD [landing ship, dock], that's a big one and the Alligators [landing vehicle] are packed in there and when it's time to join the waves the LSD lets the big front down at sea and you drive them off with the tracks, hit the water and it engages, the Yank driving the Alligator,

10:30 engages the propeller shaft. Then it screws around while the barrage is on over the top of you.

**Can you explain the barrage?**

That's from the navy ships, yeah. Just a group of cruisers and destroyers firing on the land, just where you are going to land, in the landing area, just to make sure that all the strong posts near there are washed out.

11:00 But the Japanese changed their tactics, they moved back about two hundred yards, three hundred yards from the beach, so you landed without any opposition until you went forward.

**It may sound like a silly question but how do you avoid landing underneath where the barrage is firing?**

Because that stops when the troops hit the beach. It's all controlled. You have people what they call,

11:30 people that direct the barges in on the beach and you have people where the artillery training who direct the barrage on the beach, and they're in radio contact with all the ships to a master, the top ship and they cease fire and they all cease fire, that's it, then you're dependent on a land call from

12:00 the shore to the ship. So if you want further fire directed or by that time the landed artillery probably are enough to cope with the problem. So you don't need the navy anymore, they can go home.

**What were you told before landing at Labuan about what to expect in terms of the enemy presence?**

Well they pretty aggressive,

12:30 probably pretty well. But it wasn't well defended until we got to it, we'd taken all the island apart from the pocket, the position they called the pocket, where all the Japs were all gathered there, it was a bit like a small football field, but with caves and well dug in, took a lot of artillery a lot of air

13:00 strikes to drive them out. But eventually it was captured, without too much loss of life.

**When they were driven out what did the Japanese do?**

A few of them surrendered, a few of them committed hari-kari [ritual suicide], there was a break out group and they just got killed that's all. But ah towards the end

13:30 they didn't worry about surrendering, they'd surrender. Early in the part, the Japanese war it was considered crime to surrender but towards the end they were happy to surrender.

**Did you witness Japanese troops committing hari kiri?**

No.

**So what did you know about**

- 14:00 **that inability for them to surrender, how did you know about that?**
- Only what we were told about and what we read. It was well documented what to expect, through lectures and things like that. From people that had previously bumped into them.
- Was there any Japanese air presence at that landing?**
- No very limited then, there was the occasional flight but not to any great degree.
- 14:30 **Were there any kamikaze planes?**
- No not there they were only in the Philippines.
- Can you explain what the level of noise and the level activity is like for one of those amphibious landings, how busy it is, what's going on?**
- Oh there's a lot of noise because the artillery ships are firing and some of them are having
- 15:00 prematures, they going off before they hit they hit the ground and the shrapnel is coming down on the landing craft. The aircraft, our aircraft and then there's rockets going off with the landing craft as they're going in. It's pretty noisy situation.
- And what was the swell like?**
- Not much swell at all. Quite an easy landing. I think the only
- 15:30 bad landing was at Tarakan which the 26th Brigade had, on the island of Tarakan where they struck bit of a swell but also they went in on the, all the beach photographs had been taken on a high tide and they went in on a lower tide and all these defences didn't show in the high tide but they showed when the barges went in.
- 16:00 Some got impaled on those, really, you know it was reasonable depth of water.
- You mentioned that the landings at Lae you had to clear a path to extremely dense vegetation. How did Labuan compare?**
- Fairly open, yeah, fairly open, the only densely treed area was the pocket area and surrounding that.
- 16:30 But generally speaking it was fairly flat. And a few shrubs and that's all.
- So what did you do once you hit the beach, can you explain?**
- Went inland, drove inland, dug gun pits and did shoot when required. It's a fairly simple campaign that one, not much doing at all.
- So you drove inland and then -**
- We drove inland to the airstrip yeah. Where you could fire,
- 17:00 away form the airstrip about a hundred yards, fired over the air strip. Then we didn't fire much after that, only concentrated into the pocket.
- What sort of opposition was there at the airstrip?**
- Not a great deal at the air strip no. All took place in the pocket where they retreated to.
- You mentioned that the Japanese weren't very strong in terms of their artillery, when you say there wasn't strong opposition**
- 17:30 **at the airstrip, what sort of enemy fire was there, where did it come from?**
- Only retreating infantry and mortar fire, that's all, but it was taken very quickly I think, on the first day, day plus twelve hours.
- So what happened to you did you actually camp at Labuan or did you evacuate?**
- Oh we stayed in Labuan until we were
- 18:00 required to move over to Borneo and cleaned out the pocket and then we fired across to the straight there to Borneo. One battalion went over there and the other battalion followed. Then we went over by barge and then it was so dense there that we used the river to transport the guns up. So the barge would pull into a bank, we'd move the guns off the, onto the bank and into a firing position, clear a
- 18:30 path of fire and that'd be it. Until we got to the township of Beaufort, and then we'd clear an arc of fire, and we stayed there outside the township until the war finished, that was all. The whole of Borneo was a fairly easy simple campaign for us. There were a couple of bad spots that's all.
- What were the bad spots?**
- Only the pocket that's all. We lost very few casualties.

