Australians at War Film Archive

James McAllester - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:38 **Okay James, if you can tell us a little about where you were born and grew up and a little bit about your family background as well.**

Well, for what it's worth, I've documented all my family affairs in a separate book but I think I've got reasonable recollection of what happened. I'll start with my birth in Camberwell

01:00 in 1919. My father was just about to retire from the Education Department. It was his second marriage and my mother had been a teacher in the top class available to women in those days. Women were allowed into the first-class teaching category. They were second-class teachers. From 6th to 2nd I suppose she done reasonably well.

01:30 I'll just start with my father. He was about to retire as Headmaster of Brighton Road School up here actually and it was his second marriage. My mother was in the top class of women teachers and was prepared to retire for marriage, naturally.

02:00 It may be relevant to mention my father's first marriage produced two sons and two daughters. The two sons served in Pompey Elliot's brigade in the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] which gave the family a continuing interest in military affairs. One was a private and one was a corporal, but being infantry chaps

02:30 made me feel that the infantry was the part of the army to be in. Do you want educational details?

Yeah all of that. We want as much detail as possible of life during that era. Okay so your father, sorry, what did your father do?

He was about to retire from the headmastership at Brighton Road School up

03:00 here, which is actually St Kilda but it was known as Brighton Road School. It was one of the biggest primary schools of those days. So he retired in 1920 so all my early years I had a full-time father. I didn't… He was able to take me to football and cricket and teach me to play cricket because he had been a very prominent cricketer.

03:30 He was the Bairnsdale cricket champion in the 1880s and gave me a lasting interest in cricket.

You were a bowler or batsmen?

I was, his, he was an all-rounder but I

04:00 I guess I was more of a bowler than a batsmen, but for some reason I didn't inherit any of his superior talent. I played cricket at school but that was about as far as it went, but having teachers as parents meant that my education really continued at home until I was as old as I could be

04:30 without going to school, which was six in those days, and a new school opened up in South Camberwell and I was enrolled there. I think principally because my mother knew most of the ladies on the staff who were her contemporaries and I did quite well there and as far as Grade 6, and then went to Gardener Central School which

05:00 you had to do in those days to get years 7 and 8. Gardener was a, one of the better performing schools and I was very well taught there and got a government junior scholarship and a scholarship to Scotch College. My father had been to Geelong College in the 1870s, but Scotch

05:30 being the Melbourne sort of counterpart of Geelong he didn't expect me to go Geelong where I would have had to board. I had five very happy years at Scotch and finishing up in dux in chemistry and physics and getting a senior scholarship, which paid for university course. I did a course in what

06:00 was then engineering. It was the predecessor to the chemical engineering courses of today. And in

September 1939 I was faced with a difficult choice because I joined the Victorian Scottish Regiment in 1937 as a cadet. Everyone asked, “Why didn’t you join the school cadets?” but the plain fact was

06:30 I had a pretty busy life applying yourself to your studies and I wasn’t very impressed with the school cadets and I was for some reason had my eye on the Victorian Scottish, which was well publicised in those days and was regarded as one of the most effective and well trained militia units.

07:00 I had a few months in the cadets until I reached 18 when I became a private in the militia battalion and was allotted into the intelligence battalion. I don’t know if there was any thought given to that but it certainly interested me because the work was a little more satisfying than endless drill. But

07:30 at the same time I had to learn the Lewis gun, and the Bren wasn’t available to us until the war started. And we had camps at Queenscliff and Portsea and bivouacs on weekends at Broadmeadows, and they were very

08:00 effective training as it was available then because quite a number of our officers and warrant officers and sergeants had served in the First World War and they gave us a very complete introduction to military practice and life and in the army and all the other things you learn in those

08:30 days. And when you are in your late teens you learn easily. Some of the older recruits we got when the Munich crisis sparked in the militia recruiting campaign, we got chaps in their 30s and 40s even and it was a bit of a challenge because if you had a couple of stripes and you had a squad of

09:00 fellows all older than yourself. And this was quite, quite noteworthy for me because as I progressed from corporal to sergeant, one of my colleagues was Sam Templeton, who was then in his 40s and had served in the First World War in the navy, we believe, but he never talked about

09:30 it. Sam was a fitness fanatic and when we both put up for a commissioned rank Sam looked at me with a strange smile and said, “It’s a strange situation. Here am I twice your age and at the same stage in the army.” Sam gave his name to Templeton’s Crossing in New Guinea because he played a

10:00 quite an important part in the 39th Battalion. He was too old for the 2nd AIF at the time of this war. So getting back to September 1939, I was waiting for my commission to be finalised in the Victorian Scottish and I was approaching my final exams for my science degree, and the

10:30 government brought matters to a head by calling the militia for home defence, and the Victorian Scottish was immediately shunted down to Portsea to provide a covering force for the forts governing, covering the entrance to Port Phillip [Bay] so we had some pretty intense activity. I had no thought of applying for, no exemptions were offered

11:00 and it seemed to me that I had to do it. And the university cooperated and gave me early exams which I passed. I wasn’t able to sit for honours but I passed and I got the on the 25th October 1939 my degree, my final exam pass, was notified and my commission in the 5th Battalion

11:30 Victorian Scottish was in the Commonwealth Gazette. A key date, strangely enough it was – although we weren’t married then, my wife’s birthday the 25th of October. It’s been stuck in my mind ever since.

Jim, before we get onto the war is it possible to give us a little snapshot of life

12:00 **before that, especially during those Depression years? One of the great things about the archive is we are able to record stories of that era as well. Do you have many recollections of that time?**

Well I think my recollection is reasonably clear. They were difficult times for the majority of the population because so many breadwinners were thrown out of work.

12:30 I well clearly recall the Sandshoe Brigade, as they were called, which was the government created labouring work by constructing the Yarra Boulevard. And I could see them from the train on the way to school. Chaps, none of whom could afford boots so they wore sandshoes, which I think were about a shilling or

13:00 one and sixpence a pair, and that way they were eligible for what government assistance was available. It was called ‘Susso’. A slang term for sustenance, like the term the dole, but it really was the dole and it was the minimum sort of wage which many families were forced to live on.

13:30 Naturally we had friends affected in this way but I was shielded by this by the fact that my father was still on his Education Department pension, which was quite good for those days and he didn’t, he kept going as an active father and doing gardening. Going into the city and meeting his old friends

14:00 and taking me to cricket and football. But he died in 1934, by which time the worst of the Depression was over. But our family situation became a little worse because my mother, there was no superannuation for women teachers in those days and my father’s pension died with him, so my mother, who had been pretty thrifty, was forced to live on

14:30 income from her own savings, which was about half of the basic wage. As I remember, it was about four

pounds in those days so my mother had an income of about two pound a week. Thanks to my scholarship she was able to keep the home going with strict economy. And I guess

15:00 my recollections of the Depression weren't as severe as many youngsters but I was well aware of it. It's chiefly 1930 and '31 when I was at Gardener School. It wasn't in a depressed area. I think things were much worse in the central and northern suburbs but we certainly had a few chaps who had no

15:30 shoes and whose clothing was not in the best condition, and obviously the big families that were struggling to make ends meet. Is that the sort of comment that's…?

Yeah, just how you remembered it is very important.

But Melbourne was a very different place. You could pretty well go everywhere by tram to visit all your friends

16:00 and the train service, we weren't, we were a fair way from the local station, but we had the Melbourne Road tram just a short step from the door and you could go into the city or to almost any other suburb that way. But there was no question of owning a car of course. Some people

16:30 had cars. We occasionally got a ride in a car but that was a rarity. Have I covered…?

Yeah, yeah. Just to give us a picture of what it was like. How many children were there?

Well my father had four children by his first marriage but they were all grown up. The two boys served in the First World War so there was a big gap

17:00 between his first family of four and his second family of one, which was me. The

Did you know your father's four kids from the previous marriage well?

Yes, well Lester the elder was married and living in Moonee Ponds and we used to visit him, and Lester had a son just a year younger than I

17:30 so here I had a nephew almost the same age, but we played cricket and the usual kids things did in those days. There wasn't all the modern entertainments. But Lester had a family of five or six. He actually married before he went to the First [World] War. He married a girl from

18:00 Maryborough and he was in the Repatriation Department as it was called then. He had quite a good job which he retained through the Second [World] War but he died quite suddenly in 1946. Keith, the younger brother, never married. He visited us. I remember talking to him

18:30 about the Anzac march. I think he marched with the 58th Battalion but he didn't tell me much about France. He being the younger, I think it affected him more. And they were both lucky to survive because Pompy Elliott's brigade had a very large share of the 1918

19:00 fighting, particularly Villers-Bretonneux, which I naturally read up all I could about. But neither of my father's daughters by the first marriage married. One was a secretary in the Metropolitan Gas Company and the other

19:30 kept house for her father after their mother died, my father's first wife. And one thing I did dig out in my research for the book was the fact that in the influenza epidemic of 1919 my father had to convert part of the Brighton Road School into a hospital

20:00 or some sort of temporary hospital and his elder daughter acted as the, you know, running the domestic side of the school which had to accommodate this hospital. I've never been able to find out any printed detail about it. It's just that I got this from family correspondence.

20:30 Will I start again from 1939?

In just a moment if that's all right, Jim. Just also because you have given us an overview of your education up to university. What was your schooling like in those early days, primary school, you said Gardener? Was it Gardener?

Well looking back on it I had no criticism of it at all. The teachers were all dedicated and there were no teacher strikes or anything like that.

21:00 I certainly, my mother took a keen interest in my schoolwork and that no doubt helped me get good results. My father was encouraged to take up some teaching work by the fact that we moved so that I could be closer to Gardener School. We moved to a house in the same street as the school, which was a big

21:30 help. For a couple of months I had to travel by two trams to get there from Camberwell. And my father found that the local newsagent was a chap he had taught and he was worried about his son's progress and persuaded my father to give him some teaching. And this sort of grew and my father finished up with the dining room table full of half a dozen chaps from

22:00 my year all wanting to be, their parents wanting them to be coached to get the results I was getting, I

suppose. They thought that if my father was able to get me up to standard they could do the same for their sons. Some of them I've kept in touch with and they do have an annual dinner at Christmas,

22:30 an annual Christmas lunch at Christmas time of former Gardener pupils. But that was quite an interesting exercise to see how my father taught mathematics. He was brought in to explain things to me. And I didn't have any experience of being in any of his classes in any of his schools because he had retired, as I said, when I was a year old so...

What impressed you about his

23:00 **method?**

Well I was really quite impressed that I devoted quite a bit of the book on the family to him and I got all his inspector's reports and so on and summarised them and he was clearly in the top range of primary school teachers. The fact that he spent 45 years in the [Education] Department, was head of one of the largest Melbourne schools

23:30 indicated he was obviously a gifted teacher and a very even tempered man. I never saw him, I never saw him lose his temper as far as I can recall. He suffered quite a bit in his last two or three years, rheumatic complaints, but he still kept active and was

24:00 up and about the day before he died. He just never gave up. He was a heavy smoker but he never smoked in the house out of deference for my mother. My mother, her family was not involved in anything that would involve a lady smoking, so

24:30 it was quite rare. I don't think my half-sisters smoked that I can recall, and whether that influenced me or not but I've never smoked and as a result I haven't got all my respiratory complaints that some of my wartime colleagues have got.

You said that your father had been a keen cricketer.

25:00 **Did he ever take you to see any of the big games?**

Oh yes we went to see the '28-'29 series. He took me to the Melbourne tests. I forget which test it was but we went to see Bradman batting, and Bradman came in to tremendous applause and an English bowler named Bows bowled him first ball and that was an absolute disaster as far as I was concerned. But I saw Bradman many times in later matches

25:30 and really enjoyed watching him. He was a joy to watch. I can remember occasions when there were, I don't know if Bradman was playing them for South Australia or New South Wales, but he was faced with a Victorian fast bowler named Alexander who he was hitting all over the ground, and Alexander was getting more and more upset by this and pitching them shorter and shorted and finally

26:00 he pitched one quite short and Bradman turned his bat over and banged it down onto the pitch in front of him to show him it wasn't quite the thing to do. And some, there was always in those days a chap with a penetrating voice in the outer who would give a commentary and he, I remember this voice coming from the outer, "Why don't you get a hammer?" because Bradman had just bashed the ball down on the pitch as though

26:30 it was a hammer. And this Victorian bowler also tried, a slow bowler called Fleetwood Smith. Alexander was a fast bowler and Fleetwood Smith was not being put on by the Victorian captain, who I think would have been Bill Woodfull and this sort of irritated the

27:00 loudmouth in the crowd and shouted at the top of his voice, "Why don't you give Kingsford Smith a bowl?" and he got Fleetwood Smith confused with Kingsford Smith. Obviously he was affected by alcohol. And Kingsford Smith, of course, was the famous aviator that was in the news a lot. And this was the sort of humour that enlivened cricket in those days, but there was no Mexican waves or

27:30 drunks in the outer. It was much more, I say quite frankly, it was a much more civilised matter going to the cricket.

Maybe he managed to give the ball more flight?

Pardon.

Maybe Fleetwood managed to give the ball more flight, that was the...?

Well there may have been some inference there but it was just the voice sort of heard all over the MCG [Melbourne Cricket Ground]. I don't suppose you could do it now. The voice wouldn't

28:00 carry with all the other strange noise. The crowd would keep perfectly quite when a bowler was... The only time I observed when that was not followed was when Larwood was bowling. He of course was known for trouble in the 'bodyline' series, it was called. Larwood took 28 steps in his run up and you could hear the crowd,

28:30 everyone counting his steps. But there was much more entertainment, I feel, in test cricket in those days. It's not the business it is now and you can see that from the statistics that if Bradman had had as

many matches as the top run getters of today he would have made many more

29:00 runs. People who probably played five tests every four years or whatever it worked out as with people that play 15-20 tests a year, so the statistics are quite unreal. You are not comparing like with like.