19:00 **How did you feel about Japanese prisoners of war?**

We treated them , the Japanese prisoners of war, the Geneva conventions. I don't think any Australians committed any atrocities. There may have been but I didn't see any. But I guess you'd have to be, I guess it depended on the

19:30 family situation. Whether your brother had been in the 8th Div or something like that, then there might have been some reaction. But I never heard of any. There was one thing I did hear of, I think it was right but, apparently when they were shipping some Japanese POW over the Padas River [?], the barge either pulled away early, or some Japs tried to

20:00 jump off and two or three Japs were killed there. Who was at fault I wouldn't know.

**That was on Borneo?**

That was on Borneo yeah that was at Beaufort at the Padas River.

**Were there any oil fires?**

No, the 20th Brigade had that problem when they landed at Brunei, Mirri and round there

20:30 and then the 7th Division they had fires down there. They were at the oil rigs, the oil wells at Labuan or Borneo near we were.

**So once you were on Borneo, how long was the time frame in terms of how quickly you secured the island?**

Very quickly probably a matter of

21:00 three or four weeks, whole lot. Then remained there later, even after the war some of us were still there, until the end of November.

**So during those three to four weeks can you explain to me what your daily routine would be, what you would do from day break in the morning?**

Well yes we had, this was after the war?

21:30 We were in charge of a POW camp there which we had turns guarding. Also we maintained the guns which because of the tropical conditions had to be oiled and greased and you know wiped down. So that and we just rested I guess.

**When did you first come across that POW camp?**

Well when the Japs came back

22:00 to surrender, these engineers had built these cages, so they just put them in there and we just guarded them that's all.

**What did the cages look like?**

Well you've seen a POW compound, with high fences and wire around the top, with century boxes all round. You seem them, those German ones, same like that sort of thing. With a guard house outside

22:30 and changing the front guard and the sentries up in the boxes with Bren guns

**And what sort of conditions were the Japanese in?**

most of them weren't in bad condition at all, the ones we dropped in, because I'd been living in the high country, they were different from the New Guinea Japanese because towards the beginning the new Guinea Japanese were pretty,

23:00 pretty sick, they were run down and very thin, but these were pretty well in pretty good condition. Borneo was a pretty good country, lots of vegetables and things like that. They could raid the peoples farms and vegetables strips and yams were plentiful, and there were chickens running around and they knocked off a few chickens so,

23:30 they did reasonably well, they were in pretty good condition when we took charge of them.

**And did they surrender easily?**

Oh yes, yeah, most of them I suppose ninety-five percent that we had anything to do with just came down from the mountains where they were and that was the end of it.

**Given that there were really strict rules about surrendering why do you think they were so compliant at that stage?**

24:00 Well I think it had been explained to them what had happened and the Japanese had capitulated, so I guess they realised, what could they do? Surrender, I don't know, I fail to understand the Japanese

mind.

**What do you mean?**

24:30 Their own culture, they treat their own people like they treat our POWs. Some of the guys got malaria in a tent, he's disturbing their sleep, they take their mate out, they peg him down on the parade ground with pegs on the wrists and the ankles in the rain and leave him there so they can sleep. They do that to their own people. No wonder what they do to other people.

25:00 That's their culture.

**Did you witness that sort of behaviour?**

I took this group in to release this guy with an interpreter, took, took him back to his tent and put him in his own bed. So that was one little thing.

**Can you think of any other examples of brutality amongst their own?**

No.

25:30 **So where were you, what were you doing specifically in Borneo when you heard about the atomic bombing, that Japan had surrendered?**

We were just, still fighting a war. The Japanese troops in East Borneo, Papua New Guinea, in the mountains, hills and we were trying to get them

26:00 out and we came across a camp and they called for artillery fire and we fired on them. Our officers were directing the artillery fire. That went on right to the end. Even two days after we still set troops out looking for them, make sure they came in.

**What sort of casualties were the Australian infantry experiencing flushing these - ?**

Not many because they were told not to, the instructions

26:30 to all Australian troops in the last six months of the 9th Division was not to take risks, to call on the artillery to bring shell fire down when they found Japanese and that was our job to bring shell fire down.

**So did the artillery experience any casualties or injuries in those - ?**

We were that far away from them, wasn't necessary to get close. If we got close we couldn't do anything, because you had to have elevation to fire over the trees to pin-point

27:00 where the Japanese targets are.

**How did the conditions in Borneo compare to what you had experienced in Lae?**

Much better than Lae. Lae was the worst part of new Guinea. There was swamps and kunai grass, but Finschhafen, Finschhafen wasn't a bad place to live.

27:30 Parts of it were very high and you got the breeze, got a cooling breeze, but Lae was more or less ground level and swamp and riddles with mosquitos, breeding grounds.

**Were there any local villages?**

There was a few there, Katika and, we talking Lae now? Each of them had villages. There was a missionary, a German Lutheran missionary at,

28:00 wasn't occupied then, but that was at Finschhafen and Hellsbach [Mission], there were villages at Katika and Finschhafen itself and Sattelberg, villages at Sio, all along the coast little fishing villages.

**Did the troops have any contact with the villages?**

Not a great deal no

28:30 because they fled, they got out of the way. They went into the mountains. They wouldn't have done them any good. Because they would have been knocked off in the shell fire and the exchange of shots. But I guess they were told by the New Guinea people themselves to go to the high ground and get out of it.

**How do you think they might have been treated by the Japanese?**

I don't think they were

29:00 treated very well because some of the stories we heard. But know they came down second third hand, one never knows.

**What were some of those stories?**

How they were treated, they were beheaded. Act as labourers for the Japanese if they showed any resistance, they only had one treatment, behead them. But that's only

29:30 second maybe third hand. The only people that could answer that is some of the commandos who lived with these people at times, when they were behind the lines for a while.

**Did you have any contact with any of those commandos?**

There was a troop at Finschhafen but we didn't have any contact with them.

30:00 **So when you heard about the atomic bombing of Japan what exactly were you told about what had happened?**

We just heard that one bomb had been dropped and another bomb had been dropped, there had been a lot of casualties and Japan had surrendered. That's all.

**What did you know about atomic weapons before?**

Nothing at all, nothing at all. Be sure if the

30:30 Japanese had had that, they would have used it. But I never want to see or never want to hear of atomic war.

**What were your feelings then about the end of the war?**

Well personally I was just glad it was

31:00 all over. Get back and lead a normal life, as quick as possible.

**So what happened then to you?**

So because I was single although I was original, it all went on the points system and married people got privileges which I guess was right, but I didn't get, I think it was the end of November,

31:30 spent time on Morotai, no it was end of October, spent some time in Morotai and then we came home on the Kanimbla, lovely trip on the Kanimbla. Got ah, called on Brisbane, got taken off there and then we went to a camp and went down, travelled by train to Melbourne. Discharged in December at Camp Bell which were the old Royal Park.

32:00 **So what did you do once you got to Brisbane did you have an opportunity to celebrate the end of the war?**

Yeah we went on leave, we were given leave, went to the hotel had a few beers, went to the pictures that night. Came back and next morning we got on a train and went out, that was it.

**Were you able to celebrate at all in Borneo?**

Oh no, no couldn't celebrate in Borneo. We had a victory salute

32:30 a gun fired about a hundred rounds, that's all. That was the end.

**So can you tell me about arriving back in Melbourne what you did?**

Took six weeks holiday, went down to Portsea, Sorrento and spent a week on the beach.