Do you recall anything else about the bodyline series?

Well Jardine was

29:30 as unpopular… The English captain was about as unpopular with the Australian public as any public figure could be today. He obviously worked out this bodyline theory as it was called, bowling short on the leg side so that the batsmen had to defend his body by hitting away to the leg

30:00 where there was a field placed to grab every possible catch. Larwood was the ideal bowler to do it because he had the pace and to get them short enough to get them to come through at the right height. I think I recall was it Bradman or Oldfield or one of the Australian team was hit by one of Larwood's balls and I can see him now staggering.

30:30 The ball hit him just over the heart and he staggered. I'm not sure if he fell but it was, the crowd immediately, you could hear the gasp all over the ground and all sorts of muttering going on. But it was, it certainly added interest to cricket but it was obvious, well not obvious but it

31:00 seemed to me Bradman was determined to find a way of overcoming this. And again I saw him dealing with it in one match, because I think there was only one test in Melbourne, but he would sort of move over to the off side, and as the ball came to shoulder height on the leg side he would belt it over all the fieldsmen and I think his results,

31:30 his figures show that he did eventually counter it. But it was certainly a hazard for the Australian team at the start. But I can remember fairly clearly all the key players. One that I particularly admired was Jack Ryder. A Melbourne

32:00 man who I recall him making 295 in one, I think it was a Sheffield Shield, Victorian versus New South Wales. It might have been the 1936 match where Victorian made 1,107 runs, and I always remember mainly the New South Wales slow bowler whose average for that match was four wickets for 362,

32:30 which was not a very encouraging result. But Bradman wasn't involved of course. He could have been in the New South Wales side but I doubt it. But Woodfull and Ryder hit the NSW bowlers all over the place and got up to this 1,107 runs. I've still got the press cutting which my father carefully cut out and said, "Put this away. It will be worth something one day."

33:00 **So what sort of games did you play as a boy?**

Well I played cricket at school but I never achieved anything beyond our second eleven or something like that. And I was fairly, you see. I was two years younger than the rest of my class. This is one of the results of my mother teaching me up to age six.

33:30 And then when I went to South Camberwell School I was judged by the teachers, some of whom were friends of my mother of course. They said, "He will be all right for Grade 3". So in Grade 3 I was seven years of age where most of the other children were nine. This carried on. You weren't sort of held back if you… So

34:00 I left Gardener at age 12 instead of 14, which was usual, and in the five years at Scotch I was younger and smaller than the rest of the class, which didn't sort of enable you to be first choice if they were picking a team so I guess I must have missed out a bit. I could have perhaps been

34:30 more assertive but perhaps I'm not assertive by nature. But I certainly enjoyed. We always played cricket at lunchtime, which was because we had four ovals at Scotch and there was always plenty of space for unofficial matches and so on. I think that is the most enjoyable type of cricket. It gets a bit too competitive when you get into the top teams and

35:00 as the players are now. Every move you make is analysed. Unless you are super confident and have a lot of natural ability it can become discouraging.

Your scholastic pursuits aside what were those years of Scotch like?

Well again very interesting.

35:30 The school was run for my first two years by Dr Bill Littlejohn, who was a very well regarded educationalist. He ran the school personally, which headmasters can't do today. They seem to be too busy recruiting overseas students and so on. And he was always around the place if you

36:00 tried to beat the bell which terminated in the afternoon at 3.45. There was a train which left the station at 3.52 I think and got you from school to Kooyong in seven minutes, which was pretty good, so you needed a good start and some chaps used to try and sneak a bit of an advantage, but the principal would be out there with a watch in his hand

36:30 and anyone that transgressed by beating the bell was kept back. But he certainly seemed to know me as well. He and I as a student and I have never heard a criticism of him by any chap who went

37:00 to the school in those days. He wasn't a very big man but he kept up the dignity of the job and was clearly the man running the school. I suppose that applies today in many cases. My father was quite interested because he was at Geelong College as I mentioned from 1867 to 1972, and George Morrison was the principal

37:30 and he was I gather had some similarities to Dr Littlejohn and he came from quite a famous family. In fact there was an article in the paper the other day about his brother, or was it his son, who was known as Chinese Morrison. He was an Australian who spent a lot of time in China and achieved quite a lot

38:00 as an international traveller. I don't know if he was ever officially a diplomat but he was obviously an adviser to the Australian government in Chinese affairs. I think Scotch under Littlejohn was certainly a very effective teaching institution. He was succeeded by Colin Gilray, who didn't seem to be

38:30 very interested in me and I was not very impressed with him because when it came to Year 12 I was doing five subjects, which was more than the normal. In those days most were generally directed to doing four Year 12 subjects, but I was doing five. That was three mathematics, physics and chemistry. And he said that gave me

39:00 one spare period, as they were called. Gilray suggested, well he didn't suggest, he said, "You had better do English." Well you only had to do English up to matriculation and then you had an extra year when you didn't need to do it which I found very boring and I wasn't keen to do it. And I went home and told my mother that Gilray wanted me to do a sixth subject and she put her hat and

39:30 coat on and went and told him, "No way." But again, other school activities I became, the last two years secretary of the Science Club it was called, where we had Saturday morning visits to factories and technical institutions in Melbourne. That was a very rewarding activity because there were

40:00 a lot of boys interested, and you had to get all the names and if you were limited in numbers you had to pick out those who most eligible to go, which was an awkward problem. And we saw a lot of interesting places. Factories, General Motors and every major factory we

40:30 visited. And as a schoolboy I had to write the letters asking for permission to visit and when it could be arranged, which gave me a bit of practice in correspondence. But I always got courteous replies except when there was a transport strike, and to get to General Motors at Fisherman's Bend we had to take the launch and this took a little longer than public transport would have and we were a bit late. And two very kind members of the General

41:00 Motors staff showed us around and I was a little bit shocked to get in the mail on the Tuesday a letter from the General Manager saying, "It is to be regretted but he did not arrive." Obviously he had got tired of waiting for us and went home and we had arrived after he left and had our tour of the factory. But that was quite an interesting job and gave me a good

41:30 understanding, well as much as you could understand at that age, an understanding of industry and what was involved in setting up a factory.

Did you have a career…?

Tape 2

00:31 **Well we are back on, Jim. Now you told us a little bit about the Scottish Regiment when you joined them. It would be nice if we could to get a little more detail on your involvement with the Scottish Regiment. You mentioned the drills and I'm wondering whether there bivouacs and things that you were involved in.**

I think I've mentioned that

01:00 most of, a high proportion of our warrant officers and sergeants and officers were First World War people and we took our cue from them. The first six months as I joined in the middle of '37, from then until I was eligible to move into the militia battalion as a private I was a cadet

01:30 until then, was mainly involved in small arms rifle, bayonet, grenade similar training with plenty of emphasis on elementary military drill and that sort of thing. And it took a while to get used

02:00 to wearing the kilt, for example. It wasn't an everyday dress, not being a part of Scotland, but once you got used to it it was much more comfortable than you realise. Much more so than the ordinary militia uniform which was based on the First AIF uniform of

02:30 riding breeches and puttees wound around the leg. That was always a tedious business. But for some

reason, probably to reduce wear and tear on the kilt, we were at one stage issued with the standard uniform to go to Williamstown rifle range, which we did usually on a Saturday afternoon and practise firing a rifle, and Bren rifle and Lewis gun.

03:00 I remember I was particularly impressed with the Lewis machine gun which was quite unusual because I was able to get reasonable scores even thought the guns were reputed to be through the First World War and have conical barrels. In January 1938 I commenced

03:30 with the militia battalion, which was then about 300 strong, and the training advanced to occasional field exercised, weekend bivouacs at Broadmeadows. Our annual camp that year was at old Franklin Barracks at Portsea. We were roaming all over the Mornington Peninsula

04:00 on tactical exercises and back in the drill hall one night a week we were gradually absorbing recruits because I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but the crisis in Europe, generally referred to as the Munich Crisis when Chamberlain went to try to

04:30 negotiate with Hitler, that caused the official strength of the Militia to be raised to I think 70,000 and the Victorian Scottish allocation was only 30 or so extra places. But the 30 recruits came in and we were all busy helping train them.

05:00 Most of us were pretty new to the game ourselves. Some time during that year I was promoted to corporal. It might be later in the year. But in February 1939 we went to a much bigger annual camp at Bittern on the Mornington Peninsula with the

05:30 other units of the 2nd Brigade, so we had four battalions in camp at one time, which was a good introduction to the sort of camps that were necessary in war time. I was quite surprised to be promoted sergeant the day I arrived at that camp, which at the age of 19 seemed to me a little bit premature. But I had

06:00 been doing the instruction and so on and presumably they wanted an intelligence section sergeant which required, you know, a fair degree of study, particularly of the manual of map reading. There was an army publication which was called The Manual of Map Reading and Field Sketching

06:30 and you had to do sketches of country over which operations were expected to take place, and it became quite a useful thing in wartime. Some of the sketches done by chaps in the various

07:00 intelligence sections made the official history, finally, of the only record of some particular battle. I didn't claim any particular talent at this, but I did what I could and later when I was in charge of the section I was always looking out for someone with a bit of natural ability to do this work. We did quite a lot of mapping

07:30 using a fairly primitive thing called a plane table, which is just a portable tripod with a small drawing board on top which you could sight objects in the distance and represent them on paper and so get yourself a plan of the area. That also became valuable in wartime because maps of the campaigns in which our battalion was involved were

08:00 never adequate and never in sufficient detail to use in a company or battalion sense. I don't have any particular recollections of that period other than during the rest of 1939 I was required to attend Victorian Barracks one night a week for a course which was

08:30 being run for battalion intelligence officers by a chap called Gordon Nolan, who was a very well known Melbourne man. He was then a captain in the Militia and when the war started he became the Divisional Intelligence Officer in the 6th Division, the first Division raised to go overseas. And he finished

09:00 the war I think as a colonel of the cloak and dagger units. But he gave a very good course in these evening classes of Victorian Barracks and of the weekends he took us down to the Mornington Peninsula in his and other cars where we did what were called TEWTs – Tactical Exercises Without Troops – and this was, he had a

09:30 whole brochure worked out which originally he called the 'Nip War', but apparently army headquarters took a poor view of this and changed it to the 'Nit War' as a prompt evasion of the official sanctions. And this gave a sort of a hour by hour series of actions required

10:00 to deal with an enemy landing down near Westernport and advancing up towards Melbourne from the Mornington Peninsula. I've still got the document because it is so interesting and it proved a very good introduction to what is necessary in an operation because he had worked out all the signals

10:30 that had to go from company commanders to commanders to the brigade commander and so on, reporting enemy progress and what was being done to counter it, and we learned a lot from that. And by this time I was finding it very difficult to fit in the whole week's activities because of the time involved in travelling to the university. My mother had

11:00 expended her remaining savings into getting me into Ormond College as a resident, and fortunately I earned a college bursary as well so it reduced my mother's home budget a little bit because I wasn't

living at home and it gave me more time for my university work. But it was still difficult to fit in a night a week and an occasional weekend on this army intelligence stuff.

11:30 Having sort of got a feeling for it it didn't make it difficult for me to go ahead, as I said earlier, to avoid applying for any exemption when the government decided to put the Militia on a war footing and the regiment had to go to Portsea. But you see other the period at Portsea, other units went to these positions in rotation

12:00 and it was back to civilian life for most of November and December. But in that time I was sent to the Southern Command School at Seymour where I completed a course for battalion intelligence officers. It was not surprising when the then intelligence officer of the Victorian Scottish

12:30 went to the 6th Division when it was formed in October 1939. He was one of the original officers who went over to the 6th Division. And there was a vacancy in the regiment so I was appointed to that section and went to the three month camp as we called it. The whole of the 2nd Brigade went into camp at Mt Martha and it was a very intense three months of training

13:00 well over, right over the Mornington Peninsula. On one occasion we did a climb of Mt Martha and finished up at Flinders going right over the higher country there. And another occasion I remember we went right down to Rosebud and over the Bay to the south coast, so it was a particularly

13:30 well organised and valuable training period and it provided opportunity to understand the whole working of a battalion and naturally there was weapon training and grenade throwing and all the rest of it worked into the complete syllabus so that at

14:00 the end of the three months' course as usual we were sort of pushed back into civilian life with no knowledge of our future. The 6th Division had been formed and by that time had embarked for the Middle East and things were so uncertain nobody really knew what to do. Most of us put our names down for the next division formed, if there was one,

14:30 but there was no commitment by the government so by April 1940 we in the regiment were aware that another division was to be formed. What was somewhat disappointing, although four battalions had been formed in Victoria for the 6th Division, the 2/5th, 6th, 7th and 8th there was only to be one extra

15:00 went to the 6th Division when it was formed in October 1939. He was one of the original officers who went over to the 6th Division. And there was a vacancy in the regiment so I was appointed to that section and went to the three month camp as we called it. The whole of the 2nd Brigade went into camp at Mount Martha and it was a very intense three months of training.

15:30 Another Militia unit who had the advantage that it only held one annual camp. It didn't have requirements during the year for training so we naturally exchanged views on our Militia training and we saw a great deal of each other at the Mt Martha camp because the Melbourne University Rifle Regiment

16:00 had a battalion in the 2nd Brigade. There was the Victoria Scottish, the 5th, the 6th Battalion, Royal Melbourne Regiment, the 32nd Battalion – they are known as the Footscray Regiment – and the Melbourne University Rifles. They made up the four of the brigades so Treloar and I saw each other in camp on various occasions and decided to share a study at Norman College. So we were there for about a month,

16:30 during which period I was awarded actually a research scholarship which would enable me to go on and do a Master of Science degree. And during the period the Bachelor of Science degree that I completed in 1939 was confirmed at the usual academic ceremony.

17:00 But at the end of the month Treloar and I were quite surprised when we were both selected for the 2/14th Battalion. It was quite a coincidence and quite an encouraging one. Well we never gave any consideration for turning it down – it wouldn't have been thought of. Naturally my mother was disappointed I wasn't going to take up the scholarship, but she made no attempt to discourage me going ahead so

17:30 with Allan Trelloar we went together to Puckapunyal and he became the mortar officer and I was the intelligence officer for the 2/14th. We had a very cold winter and intensive training at Puckapunyal from May to October. We did have a bit of relaxation going to country dances in Kilmore and

18:00 that was perhaps one night every second week. We got weekend leave every second week and our families could come and visit us. But it was a period of getting to know your future mates because with this system of selecting they had something like 1,100 applicants from the 2/14th from Militia and

18:30 regulars. And the army in its wisdom decided that in each, they would appoint the commanding officers in each division unit and the man selected for the 2/14th was George Cannon, who had briefly been in the First World War as an artillery signaller. He hadn't been an infantryman but he had been a Militia officer between the wars and had worked his way up to lieutenant colonel

19:00 and he was the nominated commander and he was instructed to go to every Militia battalion and ask for two names. And when he went to the Victorian Scottish, who was then commanded by George Knox who

later became a leading Victorian parliamentarian, he was commanding the 23rd Battalion in the 1st AIF. He was a very good CO [Commanding Officer] for us

19:30 and he nominated a chap called Howden, Stace Howden for the 2/14th. One other chap sort of applied personally and eventually squeezed his way in, but as far as I was concerned it was quite an honour to be picked out by the CO for this job so

20:00 after, what was it, all the winter and early spring at Puckapunyal we were sent by train to Sydney and embarked on the Aquitania in a big convoy that the Queen Mary, the Mauritania. They were the ships with several thousand troops on each. It was quite an event to have all these

20:30 ships in Circular Quay area in Sydney with the surrounding buildings lined with people wanting to see what was happening. No doubt some German spies as well. We were farewelled by the governor-general. I've got a photo there somewhere of him shaking hands with us all. The governor-general was Lord Gowrie in those days, who was a VC [Victoria Cross] winner himself. And

21:00 it was quite an occasion. So we…

Sorry Jim, can I just ask you at this point before we get too deep into it, what your understanding at that point was of what the intelligence section did and what your role in it was to be?

The briefest description you can give of the work of an intelligence section is the collection, collation and dissemination of information

21:30 about the enemy and the topography and other relevant matters. The collection it comes in from various sources. You get intelligence summaries coming from your brigade headquarters. The information has just got to be grabbed wherever it is available. It's got to be entered in the sense that it's got to be

22:00 looked at and see where it is appropriate. And dissemination is firstly letting your commanding officer know, and secondly letting the company commanders know. And there were very few official publications on the subject. That's why it was so valuable to have Gordon Oldern's course background to

22:30 enable me to do the job. I must say our CO wasn't very familiar with this and I had a certain amount of difficulty trying to explain to him what I thought we should do, and as a result we didn't really work out the best way of fitting into the battalion organisation until after the Syrian campaign started. We had various things to do during training exercises,

23:00 which were really on the First World War pattern where the intelligence officers were known as the scouts and they usually were employed in France, as far as I can gather, in scouting around trying to pinpoint where the enemy guns were and what the enemy was up to in preparing new defences and that sort of thing. But

23:30 the whole question of mapping didn't come into prominence then because France was pretty well mapped. But we found that Australian wasn't all that well mapped. There were maps prepared. One of the best maps of the Mornington Peninsula was prepared by the intelligence officer of the MUR [Melbourne University Regiment] at the Melbourne

24:00 University, a chap named Cumbray Stewart, and I remember getting, I kept a copy of this map which had been done on the plain table I mentioned earlier, and it had every house around places like Portsea pinpointed and shown and I gave a copy only 15 years ago to the Portsea Conservation Society, which were absolutely delighted. It was the first map they had of the area in those days and showed them all the things that they wanted to have

24:30 a look at. There is not a great deal more I can tell you about the actual working of the battalion intelligence section without getting maps out and so on.

That being one of the main developments, do you think, since the First World War – making maps and the preparation of them?

I guess there would have been a certain amount of mapping done by the intelligence section in the First War but it would mainly

25:00 have been based on the existing French maps. I did have a specimen somewhere but the situation we were often faced with in the Middle East was you had to start from scratch and prepare a map of the area you were intending to operate in and fill in the detail as you went and use that as a guidance during

25:30 operations. We had developed in the Militia days through the use of what were called talc sheets. It was a sort of fairly firm plastic sheet that you put over the map and map board and clipped to it and you marked detail which was of a determinant nature with what were called chinagraph pencils.

26:00 They were pencils which would adhere to the smooth surface of the plastic. And this was part of the intelligence section stock in trade and proved quite valuable, except what wasn't realised by some was that the smooth surface would flash the sunlight and be a clear indication to the enemy of what was

happening. During the Syrian campaign on one occasion

26:30 where the whole of our sister battalion, the 2/16th, had their command group on the flat roof of a hut, and presumably the map boards caught the light and told the enemy what was happening and they immediately deduced they were some important people so they shelled them immediately and caused them to leave the building in a great hurry. That's just a sideline on

27:00 the mapping activities of the intelligence section. But another thing that was often necessary was to project from the contours a cross-section of a piece of country so that the peaks are in elevation, and this would enable you to work out if you got to that peak what you would see, what would block

27:30 your view and so on. And part of the training I gave our chaps at Puckapunyal was doing exercises of this kind so that they hopefully would be more useful in war time during operations. I don't know that there is great deal of, talking of information, you gain quite a bit by getting

28:00 to know the intelligence officers of the other battalions in the brigade and what you used to call swapping notes with them to see what they had become aware of that we didn't know. So in the 7th Division only one battalion in Victoria didn't give us a chance to any brigade liaison type of work until we got to the Middle East. The other units that we were

28:30 all in camp with at Puckapunyal were nearly all artillery units and one air battalion and we didn't do any combined exercises with them during that period. But the whole of the Puckapunyal training was more or less in-house instruction or in-house activities trying to imagine what actual conditions in the field would be like.

So how many

29:00 **were you actually instructing at Puckapunyal yourself? How many men would have had had?**

Well the establishment was for six men and a sergeant and an officer. I was very fortunate in that my sergeant was a Victorian Scottish, Bill Lange, elected to enlist at Caulfield. Only the officers were selected and appointed. Everyone else had to join up. Even if they had been sergeants in the Militia they had to join the AIF as privates and take pot luck.

29:30 Fortunately Bill Lange was able to enlist at Caulfield and be allotted to the 2/14th. Another chap from the Scottish, John Stirling, did the same thing and was allotted to the pioneer battalion and I had quite a bit of work to get him back. But fortunately as it turned out, another chap named Bruce Kingsley was similarly treated. He wanted to come to the 2/14th

30:00 but he was sent to the pioneers, so I went to the CO and I said, "A very good chap from the 5th Battalion intelligence section wanted to transfer but he has been sent to the pioneers," and the colonel said, "Well that's funny. I've just had a request from Major Cuthsworth that a chap named Kinglsey has been similarly treated." I didn't recollect this until much later.

30:30 I didn't make a note of it at the time but I do recall that Kingsley and Stirling both came over to the 2/14th as a result of representations by Colonel Cannon to Colonel Welling, the CO of the pioneers. It was fortunate because both Welling and Cannon had been CO of the 58th Militia battalion and knew each other very well, so with a few drinks after dinner and agreed on the swap. I don't know whether Welling got anyone in exchange, but

31:00 anyway we got two chaps, one of whom won a Victorian Cross and the other, John Stirling who was in the association for over 40 years and my right-hand man in many enterprises. He was my sergeant in Syria. By this time I was at the officer training school at Cairo and we had another chap from the Victorian Scottish, Bill Lynn, who was a commercial artist. He was a very good man at drawing maps

31:30 and his maps have been used in the battalion history. So I had those chaps with me whom I knew well to form the nucleus for the intelligence section for the 2/14th. And by this time I asked the adjutant if I could have first look at the drafts arriving from Caulfield. There was 40 or 50 men a day drafted from the recruit reinforcement depot and they all had

32:00 to be allotted. Those who had been machine gunners in the Militia were allotted to the carrier platoon where the machine guns were and mortar men similarly. Signallers went to their officer and there were very few who had been in the intelligence sections in the Militia, but I managed to grab them and so two or three turned out very well. Roy Watson later became the intelligence officer of the battalion and was

32:30 instrumental in getting them out of a very difficult situation in New Guinea. Bill Lynn was commissioned and went to the 15th Battalion because chaps who had completed an op [operational] tour and were commissioned couldn't go back to Lieutenant. Geoff Woodley became a sergeant. He had been in a militia intelligence section. And Rupert White, who had been a battalion intelligence sergeant in the militia, was killed in Syria.

33:00 But all those chaps benefited by the sort of wider experience and training they got in doing battalion intelligence work. I don't think I've left anyone out in that.

Was there anyone who hadn't had intelligence experience?

I think that was

33:30 it. Actually Bill Lynn wasn't in the Victorian Scottish intelligence section. He was in a rifle company and he soon adapted to the work at Puckapunyal, but I think we had five out of the six. I can't think who we would have had to train from scratch but everyone helped each other on field work such as mapping and so on

34:00 and you had to be able to use a prismatic compass and generally be as adaptable as possible.

So did that training at Puckapunyal involve a fair amount of coordination with the infanteers?

Well we did have battalion exercises which was the most we could do without other battalions available to make a brigade exercise and

34:30 it was mainly a matter of sorting out problems of maps and topography. There was… I can't recall doing an actual battalion attack exercise where it would have been obvious where you had to have placed the members of the intelligence section so that they

35:00 could report back where the companies were and what they were doing. I can't recall an actual exercise where we functioned as a complete battalion. That started in Palestine.

Okay. I think you explained very well what the make up of the section and you got us as far as Circular Quay and the embarkation there. Tell us about the

35:30 **voyage across to the Middle East.**

Well the Aquitania was a comfortable ship because most of the wartime, most of the peacetime equipping was still there. The troop decks were pretty crowded and I remember the troops had to get their beer ration through a hole in the wall and sort of hand out.

36:00 The officers were as the British Army sort of practised were accommodated in the first-class portion of the ship and we had I think two or three to a cabin and it was reasonably comfortable voyage except for the difficulty of exercising on deck. We had to try

36:30 and keep fit by running around the decks and playing basketball and things like that. I guess the….

Okay so Aquitania you are talking about how the British Army had the first class…

At Fremantle the 2/16th Battalion came on board and

37:00 they surprised us by their CO having ordered them all to shave their heads. Many years later we heard a story that this was a practice that started with Alexander the Great where he had all his soldiers shave their heads so that the enemy couldn't grab them by the hair. I think that was in the days when soldiers wore pigtails. You know, they had a what was it a

37:30 a waxed pigtail down their back. You might have seen it in some films. Anyway we got to know the 2/16th officers on the rest of that voyage to Bombay where we transhipped to small ships because they didn't want to take the big ships up the Red Sea, so we were…

38:00 The people who were on the Aquitania were allotted to other ships and we went on a little regular troop ship called the Dilwara, which was very comfortable. It was later sunk in the Japanese war, I think. But we landed at [El] Kantara on the [Suez] Canal and were transported by train up to Julis where we camped for the next four months. In the area just

38:30 north of Gaza and we trained very hard there. The whole brigade was in the vicinity. The 16th and the 27th Battalions from South Australia. And got to know our brigade commander. He had been at Puckapunyal but we only saw him in the distance and occasionally addressed us, but we didn't get to know him at all.

39:00 The training area available to us in Palestine was most of the southern portion of what's now Israel and south as Tel Aviv and far east as Hebron and as far south as Beersheba. And some of us were interested of course in the First World War campaigns there and learned a little bit about them. My colleague Allan

39:30 Treloar's father was the head of the military history section and had been on the headquarters of the first Australian division on Gallipoli, so Allan being a classical scholar had absorbed a great deal of history and was able to keep me up to date on those sort of things.

40:00 The training in Palestine was fairly intense. Not too much marching in loose sand fortunately as the 1st AIF had to do, but it still got us up to a fair state of physical fitness by April when we were instructed to pack up and prepare for embarkation and

40:30 those of us in battalion headquarters were, I'm not sure how many of the troops were aware that we were booked for Greece. Originally they were going to send 7th Division to Greece but Blamey apparently didn't consider them well enough trained so the 6th Division by this time had taken part in

the Bardia and Tobruk operations and were sent to Greece with the

41:00 New Zealand division who were left in very dusty camps outside Alexandria wondering where we were to go next. But it wasn't long before it became apparent that Rommel had made a pretty vast move across North Africa and was by this time ready to attack Tobruk. so

41:30 we were moved up the Western Desert initially to a place called Maatenbagush [?] which had been partly prepared by the British Army as a defensive position, as a perimeter defence on the coast and it involved we could see awful prospects ahead of having to dig out anti-tank ditches full

42:00 of loose sand. But somebody changed their mind and we were sundered on again to Mersa Matruh, which was an ancient...