33:00 Came back and I started work.

**What was the purpose of your holiday?**

Just to swim, relax, have a beer. Come back gradually to a normal life.

**Where did you stay when you were down there?**

Portsea, stayed at the old hotel in Mornington, they used to call it,

33:30 and Sorrento, stayed at the old Sorrento Hotel. Had a lot of play, I was single, so, it was OK.

**Did your family know you were coming home?**

We were able to call them from Brisbane, tell them we were on the way.

**So can you tell me about your discharge**

34:00 **from the army?**

Well I went to along to the medical officer at Royal Park and any complaints, told him about my hearing, and he said, "Well that's normal," told him about the pains in my stomach, "That's normal, you've had six years in the army." But he said, "You can go and have some tests," so gave me some tests, but they didn't find anything out because they didn't have the right equipment. I found out later on that I had ulcers and they've

34:30 been treated. They're OK now.

**And what did they have to do with your army service?**

It was the diet I guess and I suppose a little bit of worries I guess, definitely worried, bit of stress.

**Did you have a girlfriend at this stage?**

35:00 Not properly, I was never engaged, but I had one before I joined and we parted friendly and took out one when I came back from Middle East just for once I think and we renewed it when I came back from the islands, went out a few times then we

35:30 started going out when I came back from the war.

**How common was it for men to get married or engaged when they were on leave or pre embarkation.**

Not very common, some did, a lot did.

**Had you made a decision to stay single?**

Yep. Reason being if anything happened to you, why would you do it being married? I mean what was your wife going to do,

36:00 she might have children or a child or something like that. I preferred to wait until I came home, myself. And when she said yes, I said OK and that was 1947. About eighteen months after I got discharged.

**What were those first few months like after the war?**

36:30 I think they were alright if you kept yourself active. I got straight back into cricket and work and resumed other activities, that was about it. We had a re-union a get-together from the unit, but basically we just, took twelve months to settle down properly I guess,

37:00 but then we did.

**Did you have mates that you were in contact with that weren't coping well in those first...**

No fortunately most of us coped well. Most of us coped very well. Couple had marital trouble but you know we sort of kept together and helped one another. Some ironed it out, others didn't

37:30 but they got over it they married somebody else later on. It wasn't the end of the world.

**Given that 9th Division had spent so much time away from home in all these different campaigns, what were some of the difficulties in returning to Australia? What were the hardships?**

Well I didn't have any hardships, myself,

38:00 the only ones I knew who had hardships were the ones that had marital problems and that was in our unit. I guess there were others that had them but didn't talk about them. Because the unit came from all over Victoria. They were scattered from the south to Gippsland

38:30 to the west, pretty big area, although Victoria is a pretty small state compared with others. I guess you know some people had them but didn't want to talk about them. Some died relatively young, there might have been a reason, they kept everything to themselves, just build the pressure up inside, who knows?

**Mr Widdows how did serving in the army during World War II change you?**

I guess I learnt a better appreciation for a lot of other people, becoming more tolerant. But I don't think there were any other changes. There was a lot of

39:30 experience and helped my education a lot. Learning about different countries and different sorts of people, a smattering of different languages and things like that but generally speaking not a great deal.

**When you look back on it what do you think about the necessity of that war?**

Definitely a necessity because who would want a world with

40:00 Hitler in control? When Rommel's son makes a statement about all Germans are grateful to the allies for defeating Hitler, give the Germans a chance to make their lives. That's an answer within itself. That's the feeling held by most of the people

40:30 in the African Korps, grateful. For the ability to be able to start again.

**What does Anzac day mean to you?**

it means remembrance to the people, not only passed on in service but passed on since. Renewing again with mates who make a special effort to come in from the country, or inter-state. That's on World War II. I've been fortunate, I've been to Gallipoli and I've seen the situation there you also think about Gallipoli and France I've been through a number of cemeteries in France.

**What do you think when you see young men and women marching off to the desert now?**

Well they joined the army I guess

41:30 you go overseas, I guess that's their job. They got to be willing to do it, if not they can always get out. The ones I've spoken to who have come back they're quite happy. From the gulf war, haven't spoken to anybody, spoken a lot from Vietnam from the Gulf War in '91, but I haven't met anybody back from the recent thing.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**