Tape 3

00:30 **So we are recording again now Jim.**

Well in Mersa Matruh we were occupying positions which recently had been held, I think, by the Italian army. I'm sorry, the Egyptian army, as a defence against the Italians and later by the British army which

01:00 had moved into the Western Desert at the outset of Italy's involvement in the war. We took over the existing defences from the 2nd Battalion of the Scots Guards, a British regular unit which was obviously very accustomed to soldiering in

01:30 faraway places, and it was quite an experience to see the amount of gear they were carrying into the desert. We were by this time travelling from Alexandria to Mersa Matruh we hadn't had a great deal of desert experience but we had learned not to carry anything they didn't need, but the Scotch Guards I remember had a three ton truck for the officers' mess with

02:00 crockery and cutlery and all, but they were obviously very efficient soldiers but they were still carrying on some peacetime practices. I followed their intelligence officer down along a tunnel to the underground headquarters they had dug for themselves and I bumped into the back of him in the darkness and

02:30 realised what was happening. I found he was saluting the CO's empty desk, which is apparently the practice it the British army. If you enter the orderly room you salute whether there is anyone occupying the CO's chair or not. They were very nice fellows and they had obviously knew a lot more about warfare than we did, but we

03:00 found a lot that to be improved in the situation. There were dugouts full of sand that had to be re-dug out. There were minefields all over the place and mines that had been there for a

03:30 long while probably laid by the Egyptians in defending, before the British army took over and then the British army had probably laid more. We had no history at all, no data to work on and we had to, the intelligence section had the job of mapping them and sort of providing the company commanders of some indication of where they should avoid to avoid stepping on mines, and unfortunately, and it was

04:00 with hindsight, it was fortunate that we only lost one chap killed and one chap injured. A chap called Tiny Faber, he was killed and another chap was injured stepping on mines. One company commander was found to have stopped with one foot beside a mine and one foot poised over a mine and that was one circumstance I remember

04:30 quite well. I found a need to prepare some fresh maps which Bill Lynn, the chap I mentioned earlier, did a very good job in preparing some fresh maps, but the British units had

05:00 labelled all the platoon areas with British names. Places like Witchcross and so on which our chaps found a little bit puzzling, but nevertheless they got used to saying, "We are going over to such and such a platoon in such and such an area," realising it wasn't a town or anything, it was just the names they had given to these areas. It was something new to us. But most of our time in Mersa Matruh was

05:30 there were occasional air raids. The Royal Navy were running a destroyer ferry from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk and I remember one, I think it was the Carlisle but I can't be certain of that,

06:00 was steaming along the coast just outside our perimeters which were pretty close to the coast and they decided to see if all their guns were working and they fired them with great gusto and all of the bits and pieces hit our positions, which we didn't think was very kind. We thought, "They could have easily done that out to sea." I can't

06:30 think of any other particular incidents there. We were supposed to, Mersa Matruh being a perimeter defence had an entry point from the coast road coming from the east and then an exit point going to the west and our chaps had to keep a record of vehicles coming through, and we were surprised to learn later that one vehicle which went out

07:00 had been stolen from a British position somewhere in the desert some months before. Obviously it had been in the hands of what we called in those days Fifth Columnists, the Fifth Column that the German used in Scandinavia to infiltrate the population. But we never caught anyone. So will I leave Mersa Matruh and get into Syria?

Yeah, we do need to get to Syria but I'm

07:30 **interested if there is anything else you can tell us about your intelligence work in Mersa Matruh.**

It was chiefly in making sure that the information we had on maps was as complete as possible. That the fields were recorded as much as we could to hand over when we moved out, which we knew we would at some time, and

08:00 I can't think of any other particular items. It was mainly a job of keeping yourself clean and inhabiting keeping your body underground so that in the event of air raids you would not be sticking out as an easy target and…

How intensive were the

08:30 **air raids?**

There were no deliberate air raids on Mersa Matruh. It was the ever present risk because there were Italian aircraft all around the Mediterranean Sea who were mainly concentrating on Tobruk at that stage, but it was largely precautionary. But it certainly was good policy to discourage the troops from wandering around

09:00 or treating the whole thing as a peacetime camp. The dust storms were another hazard. We occasionally had dust blowing everywhere and getting into the food and feeding was a problem. We had a small beer issue which

09:30 was difficult to enjoy because there was no means of keeping it cold, but otherwise it was a fairly uneventful month with really not much going on. So we were relatively glad, I suppose, to get some orders to proceed by road back to Cairo or back to Egypt

10:00 and as is usual when there is a move the intelligence officers usually move with the second in command of the battalion. And a representative from each company organises the next stopping point so I left by road with the small party

10:30 which proceeded through Egypt and across the Sinai Desert and up to a British army headquarters in Palestine where we were told that the battalion would arrive at a rail siding called Binyamina

11:00 on the railway going north to Haifa and would be in camp in the vicinity of a Palestinian town called Afula. And this was my first occasion to work

11:30 together with the intelligence officer of the 2nd Battalion to work out how the brigade would be located around Nazareth. And by this time it became apparent that we were going to mount an operation against Syria. The object of parking the

12:00 7th Division troops in the sort of centre of Palestine was to sort of avoid it becoming known that they were there. Our sister battalion, the 2/16th, all Western Australians and all fairly tough gentlemen, decided that they wanted to see Haifa so one night most of them departed for Haifa

12:30 where there were nightclubs and similar entertainments. And that night I happened to be duty officer on my own in the 2/14th camp not far away and I got an urgent request came from brigade for a town picket, as it was called, to go to Haifa and get the Australian troops out of there. This I didn't think was an easy problem, but I managed

13:00 to scratch around and get a dozen or so chaps that were still around camp either on duties or inevitable chaps like cook's offsiders that always seem to dodge any route marches and got hold of a utility and drove over to Haifa, and thought on the way how I was going to do this job because I had no supporting advice at all, and I thought I would go to the Palestine police headquarters. Now in those

13:30 days the Palestine police were British ex-servicemen. All very helpful and pretty tough characters really because they had had to deal with the friction between the Arabs and the Jews, which was not really at the stage it is now. And anyway the police superintendent said, "Well break your party up into half a dozen groups and I will provide

14:00 a police officer with each and they will go around the town to all the spots that the troops tend to drink. And my suggestion is that you offer them transport to get them back to camp." We organised to have half a dozen three ton trucks down at the port area of Bakgalim [?] just sort of below the township the city of Haifa. And

14:30 I might mention that Haifa was a very attractive, clean, laid out city and consequently that's why the

Australian Army decided to put camps in the vicinity. It would be too much of a, it was bad enough having camps within reach of the villages where there was a certain amount of what our brigadier used to call 'undue Tel Avivity'. The antics of the troops on leave, however, this gave me quite an

15:00 interesting evening going around the nightspots of Haifa telling these chaps, "Well don't get too drunk but there will be transport back to Afula at midnight." Anyway at midnight we certainly collected a large number and the police said, "Well it's no good looking for the others. They are probably under beds in various establishments. You might as well take this lot back and hope you've done your job."

15:30 So I took this lot back and they were mostly 2/16th chaps. And the policemen had alerted me to a very wise precaution. You see in those days the chaps were in shirts and shorts and they had their pay book stuck in the pocket of these shirts, and these policemen had done a very good job – they had picked the pocket of so many of the

16:00 soldiers who had been on leave and they gave me a big envelope with all their pay books. So as we unloaded them all at the 2/16th Battalion camp I said, "Well you'll be seeing your CO in the morning." And they all jeered, "You haven't taken our names." And I knew it would be a futile exercise to try and take their names so I said, "It doesn't matter. I've got your pay books." Well they all started to shake their fists

16:30 and threaten retaliation and I moved off and left them to it. And their CO gave them various punishments in the morning, docking their pay books and so on. That was my introduction to working with the rest of the brigade. But we had a short period of mainly, the intelligence section was sorting out huge rolls of maps that had been

17:00 delivered to us and folding them up in a form where they can be conveniently opened out and issuing so many to each company commander and platoon commanders and so on. That kept us quite busy until we moved off around the 7th of June into what was called the lying up area, which was alongside the Syrian border. They company commanders were disguised in

17:30 British army uniforms and they were taken on horseback to ride along the frontier to where they were able to see the different Arab villages and hills and so on across the desert, although it was really Lebanon, although it wasn't a separate country as it is now. It was all Syria in those days and Lebanon was just one part of Syria. So

18:00 at least the company commanders had a look at where they had to go. I didn't take part in that trip, partly because I had too much to do getting these maps sorted and worked out which would be required now, which might be required in a week's time and so on. When they were unloaded on us in just one enormous pile

18:30 and certainly the intelligence section did a good job in folding them and sorting them out because unless you did this, if you issued them in rolls to the commanders, well God knows how they would finish up. They would fold them as best they could but we folded them down the middle concertina fashion and then up the same way. I haven't got one handy. I've got some there if you are interested, but that

19:00 was the main thing. Unfortunately the maps for the country immediately over the border were 1:2000 scale which weren't enough to show any detail, so most of the chaps had to find their way through the different Arab tracks, roads and villages. It wasn't very densely populated; they were fairly scattered.

19:30 But our battalion was given the job of crossing near the coast the 2/16th went further inland and the 2/27th, the South Australian battalion, were kept in reserve initially. Well we had one raiding party which was formed by selected chaps from each company. More or less the toughest soldiers we could nominate.

20:00 They were briefed at a little Jewish settlement called Hanita which is where we first met Moshe Dayan who later became the Israeli Defence Minister, and he became notorious or became well known for the patch over his eye which he owed to his experiences with us. This party was to try and

20:30 prevent the coast road from being demolished. The intelligence reports said that a demolition had been prepared a little bit north of the coast road and the object of this raiding party was to identify this spot and prevent it from being blown up. And Moshe Dayan was in charge of a small group of guides. I think there were a couple of Arabs and a couple of Jews

21:00 and he was a member of an organisation called Haganah, which was mainly Jewish activists that was opposed to the Arab population and in some ways to the British administration of Palestine which were still carrying on under the League of Nations mandate.

21:30 Then from this Hanita Arab settlement, which, incidentally, Moshe Dayan had built a few years before, our party set out with the guides across the fairly rough country between there and the point on the coast road where the demolition was believed to be, but it hadn't been pinpointed and they had a fairly busy time of it because they found telephone

22:00 wires which they cut, but they weren't the wires that were used to effect the demolition which occurred later without them being able to stop it, and a big section of the road and a cliff like such as you have

between Anglesea and Lorne down here, a big section of road was blown out and delayed the advance for a day or so, or best part of a day, although the engineers fixed it pretty quickly.

22:30 But they got into a fight with the French troops on the coast at a place called Iskanderun and Moshe, I've detailed all this in the book, but Moshe Dayan was helping to direct mortar fire onto a French barracks some distance ahead and they got a

23:00 direct hit on the eyesight of the mortar he was using and drove it back into his eye which made an awful mess of his skull and he was bleeding pretty badly and bandaged up and sent back for medical attention during our move forward. After dispatching the raiding party, another company of ours went across

23:30 the frontier and came down towards the coast, another company joined the 2/6th Battalion and went inland some miles and then struck across the town of Tyre, the ancient city now just called, I think the Arabs have abbreviated it to Tyr instead of Tyre, and gradually during the day we got ourselves sorted out.

24:00 Our B & D, C, A, B and D Companies gradually moved up towards Tyre and C Company came into Tyre with the 2/16th and C Company took over the township of Tyre and just made sure the population had no troublesome elements. The Vichy French troops

24:30 who had made a half-hearted attempt to stop our progress had withdrawn north of the Litani River and that was where it became obvious that the first serious engagement. It's not really covered other than briefly in the army history and if you have a particular point to check you have to dig out the naval histories. But that's another thing.

25:00 **Well that's another interesting point, but we might not have time to talk about that. But we are recording now so in your story you were just, you had just advanced into Syria.**

Well our companies were scattered over a wide area and fortunately the brigade commander liked detaching a company

25:30 from a battalion and loaning it to another battalion and this happened really right at the beginning so that we didn't collect the companies together until just prior to the Litani River crossing. And our battalion wasn't given any role in that other than to do a lot of pick and shovel work preparing the

26:00 approaches to the river. The 2/16th did the crossing and the 2/17th followed them through and attacked the positions on the other side and we then came across and picked up the advance with two of our companies, one each side of the coast road, which was the only access way through along the coast.

26:30 We were well supported by the Divisional, the 6th Division Cavalry Regiment which was allotted to 7th Division for the operation and we had some 2/4th Field Regiment Artillery troops with us so that our chaps were

27:00 quite encouraged that when the pointed out an enemy position the artillery were able to engage it. This went on all through the afternoon. This was the 12th of June. Until rounding a bend in the road we could see across the Surani Wadi which we didn't give it a title of the river because there was no water in it. Six

27:30 of the heavy tanks that we had been, we had noticed from the intelligence summaries that were sent to us before the campaign that the French had about something like 70 of these tanks. They were much heavier than the light tanks that our cavalry regiment was equipped with and in our view they posed quite a threat. So

28:00 that took us up to the evening of the 12th and the brigade commander then ordered an attack on the area around where the road crossed the river and the road from Marj Uyun came from the right. Initially he wanted our C and D Companies to carry out the attack but it was then pointed out that

28:30 our D Company had been moved up into the hills on the right of the road to protect our flank and unfortunately either the enemy or the local population had cut the signals wires, which was the practice to run out on the ground by each company as it moved away from the battalion. So B Company, which

29:00 the brigadier had detached to the 2/16th Battalion to help them clean up after their crossing of the Litani River, were to be raced up so late in the night. I think they arrived in about 2.00 am and there wasn't adequate time for them to reconnoitre the ground they were to attack. The attack started before dawn and they didn't get going very far because the French tanks came out and

29:30 crossed the wadi by the bridge on the main road and got into the flat coastal plain area, which was largely maize crop, I think, and left our chaps in an untenable position. They had no anti-tank support. Although the anti-tank regiment

30:00 had part of its compliment somewhere in the vicinity, they didn't seem to feature in the brigade orders for the attack. And although the company commander concerned sent back a signal for urgent artillery support it was some time before the artillery could register on the position, and also they were certainly not anxious to shell

30:30 an area where our chaps were trying to keep out of the machine gun fire from the tanks. I think we had something like one or two killed and eight or nine wounded by the tanks. Fortunately our C Company on the right of the road had some rocky, sloping

31:00 ground. You see the hill went up from the coastal plain and were not so seriously put in jeopardy. Both company commanders were wounded and the CO ordered the B Company people to withdraw to hopefully get out of the tanks' domination

31:30 of the situation and the quite a few key personnel were wounded. One of the platoon commanders and two or three of the NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] were wounded and the company regrouped a little way back and moved into its position where it could advance further. But by this time

32:00 there was great concern at brigade headquarters and they ordered the 2/27th Battalion to move into the high ground on the right, which was the obvious place where there was some cover from enemy fire, and to cross the wadi further up stream. And they did this while our chaps consolidated

32:30 their positions and prepared for further orders. During this morning the 2/27th Battalion captured quite a few prisoners of the Vichy French units, which were occupying the ground they were attacking, and sent them back along the road and they were all there in a large column when

33:00 6 Vichy French aircraft came from nowhere and started strafing the area with their 25mm cannon, aircraft cannon, which caused quite a lot of casualties among the prisoners. And Allan Treloar and I, part of the intelligence duties which I hadn't mentioned earlier was the identification of any enemy

33:30 units that you happen to capture, or where a member of… or were able to be identified in any other way. So Allan spoke French far better than I did. I asked him if he would help me identify any of these units and we had just started on this when the French aircraft came over and some of the prisoners of course

34:00 scattered. I was thinking about how I could stop one of them who I could see was disappearing up into the hills and decided it was a bit outside my duties, even if I could run as fast as I could. But turning around I found that Trelloar had been hit by one of these aircraft bullets and was losing a lot of blood and

34:30 I thought that the most important thing was to get him to medical attention as quickly as possible. We had been accompanied by a British unit, a medical unit called the Light Field Ambulance, which had facilities to treat him and there were no stretcher bearers of our chaps in sight of course. They weren't expecting any more.

35:00 They weren't expected to be required while we weren't in an attack phase. And there was an empty vehicle that had been hit by some of the aircraft bullets and the driver was known to me and I said, "Could you get Trelloar back to the ambulance which is just down the road?" So

35:30 he did that and Trelloar told me later that he was greeted by an elderly British medical officer who said, "Oh, that's a good wound." It was right through the thigh here. He said, "That's where General Bridges was hit on Gallipoli." What he didn't realise that Trelloar, having a knowledge of history, knew that General Bridges didn't come home from Gallipoli. He was in hospital as a result of that for five or six months and

36:00 rejoined the brigade in Tripoli in about November or December. That was, you know, was quite a setback as far as I was concerned. It was certainly a very unlikely sort of thing to happen to anyone but you see we had no air force cover for our

36:30 troops at all. The French air force roamed the desert at will and it wasn't until about the 2nd or 3rd or about the 20th of the month before RAF [Royal Air Force] or RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] aircraft arrived, and then we had 3 Squadron of the Australian air force supporting us and they did very good work. But at this stage there was quite a lot of this ground strafing going on and

37:00 a number of our chaps in the different companies were hit. But fortunately we didn't have very heavy losses from it because they were not equipped as you can see from recent events where the Israelis are actually able to pick out a particular vehicle and now

37:30 their laser guided or what the aircraft weaponry is. But as you can see from the newsreels they are able to follow right through and see what they are aiming at. After this, this was a pretty long day. It was the 13th of June I think from memory, and the 2/16th Battalion were

38:00 moved through and ordered to attack the French defences around the city of Sidon, which in those days was known in the Arabic terminology as Siada, and Siada was a word we were familiar with because it was also an Arabic word for 'G'day'. If you passed an Arab you usually said, "Siada George," and he usually said, "Siada," back again. However, the 2/16th

38:30 Battalion had a very bad time attacking Sidon. They had more trouble with tanks, much more than we did and lost quite a lot of members and following their capture of the town we moved up into an area just overlooking the town. And while we were there we were ordered to move over into the central

sector to a place called Jezzine

39:00 It was the 25th Brigade which was conducting the campaign over in that area was having a lot of problems. They thought they had captured Marj Uyun and the French recaptured it and by that time they were strung out between Marj Uyun and Jezzine along a very long, very bad road. And the 2/31st Battalion had taken the town but had

39:30 some doubts as to whether it could be held, so on the… This was a night move to hopefully reduce casualties from aircraft attack. We were moved by truck something like 30kms or so along an east-west road to the Jezzine area where we were

40:00 shown into positions overlooking the French holding, the French positions with very good help from the 2/31st Battalion and our companies were distributed through the rocky hills in positions… Some of the highest

40:30 peaks, I think from memory, were something like 1,800 to 2,000 metres and we had no warm clothing. It was bitterly cold at that height although it was mid summer in Syria, and preparations were made for an attack on the French positions and B and C Company were nominated to do this.

41:00 The artillery, we had another regiment other than the one that had supported us we had the 2/5th and 2/6th Field Regiments in our support and they were in a fairly low lying valley below our positions and firing over our heads. It was called harassing fire. It was meant to harass the enemy but it certainly stopped us getting any sleep.

41:30 Everything was lined up.

Tape 4

00:30 **Well this is the perfect interestingly aspect of it that you had close contact with these people and that you were actually able to speak to them.**

What, the people we captured?

Yeah.

On a few occasions as I said earlier when Trelloar and I were trying to identify the units,

01:00 the French units that had been captured in our 2/22nd Battalion attack we didn't get much out of them. We identified them as a foreign legion. I forget which but it was one that we had already been notified about. There wasn't any thrilling news in it. Later after the operations I was just about

01:30 to describe to you at Jezzine one of our chaps leading a patrol with considerable success captured a whole blockhouse full of troops, about a dozen of them, and we'd had a change of command. And the new acting CO, our CO had been withdrawn for a rest and the command was taken over by

02:00 a major named John Evans who had been a very successful infantry soldier of the First War. He had won a Military Cross with the 8th Battalion in France and he immediately said, "What's going on?" And I told him about this attack which had resulted in the capture of a blockhouse of French Foreign Legion prisoners and he said, "Let's go and see them." And he had a

02:30 little 8 hundredweight vehicle at his disposal and we went up the road and I said, "You had better stop here sir because once we get around that corner we will be in full view of the French artillery observers and they delight in picking off vehicles." And he more or less said, "To hell with that," and went around the corner and soon a shell dropped on the road and he pulled up and got out and said, "We'll walk from here." Anyway we were going to the point where

03:00 the prisoners had been lined up and I had also found our French liaison officer. We had a Free French liaison officer. A corsair named Delagrini who didn't seem to have any responsibility to us. He didn't tell us anything useful and as far as I could see he was only faced to the point where these prisoners had been captured to try and

03:30 persuade them to join the Free French and abandon their allegiance to the Vichy French government. And I said to him, "Can you tell me what regiment they are from?" and he said, "They are legionnaires." And I said, "I know that. I want to identify them by the unit," and he just poof or whatever dismissive French gesture and so I remembered

04:00 the lesson I mentioned to you earlier about pay books and so I said to the corporal in charge of the troops guarding them, "I want their pay books," and so he said, "I'll fix that sir." And so he had his rifle with a bayonet on it and he sort of moved it to the body of the nearest prisoner and said, "Pay book, sport." And I think he was probably a German or Dutch

04:30 nationality and he looked blankly at him so the corporal pulled his own pay book out and waved it at

him and put it back in his pocket, so the chap handed over his pay book and on examining the pay books I found that the Foreign Legion troops were from the 3rd Battalion of the 6th Regiment, which we had not previously

05:00 been told by intelligence were in the area. Apparently from… I could work out from the intelligence summaries they were supposed to be over in the Damascus area quite some distance away. Apparently they had been moved down to reinforce the situation at Jezzine and this was something that according to our standing orders was supposed to be reported immediately to divisional headquarters

05:30 and repeated to brigade headquarters. So I got our signals to send a message to this effect. Unfortunately there was no direct communication available to division so it got sent to 25 Brigade Headquarters and on subsequent investigation I found that the signal officer there looked at it and said, "McAllester, he can't sign this priority," and put it aside and the information never got back.

06:00 **That's perhaps a good point to have a look at the work you were doing as an intelligence officer during the campaign in Syria.**

Well that was the only one, the only significant event in that connection. On other times I had to look at the intelligence summaries and look at the information that was coming in from our companies so that they had overrun a post

06:30 that had some Senegalese or Algerian native soldiers in it and that seemed to tie in with the information in the intelligence summaries so there was nothing out of the ordinary to report.

So you were relying on these intelligence summaries?

We had received intelligence summaries stating which French units and Free French units were opposed to us.

07:00 Some foreign legion and some, as I said, earlier some Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan and I can't think of the others off hand. And there had been quite good penetration of the situation in Syria from the secret service. We were never, never… We expected to be told

07:30 who got the information. It was all typed up at general headquarters in Cairo and then sent out to the units, the commands in the field. Our command was then known as for the first fortnight of the campaign we were under British, under General Wilson of British headquarters, and then Trans-Jordan and then from the 18th of June, General Lavarack.

08:00 And 1st Australian Corps took over control of operations and started issuing intelligence summaries so they were merely passing on to us what they had received from Cairo, and that was really well supplied with information what the resistance was we were expected to encounter. As I mentioned earlier they knew they had these 70 heavy tanks

08:30 which we, our cavalry regiment only had light tanks which virtually aren't heavily armoured at all and Bren gun carriers which have no covering on the top. They are quite open vehicles, as you see in the pictures, so I used to sort of did a couple of written extracts of these summaries of what I thought would be of

09:00 relevance to our company commanders and the CO and make copies for the company commanders. I had a battalion office truck in those days which had facilities for producing paper and the necessary and old wax sheet duplicator. Are you familiar with the wax sheet duplicator methods? And so material for the companies was issued in

09:30 that form. For a planned operation they would get a typed document setting out what they were to do and giving the map references. I always had to make sure that the map references were consistent with the maps I had issued at the beginning of the campaigns, and generally try and make sure that the CO's instructions were

10:00 adequately supported by information, map references and so on. It was, you just had to deal with every task that came up during the day. I can recall distinctly that in the five or six weeks that we were on the move and not having any particular place to rest at night other than where you were, but I was

10:30 really on the available 24 hours a day although I managed to get an hour or two sleeps when the occasion or opportunity offered. But during that period we had six officers on the headquarters, the CO, the adjutant, the medical officer, the signal officer and myself. And at one time or another I know the CO or the adjutant were

11:00 deemed to be exhausted; they were sent back for a week's rest. The signal officer I think had one period of rest. The medical officer was obviously on the job all the time one way or another much as I was. Nobody ever suggested that I needed a rest so I didn't get one. So that's my main recollection of the situation then. I was physically

11:30 exhausted for a great deal of the time and I just had to keep my wits about me and do what was necessary. Other things the intelligence section did was keeping a log of messages in and out. Messages would come from the signals who took them down and quite often in morse code, sometimes they got them by wireless. We had wireless communication

12:00 which didn't seem to work in that particular terrain with some many rocky hills about. Nothing like wireless is today, like we had a company move out on some part of the operation and attempt to communicate back to battalion headquarters and the signaller would say, "Can't get through. Can't get through." So most successful communication was by cable and

12:30 on telephones and also some messages were transmitted by morse code with the signallers working the keys. The chaps in the intelligence section for the first couple of weeks as the operations were quite, as you can gather

13:00 from my earlier comments, were somewhat disorganised. There was no overall plan that we could all work to. They did attempt to establish observations posts, which were the 1918 method of operation for the battalion intelligence section, but we had so many problems with the companies having difficulty finding

13:30 their way in moving from one point to another because of the rocky ground and absence of roads and so on I suggested to the CO that we attach one man from the intelligence section to each company commander and be his adviser on map references and anything to do with mapping and topography and so on

14:00 and could also send messages for him. Take one from the company commander to the signaller and utilise the intelligence section man as a sort of coordinator of that. That worked very well, and as Bill Russell said in our battalion history, the system put in place then remained effective for the rest of the

14:30 war in the other campaigns, but as a consequence for one of my, a chap I attached to Don Company, Rupert White, he was with the Don Company commander in the Moor township after our, one of company's managed to get in there before anyone else. And they were more or less isolated and instead of

15:00 utilising my man to sort of send messages or anything like, that the company commander sent him to go and find the CO and unfortunately he was killed on his way trying to do that. And I thought that that was not quite the best use of an experienced chap because as I said he had been a sergeant in the Militia and very good at his job and the establishment provided him with being a lance corporal, which was his

15:30 rank when he was killed. That system of having one man to each company commander meant that the intelligence section was able to utilise all the abilities they gained in training to help the companies go where they were supposed to go according to the map.

16:00 It was… I had better deal with the Jezzine Operation before I go into that I think. As I mentioned earlier we arrived at Jezzine after moving over from Sidon overnight and after a day of sorting out positions and finding out where the enemy positions were,

16:30 I found that where the CO had established our battalion headquarters was at the rear side of the hill. And when I went up to the top of the hill I found a spot where I could see the positions where the French troops were occupying positions which became well known by their height numbers as shown on the French maps. They were

17:00 called 84 and 32, which was their height in metres. So we used that as an observation post and the after putting one man with each company I still had two chaps to do the message logging and so on at battalion headquarters, and they took it in turns to man this observation post so we had some idea of what was going on. Well the first orders

17:30 we received was for a two company attack on these French positions, and B and C Companies were nominated to do this and artillery support was lined up and the artillery came down as planned somewhere in the early hours of the morning, and when the artillery ceased fire in accordance with their instructions we couldn't see any of our troops on the ground from this observation post.

18:00 So after some hard, searching the enquiries were made. And they had just given the troops far too much ground to cover in the time. The ground was exceedingly rocky with no set tracks or anything and even with their normal loads of weapons and ammunition they just hadn't got

18:30 anywhere near the start line, so the place was full of brigadiers visiting and so on and they realised they would have to plan it for the next night. So it was planned again for the next night and by this time the attack went in and the French dug in in rocky ground and were able to resist very successfully. And we lost quite a few casualties and

19:00 when the… I've got ahead of myself a bit, I'm sorry. The previous night when the troops didn't arrive on the ground the CO sent me to find the companies. Well fortunately I had established liaison with the 2/31st Battalion, which I mentioned earlier were in the Jezzine tow,n and had been nearly bombed out

19:30 of it by a French air raid which demolished the only decent French hotel in the town. And unfortunately by coincidence our CO's truck was in the basement of the hotel, so it was demolished with the rest of the hotel. But the 2/31st Battalion were much more unfortunate. They lost the company quartermaster killed in that raid. Anyway I established contact with them

20:00 and so I knew where to go so I went through Jezzine and up to where the road north crossed a little stream known as the Wadi Abasidi and on the advice of the 2/31st company commander I went along a track along that Wadi until I found two company commanders who had not been able to reach the objective

20:30 that earlier night and got them back to battalion headquarters where they took part in the discussions leading to another attack the next night. Anyway when the attack went down the following night and we lost, the chaps lost quite a few casualties, the CO decided to make another attack with a

21:00 number 9 Platoon, which by the end of the war was the most outstanding achievements for the battalion. And so again I had the job of getting to them, this point where they could conveniently move off from. Using my contact with the 2/31st Battalion I went again by truck through the town with this whole platoon on board and got them to the

21:30 point where at this Whati Abasidi where they could make a start to attack to take Hill1284. And I think 31 of the platoon went into the attack and one was killed and 13 were wounded. And they were pushed off so by this time it was obvious the French were too strong there to do any more about it.

22:00 And it was… I think it was the divisional company ordered that the artillery was to make life as uncomfortable as possible for them and minimise any further casualties on our part. Our chaps did a lot of patrolling and so forth, and we attempted to improve the position by raids such

22:30 as the one I described earlier when about a dozen Frenchmen were captured in the blockhouse, and that was right over on the eastern flank on the road that led up to Damascus, which was why they brought troops down from Damascus. I told you about the identification problem. There were various other minor engagements but by the

23:00 end of the month we had orders to move back to the coast and we were relieved by the 2/33rd Battalion. And I was… One of the jobs of the intelligence officer in a relief like that is that the incoming company commanders know where to go. So you can do it by sort of posting a chap from the intelligence section at a road

23:30 or something like that. You've got to work out what can go wrong and try and anticipate it. So on this occasion I was looking for the D Company of the 2/33rd Company which was to relieve our D Company because that was over on the right. So I thought I would get them on the right. And coming up the road – I was leading the company – I was pleased to see an old friend from the Victorian Scottish days, Boyd Ferguson,

24:00 who had… I'm not quite sure whether he offered, applied for a transfer to the AIF from the militia but he had joined the AIF before I did and had been sent to England as a reinforcement officer. And the 25th Brigade had been formed in England and sent to the Middle East from there. And by that time he was a company commander.

24:30 So we had a minor reunion walking along the road together and telling where the troops were he was to take over from. Unfortunately he was, later he was, his company was waiting to emplane on the Ramu Valley on one the Port Moresby airstrips and an American Liberator crashed on them and nearly wiped out the company

25:00 and he was one of them. His sister married Weary Dunlop and I can tell you some stories about Weary's wedding, but that's not part of this discussion.

But you were there?

Yes. My wife was

25:30 steward contemporary of Helen Ferguson, who married Weary, and they knew each other quite well. As far as…I think I've said as much as I can think of about the Jezzine operation. It was quite a setback to lose so many chaps and achieve nothing, but I think it was inevitable.

26:00 Initially on the coast we didn't have the tank support which would have reduced our casualties. And the Jezzine area, the job of attacking the trench positions which were very easily defensible was attempted by too few troops. They had… It perhaps should have been done with a brigade

26:30 attack if a brigade had been able to be got together for it, but I didn't attempt to rationalise that in the book. I just described the operations as I saw them.

So how long was this period of time?

By this time we are up to 30th June having spent a week at Jezzine and from the 8th to the

27:00 20th on the coast. The 8th to the 20th of June we were coming up the coast to Sidon and then we went inland to Jezzine, where we spent a week. And then we were ordered back to the coast and we had a make and mend, as it used to be called in the olive groves north of Cyprus, preparing to move onto Damour, which was

27:30 the next position the French were expected to defend. And the next few days we moved up the coast and moved inland because the plan involved the 2/16th Battalion getting the most difficult and attacking the positions near the coast road. The 2/27th Battalion were to go through

28:00 on an inland route right down into the Damour Gorge and up that side. And as… By that time we were learning what to expect. Our battalion was split, with two companies going right over to the right flank and two following the 2/27th through the centre and attacking Damour from the inland side.

Can I just ask you why it was expected

28:30 **that the French would be defending Damour?**

Well again from intelligence reports they were probably piecing together from natives, information from, again I don't know what secret service agents they might have, but it was given to us in the intelligence summaries that the French were expected to defend Damour pretty vigorously because it was the last

29:00 main defensible area south of Beirut. Initially I should have explained our objective laid down was to get Beirut, which was to be taken over to neutralise the German identification of…German aircraft had been identified as using the Beirut and Damascus airports before the campaign and

29:30 this was what was of most interest to the Allied chiefs of staff that Germany be prevented from getting established there, either by Fifth Column methods or by landing airborne troops as they had in Crete. What wasn't realised was that Germany was very much involved in preparing to invade Russia, which they did on 23rd of June while we were at Jezzine. And while we breathed a big sigh of

30:00 relief because all the time it had been rumoured that Germany would attack down through the Caucasus and across Turkey into Syria. There was no positive information on this as far as I know but it was certainly mentioned. And we were… It was also mentioned that Germany would be likely to use their special alpine troops

30:30 because of the rocky nature of the country in Lebanon. While we didn't look forward to it, we were quite prepared to test ourselves against…Like the 9th Division was in the desert and the 6th Division did in Greece. If the German troops were going to be involved we knew they would be more effective than the French, and the popular feeling is that Australia will match German troops wherever necessary.

31:00 **So how, in your experience over that period of time, it's nearly a month, how accurate were the intelligence summaries you were getting or were there discrepancies? Once you got the summaries and you were out there in the field.**

You might have been able to pick a minor item which was adequately expressed, but in general I found it very good. I found quite valuable information,

31:30 as I mentioned before, when I was writing the book for the army, this army chap was in his oral history society dug up some historian who was making a great wail about General Wavell not using the intelligence he was supplied with. But as far as we were concerned, any let down that the troops experienced was in the way the intelligence was used in providing the troops to do the job. You see there weren't enough troops to

32:00 do the job properly in Greece. The Germans were able to drive them out. In Syria we were able to win the campaign, but at the cost of chaps that might have been able to do a better job if they had been supported by tanks against the French heavy tanks. Even at Bardia the 6th Division was supported by what they called infantry tanks

32:30 in those days. They were British heavy tanks and they were far superior to the Italian artillery. I remember talking to 6th Division, who spoke very highly of the support they had from these tanks. So naturally we hoped that we might get some for Syria. But it soon became apparent that all we were getting was the Australian cavalry regiment which were armed with Bren gun carriers and what were

33:00 known M1 tanks. I saw one that was hit by a French artillery shell and it just opened it up like a tin opener opens a can. It wasn't heavily enough armoured to withstand any but small arms fire. Do you want me to get back to Damour?

Oh yeah, yeah.

Well, as I mentioned, we had a

33:30 job with two companies sent out to the right flank to defend against any attack from down the roads to Damour and two companies followed the 2/27th Battalion through the centre of the operational area and there was a move onto Damour town from the east. The two companies that were to go the right

34:00 had… Each had an intelligence section chap with them and I had glowing reports back from the company commanders as to the job they did. They got them where they were supposed to go and this was a matter of some relief to me because I knew it was a difficult job. If I showed you the jobs you would see how difficult it was and how steep the 'wadi' is the

34:30 Arab word for it, the gullies. But anyway, they got into position and while I didn't get out to see what they were up to I know they successfully attacked a feature known as 567 being its height in metres. A pretty steep hill where they withstood several French counterattacks

35:00 and that made the right flank of the operation reasonably secure as the French weren't able to bring reinforcements. They tried but they established a road block and the French weren't able to bring reinforcements that way and the people they put to defend Damour had to fight it out in the positions they were in, but our sister battalions eventually overcoming them. Our two companies

35:30 went up and approached Damour from the east, were able to capture quite a few prisoners and withstand some counterattacks. I joined them in Damour at the stage where they were getting quite uncomfortable because our artillery

36:00 didn't know they were in the town, and they were still trying to shell it, and the French artillery, knowing we were there, tried to shell it too but the shell fire wasn't very intense. It wasn't anything like the sort of El Alamein scale of artillery barrage. I don't know of any serious casualties from that.

36:30 But once the French realised we were advancing they withdraw back towards Beirut and we were then ordered to move up to a little Arab village called Abai which was just underneath a peak of 903 m which was fairly well situated to get a view over the whole area. On the way

37:00 we didn't encounter any French troops in established positions. There was a bit of, I don't know to describe it. Various odd bits of shooting, but nothing in the way of a fixed battle. And we moved into Abai and

37:30 occupied the peak from which the artillery people got an observation post up there fairly promptly, but it was obvious the war was over by this time. It was about the 10th of July and although our forward company on the road going north was prepared to do an attack we got a message saying that all hostilities will cease at midnight. So that

38:00 there was firing after midnight. The artillery didn't stop or the French artillery didn't stop, but that meant that we could have a good night's sleep at last, but it was…

So what was the reason for the ceasefire?

Well the French commander had asked for an armistice. He realised that he was getting pushed back all over the country and it was

38:30 another force coming in from the east. General Slim's 10th, or was it 10th Indian Corps I think it was called. It started off as the 4th British Cavalry Brigade and that was gradually built up into what was called Hab [?] Force. They came in from the Syrian Desert and that and the

39:00 attacks by another British division on Damascus must have, I think must have convinced the French command that it was time to throw in the towel. So an armistice was signed and agreed in the Arc of the Ancient City just north of Beirut. There are various official photos of that. Some Australian souvenired the general's cap,

39:30 which caused a bit of fuss, but I wasn't there. I don't know anything about the things that went on there but apparently it was a condition of the armistice that the French leave. Prisoners the French had taken had to be returned and the Australian or the Allied force was to facilitate the repatriation of Vichy French troops back to France. So the 2/16th Battalion

40:00 got all the work of supervising the embarkation of the French who wanted to go back. A small number opted to join the Free French and that was all facilitated, but again we played no part in that. We were almost immediately scattered. Each company were put in separate villages to more or less keep order and show the flag. They were encouraged to drive around in the army vehicles and

40:30 keep an eye on all things and observing the local population, but in general they made us very welcome. In Abai the village I mentioned where we finished the actual campaign most of the inhabitants were doctors and dentists from Beirut that had it as a holiday resort, and they entertained us for meals and discussed politics and in general were very friendly.

41:00 **So that…**

Tape 5

00:30 **Okay, so it sounds like we've got to the end of the Syrian campaign and you were about to tell us about the…?**

Well I mentioned that we were spread out over the countryside in different villages. Battalion headquarters occupied a school at a little place called Inanub [?], which means 'well of the grape'. And we had a very pleasant time there

01:00 because the weather was perfect. And we got out around the countryside and we had various attempts to improve our fitness. The school was quite appropriate because battalion headquarters took over the schoolroom. And I was able to take over a wall as big as that and put a map of the whole of

01:30 Syria spread out over the wall, and that was very helpful in identifying information coming in so we could readily see what was going on. This went on until September when we were warned of a move to Tripoli, and at the same time I was ordered to move to brigade headquarters

02:00 as brigade intelligence officer, and I served in that capacity until we left the Middle East. We were accommodated in a village called Madslayer [?] just outside Tripoli, which was a very unhealthy place. In fact our medical officer from the battalion came into see me from headquarters one day, and I can't remember what he

02:30 exactly came for. But looking around seeing all these Arab children running around, and being summer they were wearing very few clothes and he said, "Those distended abdomens worry me." And I said, "What does it indicate?" "Possibly malaria but it's unhealthy to have troops stationed so close to such a village," and I said, "You had better tell the brigadier. He won't welcome that sort of advice from me." So I

03:00 assume he did tell the brigadier. And knowing the brigadier selected the spot because there was a nice big comfortable house available, we weren't moved. But about that time, September, early October, the whole division really was hit by a hepatitis epidemic. It was initially diagnosed as sandfly fever because it was

03:30 about a fever of three days' duration. But it finished up a high proportion of those suffering fever being exhibiting yellow eyes, hepatitis I think is the medical term, and being diagnosed with jaundice and for a while all the documentation

04:00 on the chaps evacuated to hospital said sandfly fever and jaundice. And then apparently the medical people starting scratching their heads and realised more properly it was called infective hepatitis. I can remember a chap, he was not a medico, he was an accountant, asking a chap in the mess, "Why do you describe this illness the troops are suffering as jaundice, which is a symptom?

04:30 What is the disease?" And all these queries no doubt mounted up and they finished up calling it infective hepatitis. The only, the field ambulances which offered temporary hospitalisation soon filled up. And at length it was the medical officers of the units were told not to send any more troops there. Tell them to rest in their tents and adopt a fat-free diet. Well to adopt

05:00 a fat-free diet in an army that isn't prepared for it wasn't all that easy. And I emphasised the need for careful hygiene and so on, which we all observed. But eventually, I think it was October, instead of being told to stay in the tent and avoid fatty foods I was evacuated through the

05:30 ambulance to the casualty clearing station in Beirut where I spent a couple of weeks, and gradually felt a bit better and was sent up to another field ambulance which was functioning as a convalescent depot at a very pleasant spot at above Beirut. A place called Durekshaya [?] and from there I was allotted for court martial duty where I spent time travelling by truck

06:00 from right down 20 or 30 kilometres down to Beirut every day and sitting on a court martial as a prosecuting officer. The rules were a soldier could have a lawyer defending him as a defending officer, but had to be a non-lawyer to be a prosecuting officer. I don't know if this had any great effect, but to be present at the court martial we had a remarkable man named

06:30 Lance Rickard who was a major in the anti-tank regiment. He had a DSO [Distinguished Service Order] and Military Cross from the First World War at the age of his early 20s, and by the end of the Second World War he was commanding a commando unit in New Guinea. But he was a very entertaining character and we made the most of our stay in Beirut where we were able to visit the officers' club for drinks and so on. And

07:00 gradually I recovered from the setback of the hepatitis and got back to my job and was immediately told to go to an air photo interpretation school run by the British army. And I said to the brigadier, "Well it's a long while since I had any leave. Can I have a bit of leave before the course?" So very reluctantly he granted me a week's leave so I went to Cairo and attended this British army school on air photos, which

07:30 was very interesting, and had a week sightseeing in Cairo at the finish, and got back to Tripoli in time to find that we were not likely to stay there. The rumours sort of grew with every telling but they…

08:00 As Japan had been in the war since the 8th of December it was fairly obvious where we would go, but also very active in the operations in the Western Desert and we wondered if we were going there. But about mid January we were sent by road and trucks to Hill 69, an established camp in Palestine not very far from where we started off. And

08:30 from there we were moved down the Suez [Canal] and embarked on the whole brigade on the Ile de France, the big luxury French liner. And by this time Allan Treloar had rejoined the battalion but had been grabbed by the brigadier for duty as a liaison officer. And I said, "Why do you think he wants you and I together?

09:00 Surely he doesn't know of our past association?" Treloar said, "Oh he's an academic snob. He likes to have a couple of university degrees on his staff." Rather a cynical attitude, but I'm sure it was just a joke at the time. But by a strange twist of fate I had the job of allocating quarters on the Ile de France and when I saw the bridal suite was available I grabbed

09:30 that for Trelloar and myself. And he spent the voyage to Bombay during which he learned Arabic. He had a pile of Arabic books. He's since become a world authority on foreign languages. I think he speaks about 70-odd languages and is a reader at the University of New England having headed a couple of university colleges in the meantime.

10:00 However, the trip to Bombay was very short and from there we were loaded again into small ships again. To dodge Japanese we sailed for quite some time towards Java. Other ships passed the ones like the Orcades that were ahead of us, and unfortunately the troops who were in those ships were landed in

10:30 Java and spent the war as guests of the Japanese. Fortunately the port that we were supposed to go to, Cilacap on the south coast of Java, was captured by the Japanese and the convoy went back towards the Bay of Bengal. And I can remember the occasion when the convoy turned around because there was considerable excitement and activity by the signallers and their Lucas lamps. And eventually it leaked out

11:00 that we were going back to Australia. This was the time when Churchill and Curtin were arguing about the destination of the 7th Division. And we fortunately had not landed at Rangoon where Churchill wanted us. It would have been a disaster because all our mortars and carriers and machine guns were on another convoy, which by that time was stranded in Cochin on the Indian coast. So if we had been landed in Rangoon

11:30 we would have had nothing to fight with. Anyway we spent another seven weeks at all at sea and finished up at Adelaide. And from there we did some training in the eastern suburbs of Adelaide, which were a lot of paddocks, and group marches and so on. And then about the 10th of April we

12:00 were ordered to move to Glen Innes in NSW and again I was in an advance party, a small group to build the camp. And took us four days on the train, which were enlivened by the fact that some secrecy didn't work and it leaked out and all our families met us at Sunshine station, which was the nearest one to Melbourne. A convoluted train trip. My mother was able to tap into the grapevine and get out to

12:30 see me and that was quite a happy occasion. Anyway we went out to…

Sorry Jim, had you and Valerie met by this stage?

We met in our first year at university in 1937. We knew each other from then on and went out together and corresponded but we hadn't formed a permanent arrangement, so we didn't get a chance to do anything more about it until I was posted

13:00 to Melbourne in 1943. Anyway, we got to Glen Innes and put up a camp there while the rest of the battalion went on leave. And then the advance party was given a week's leave which enabled me to look up old friends and so on. And I should have mentioned that I got back to the battalion because

13:30 when we were in Colombo harbour after the fruitless attempt to land us at Java or Rangoon, I ran into a chap from divisional staff and he said, "You shouldn't still be with 21 Brigade. You should be back at the battalion." And I said, "Why?" He said, "Well you are being promoted and returned to regimental duty."

14:00 And I said, "Well I haven't heard about it." And he said, "You had better talk to the brigadier and ask him why he hasn't sent you back." So I fronted the brigadier and when I asked, "When can I return to the battalion?" He said, "When you've found a replacement." So I took him at his word and hired what was in Colombo harbour called a bum boat with a native and all his wares to sell and so on. You could hire them for a few rupees. So I hired this boat

14:30 and went to a ship that I knew that the 7th Battalion was on and interviewed the CO and just said, "Lieutenant Cowan has been nominated as brigade intelligence officer." I didn't tell him who nominated him, so he assumed all was in order and he authorised me to collect

15:00 Ron Cowan, who I knew was like Trelloar. He was an academic in South Australia and actually a Rhodes scholar too. Actually Trelloar had introduced me to him as part of the camaraderie of Rhodes scholars. And so I said to Ron, "You've got to take a trip with me back to brigade headquarters on such and such a trip." And he made some well directed comments knowing I was behind nominating him because he was

15:30 the obvious man for the job. The other third man in the brigade was a different type and I put him on with his gear and me with my gear were overloading this boat to a considerable extent, but we negotiated the waters of Colombo harbour and I dropped him at brigade headquarters ship, which was a horrible thing called the Kosciusko. And I went onto the 2/14th where I was welcomed by my

16:00 old friends and for the remainder of the journey to Australia I was back as second in command of A Company as the intelligence officer's job had been filled. After I left it, the only suitable job for a junior officer was second in command of the company, which I found quite enjoyable. Getting to know the

troops and assisting with their problems because the second in command of the company gets all their odd housekeeping

16:30 jobs. So it was in that capacity that I went to Glen Innes. By the time I got back from leave the battalion had gone. I had to chase them up to Yandina in Queensland on the Bruce Highway there and we had a very pleasant camp there in a farm that wasn't covered with sugar

17:00 cane, thank goodness, and did some very hard training. By this time our original CO had been replaced by Arthur Key, who had temporarily commanded the 2nd Battalion in Crete and was obviously a much younger and more active man than our previous chap and obviously knew what he wanted to do and how to do it. And he gave us

17:30 a very tough period of training at Yandina. I remember him saying we had to toughen up by marching in excess of the normal speeds and covering a greater amount of ground. So I took… By this time I succeeded to the A Company commander because my predecessor had been promoted. So I took A Company from Yandina to Coolum on a route march

18:00 and covered 18 miles in four and a half hours, which wasn't bad going. And at reunions for years afterwards I was always assailed by a chap who reckoned I finished his career in the army because his feet or his legs cracked up as a result of these marches that had been inflicted. And I said, "Well don't blame me, blame the CO." We also had to climb Mount Mindiri, which is a sheer faced

18:30 rocky thing inland from Coolum, and I nearly went over the edge but the sergeant major grabbed me just in time. It gave me a horrible fright. But while I was there Colonel Key called me in one day and said the general wants me for a job on divisional headquarters. And I thought, "What's going on?" and without thinking I said,

19:00 "How long have I got to think about it?" and he said, "This isn't a job offer. This is an order." He was a man of very definite ideas so that was the end of my career as a battalion officer. I went off to divisional headquarters, which was at Woodford, a bit nearer to Brisbane, but that was no advantage, and learned about being a general staff officer Grade 3 on

19:30 7 Div [Division] headquarters. You see there were three Grade 3 officers on division headquarters. One for operations, one loosely termed chemical warfare, which up until that time had generally been gas mask training and so forth. But it was obvious the reports had filtered through about the Japanese using mustard gas against the Chinese and everyone wanted

20:00 to know what they were going to do in New Guinea. So I was quite happy to study all the situations and act as a general staff officer and get around the battalions. I got to know the other two brigades; the 18th, which had been in Tobruk and the 25th, which was with us in Syria, as well as the other battalions. So I spent the next couple of months moving around the

20:30 North Queensland area getting to know the battalions and checking on their state of gas preparedness. In other words, were the chaps comfortable in their gas masks, had they been tested with mustard gas and whatever else was available to test them, and generally trying to make myself useful.

How prepared were the divisions at that time?

Well as far as anti-gas training, the

21:00 use of eye shields to guard against aerial spray with anti-gas capes, which were an oil fabric. A fairly light thing that they could wear in the jungle. A lot of people did, but they weren't very strong physically. But in general by having a gas training officer in each battalion… That wasn't his only duty. He usually a platoon commander with his normal platoon but he had to keep

21:30 an eye on gas run short courses and so on. But in general by this time 7 Div had worked together for quite a while and was an operational division as many people think it should have gone to New Guinea sooner to avoid the problems that occurred when it was rushed there at very short notice with inadequate support. However,

22:00 all that came to an end in early August the G1, the general staff officer Grade 1, who is the chief of divisional staff, called me in and said, "We want you to go to the gas school," and I said, "Oh." After my experience with Colonel Key, "How long have I got to think about it?" And I said, "Yes, when do I leave?" and he said, "Tomorrow morning." So I was

22:30 sent off the next morning and finished up at Bonegilla where the army headquarters was running a special gas school for staff officers. And they put us through a month of getting us acquainted with various gases like mustard and so on. And while there I was interviewed by an officer from army intelligence who said, "The army is going to raise

23:00 a couple of units to deal with Japanese chemical warfare. One is a field unit to examine Jap ammunition in the field to see if it's got gas in it and identify the gas and warn the higher command. The other unit is a field experimentation station which we already have the nucleus of and it's

23:30 going to conduct trials with mustard gas to see if it's more effective in the tropics than it was in France in 1918." He was a major in the army, Doug Shields, who had been in the 1st AIF and he was the

medical officer for industrial health for the Victorian government. I think he had two doctorates

24:00 as well as his medical degrees, London and Melbourne I think. And he was obviously a very knowledgeable man and he had worked out this plan to plan for Japanese causing trouble with use of chemical agents by forming these units, and also importing chemical shell and mustard gas and lacrymatory, that's tear gases from

24:30 England and America. So he canvassed the idea of my forming one of these units and eventually decided that I should phase what was called an anti-gas laboratory, which we later converted the term to make it a little bit more positive and called it a chemical warfare laboratory. So I by this time

25:00 it was early September and the 2/14th had had a very bad time on the Kokoda Track and I was not feeling very happy about it because I lost a lot of very good mates, chaps that I had grown to know quite well in the battalion. Two in particular. Claude Migh who had been in the Victorian Scottish actually before my time but we had got to know one another

25:30 at Puckapunyal and the Middle East, and Allan McGavin who was a chap that had come out from England and his parents had retired here and had gone to Duntroon and been and had opted for regimental duties instead of as a staff officer at Duntroon. And they were both killed in New Guinea as well as a number of others that I hadn't known so long. I only lost one officer

26:00 colleague in Syria, Bob Whittaker. But I don't know if that was coincidence or not but the chaps that I seemed to get on best with seemed to get killed. Anyway, early September I set about the job as I had an obvious view of the pressure at army headquarters to get these measures to deal with the Japanese chemical warfare risk. They only wanted it under way. So I hopped in

26:30 and raced around Australia getting people who happened to have technical qualifications suitable and I finished up collecting, I think we had an establishment of 16 officers and 28 other ranks.

Sorry how did you go about that, gathering that team?

Well a lot of signalling and telephoning and correspondence and looking through files. I just can't… It was just a very long

27:00 day and I had to keep at it. And in the meantime we had to build two vehicles – a mobile lab and a mobile workshop. And the mobile lab was something the army had never had but fortunately a good friend I had met in the Middle East, he was named Edgar Thompson, he had been loaned to the British army and he had actually commanded a mobile bacteriological laboratory in the Middle East which used to move around particularly North Africa

27:30 and do the pathology work for identifying bugs that were encountered in the army hospitals. So he gave me the, although I knew what a chemistry laboratory would need I didn't quite know what were the problems you would encounter by putting it on a 4-wheels. But we got this built by an old firm called Cheeter & Borwick in Carlton. They did a very good job

28:00 and produced a unit that we had until the end of the war. And we had a workshop truck that had to be capable of carrying the equipment to be capable of drilling and sampling the gases under pressure so that you didn't spray the operator with mustard gas or whatever you were drilling in with, and other workshop equipment for dismantling ammunition and so on. So we

28:30 worked very hard from September to December when it was announced that there would be a field trial of some of these gas shells that had been imported in Singleton, NSW, where there was an army artillery training unit, and we had to set up sampling points on the target area. These shells are what are called basin ejection

29:00 shells. They are not the normal shell that explodes completely and causes damage by the shrapnel. The base ejection shell bursts its base plate out, releasing liquid contents which then falls as rain, you might say, as troops underneath. So you have to have a target area where you put chemical

29:30 sampling equipment and you have troops there with protective clothing. And, of course, the first. I had attended one such trial in Townsville, in December I think it was, when I was trying to equip the mobile lab so I had some idea of what was needed. The only thing that bothered me was the Townsville trial was conducted under the guidance

30:00 of a British expert which, when I asked him, I said, "I don't like this just putting them there without knowing how accurately the artillery are going to fire over them. What happens to the base plate when the shell bursts?" and he said, "They go on with the shell." Well it turned out that he was merely demonstrating in anticipation his lack of understanding because the base plates scattered all over the target area where the…

30:30 Fortunately they were all volunteers and were all young Militia troops who hadn't got to the shooting war and wanted to volunteer for something dangerous. And these base plates were about as big as your hand and about two centimetres thick were flying around at the same time as mustard gas was coming down on top of them, so there were some high time there. But the biggest flap we had was when a chap

31:00 came up to me one day and said, “Do you believe in omens?” and I said, “What do you mean?” and he said, “Well one of the volunteers is named Rick O’Shea.” I said, “We won’t take that as an omen. We’ll ask him if he wants to bow out.” And he didn’t. He stood on the target area and was doused with mustard gas and didn’t suffer any harm, thank goodness. The third trial of this kind was run at Forbes. Some of the volunteers were a little bit naughty and they picked up some pieces of

31:30 artillery shell which had mustard gas on them and finished up with horrific burns. It’s a strange secret to this that some 30 years later Allan Trelloar’s daughter is a psychiatric nurse trying to handle a chap who had said he had been burned with mustard gas in the Second World War. And, of course, the medico said he was mad. And it turned out he had been a volunteer at the Forbes trial and had actually been burned with mustard gas.

32:00 These chaps were treated in army hospitals at the time and they healed up and were sent home and many years later they decided they would try and get [Department of] Veterans’ Affairs to treat them as eligible pension applicants, which I suppose they were if there was any permanent harm. I don’t know what permanent harm mustard gas burns give. I was very careful not to get burned.

Were records kept at the time? Was that a responsibility of yours?

Records, I’ve done a lot

32:30 of work for pensions for the widows of our battalion and never happy with the information you get from records. They are supposed to be kept and the hospital staff do their best but when the pressure is on you can’t put everything down and dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’. So it is certainly in this chap’s case. I told them where to find the information. I’m

33:00 not sure what happened about it because I couldn’t personally handle the case as an advocate so as it was in New South Wales we had to leave it to the RSL [Returned and Services League] to pursue. I never heard any more. I offered to help if I was needed but there were four series of trials run initially at Townsville then Singleton, Forbes and then Grafton and then I was… I said, “This is interfering with what I

33:30 thought was our main job,” which was examining Jap equipment and they said, “Are you ready to move?” and I said, “Yes. We have been ready since January.” So at the end of April when the Grafton trial finished I was authorised to go and look for a suitable location and I went to… North Queensland was

34:00 regarded as inadvisable because there weren’t any suitable places. The AIF was being concentrated on the Atherton Tableland and Townsville was thick with all sorts of service people, American air force and so on. So we finished up building on the outskirts of Brisbane and establishing a base there and getting the

34:30 mobile lab and workshop fully equipped, which we sent to New Guinea in, I think, late ’43 and it was more or less bypassed by the war. They didn’t get much equipment from the Kokoda Track campaign because the Japs were obviously too fully occupied with feeding their troops without carting any gas shells around. In fact the mobile lab came to Brisbane

35:00 and it was included initially in the order of battle for the Borneo campaigns. But eventually the American failure to provide adequate shipping for everything that should have gone for those campaigns led to us being sent to Lae and I decided I had had

35:30 enough of the war on the mainland. I nominated myself to take it there and I took one of the other officers with me and a small section of the unit and we set ourselves up alongside 1st Army Headquarters in Lae and got a hold of all the equipment we could that was coming in from captured equipment dumps and examined all the Japanese

36:00 items that seemed suspicious. We got a very good idea of their protective measures. They had gone to a lot of trouble to have protective clothing and even respirators for horses. And another, that actually turned out to be directed at hospital casualties who

36:30 had head wounds and couldn’t wear an ordinary respirator. All sorts of things like those we unravelled with the help of the translator service, which fortunately was located in Brisbane. The Allied Translator Service and Interpreter Service it was called. And they had information on everything Japanese you could imagine, which of course wasn’t available before the war. It had been collected from Japanese places

37:00 like Lae for example. They got an enormous amount of information and documentation and equipment there so we published over a 100 reports which were sent to the other vehicles of war and we exchanged information with the American chemical warfare service, which was very well equipped. And I had an opposite number, Decoulter. He was what

37:30 the Americans called the 42nd Chemical Laboratory Company which did exactly the same job as we did. And I kept in touch with him until a few years ago when his writing failed and I guess he wouldn’t be with us any longer. But I visited him in his home in Texas many years later and we enjoyed a sort of remote friendship for the rest of our lives. The

38:00 Americans also did some mustard gas spray trials in the Markham Valley north of Lae and I went to those and reported back to the army in Melbourne what details I got, which might enable them to decide how to equip the air force with spray equipment and things like that.

38:30 But the air force had their own chemical warfare organisation, strangely headed by a chap named Arthur Trewin, who I had known at university. And he and I had both be… I think he's passed on recently. He and I had both been helping a chap in the defence department who has just produced a very complete summary of all that went on, most of which I didn't know about. They were things I didn't need to know. But he has traced the fate of all

39:00 the imported mustard gas shells and so on that had to be dumped at sea and places like that. And no doubt that will come to worry somebody in the future.

Can I just ask…This is extremely fascinating. I hope to get some details on this matter. You know the trials you mentioned in Townsville, Grafton and so on with the mustard gas, what was the outcome of this, the results?

The upshot was they formed the Australian Field Experimentation Station

39:30 run by a British army medical fellow named Gorrel. We called him 'Gorilla' because he was such an aggressive fellow and determined to get everything he wanted irrespective of anyone else. Strangely, when I was a director of Glaxo many years later and I ran into him because he was managing director of Heaven's Medical, a British medical company who took over… And he was given a retirement

40:00 trip to Australia to see his company's activities here and I met him then and he was a changed man. He had obviously lost all his fire. He probably had early Alzheimer's or something like that. But he headed this Australian Field Experimental Station. He had British scientists, Australian scientists. He had Australian air force, he had a professor that was sent by the Royal Air Force.

40:30 He had a whole gang of experts and they were busily building gas chambers and putting volunteers into them. And they ran a thing called the Goat Island trial where they bombarded an island with gas shells and tethered goats on it, which the RSPCA [Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] would have a fit about these days, and generally did a lot of work which roughly, without

41:00 trying to second guess him, it proved that mustard gas by reason of higher temperatures and higher humidity is a lot more effective in the tropics than it is in countries like France and Russia in winter. But all this information is tucked away. It isn't really completely summarised in this book that Geoff Blunkett is about to publish. But he kindly sent me the manuscript and I've gone through it and pointed out some

41:30 points to him. And asked me to write the foreword to it, which I've done. I hopes it's intelligible and I hope it is of some use if they ever decide to do more than Saddam Hussein did in Iraq. The other thing I did, towards the end of the war there was a rumour about the Japanese troops isolated on Bougainville and the other islands feeding themselves and prolonging their existence.

42:00 They couldn't get the…

Tape 6

00:30 **So Jim, it would be great for the archive because you were so intimately involved in the putting together of the field lab if you could give us a description of that very thing. Just give us an idea of what that was like inside. What sort of technology was being used in it?**

Well it was

01:00 quite a straightforward laboratory with benches and cupboards built into a three ton military chassis. The three ton vehicles were the mainstay of the army. They moved more than any other form of transport. And we just got one allotted from ordnance and

01:30 built the necessary gear into it with the help of this Cheetam & Borwick firm, which were professional body builders, motor body builders. So the one interesting thing we tackled, which everyone said was impossible, we needed Bunsen burners, which you might remember from your school days, so

02:00 we wanted coal gas not… We didn't want to get mixed up the acetylene or anything like that so we negotiated with Commonwealth Industrial Gases, which was a firm that was putting gas in cylinders for industrial gas, and after some negotiation they agreed to have made some very big cylinders

02:30 which held quite a bit, I forget the quantity now, but held compressed coal gas which was drawn from ordinary town gas supplies and compressed it. I think it was to something like 2,000 per square inch. And we had a supply of those and hitched them under the laboratory vehicle and that fed the burners we needed for heating

03:00 and laboratory work. Otherwise it just had hot and cold water, sink and vacuum equipment. There was a

very good little Beecox I think was the trade name, a little vacuum pump.

03:30 **You were describing the lab.**

These were Beecox. They provided a very good little general purpose pump which we used a lot in gas sampling and so on. And I don't think there was anything else remarkable about it. Just the bit of ingenuity you can fit all these facilities into a three ton vehicle and it looks

04:00 a bit like, as one our chaps used to say, "It would be great equipment for a travelling brothel." So I don't…

Sorry, why's that?

That's a travelling house of ill fame.

Yeah. Why? Because of all the mod cons? The reasoning there, please.

I don't think we

04:30 need to go into any detail, but if you can imagine all these establishments that are popping up around the suburbs, what they have to provide in the way of facilities. Water and drainage and heating and all the rest of it. I don't know why he made that comment. Perhaps he'd had some experience. The…

05:00 It created a bit of concern in the army because army mechanical engineering department had no similar vehicles and anything out of the ordinary always created a bit of a fuss. You had to go around areas and corners to get things, but it seemed to me to be the sort of thing that would have been useful after

05:30 the war. I tried to interest CSIRO [Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation] in it for some of their work, but it finished in an ordnance disposals depot and was probably broken up for scrap. You know, when you put a lot of work into designing something you feel it's a pity it's going to be wasted when the war ends. Nothing to make a bit note at all.

You mentioned gas sampling. What was the range of things that could be done in the lab?

06:00 Well we didn't take it to these field trials. Firstly because we didn't want to get bound up in them. We wanted to get to New Guinea and found out what the Japs were doing but the sampling work we did in pipes around the target area and

06:30 installing bubblers, as they were called, where you are drawing gas with a vacuum pump through probably a glass contained with liquid in it, which would absorb the gas from the target area and enable you to analyse the liquid to see how much gas had absorbed. It's standard procedure for… Presumably is

07:00 used now by the EPA [Environment Protection Agency] for sampling factory effluent gas and that sort of thing to see if factories are polluting the atmosphere. It was fairly simple stuff from the engineering point of view. It just meant that you had to… The main problem was getting pipes to the target area and whatever had been determined as being the sufficient area of ground

07:30 to enable them to get the data they wanted as to how much mustard gas would be unloaded on that ground if that was an enemy position you were trying to neutralise. I don't think the… There was nothing particularly obtuse about it. The Grafton trial where we had a particularly elaborate set up

08:00 required. It was way out in the country near… Lake Hiawatha I think was the name of the nearest feature. And later in 1943 we had a need for galvanised piping at the base laboratory in Brisbane and we decided to take the bull by the horns and take a truck down to Grafton and dug up all the pipe. Well we didn't have to dig it up, it was on the surface of the ground. But disconnected all the

08:30 pipe, put it on a truck and took it back to Brisbane, which in war time materials become very hard to get hold of and the army was no exception. In fact, when the 2/14th Battalion arrived back after the Ramu Valley campaign they were stationed near Brisbane and they… Because I had taken several of the chaps on who were medically downgraded after the New Guinea

09:00 campaign there were numerous visits exchanged and they wanted to build a mess, have a mess building instead of a tent out at Strathpine, just out of Brisbane, so they asked me to try and help them. So I put in requisitions on engineer's stores of sisal craft, which is a luminous paper which is quite good, and they built a whole mess building out

09:30 of this with a timber frame and a sheet in the walls which was sufficient to keep out the wind and the rain. Not in any sense a weatherproof structure, but it earned me a few brownie points with them.

So you were based at or in Brisbane or just outside Brisbane?

St Johns Wood was the place. I see it's being mis… The term is being 'misquoted' in other reports.

10:00 This thing I've been checking for Geoff Blunkett and the defence department makes some reference to St Johns something or other, but I think that is St Johns Wood where we were located. It was the only place we could find with a stable building big enough to take our equipment. Because by this time we

had collected a fair bit of other gear for… Another job I haven't mentioned

10:30 before was the sampling of all the gas shells and so on that were brought into the country in 1942. They were worried about the deterioration of both the charging and the lining of the shell. I think some of them were lined with a shellac type of preparation to minimise corrosion and make sure they

11:00 were holding up. So we had to devise equipment and build it so we could drill the shell and draw the mustard gas or BBC [bromo benzyl cyanide] or the lacrymatory gas and draw that off for a sample and analyse and test it for viscosity. The important thing with all these chemical warfare agents is the viscosity because if the charging is

11:30 sufficient it's not sufficiently viscous it will be dispersed as a mist and not be very effective. What you want is appreciable size drops so it's made… They add things like perspex and other plastics as thickeners. But as we didn't get involved in the manufacture of such munitions we didn't know much about it and we weren't told much about it. But we had to sample the

12:00 shell and we had to report on the viscosity of the gas. They made these charging so viscous and thick and opaque they were very difficult to handle, and one method of measuring viscosity is popping a steel ball of a known size through the liquid and timing the distance to fall so many centimetres. If you can see the ball, that's all right. You can do that in your physics laboratory work as

12:30 a student, but trying to do it with mustard gas, which is very opaque and very thick, it just didn't sink. So other viscometers weren't particularly effective. So it seemed to me that it should be possible to measure this by an electromagnetic circuit. The army was equipped with mine detectors which would

13:00 indicate where any small piece of metal was. I thought, "Well it would save us a lot of time if we could get a mine detector and dismantle it." Well, did that cause trouble! We asked for a mine detector so we went through all the usual rigmarole about why we wanted it and so on and finally we seemed to have approval, and then we were reminded that

13:30 we couldn't dismantle it. If it was faulty it had to be returned to ordnance. Well we said that we did want to dismantle it because we wanted to use the wiring. "You can't. The military law says you can't dismantle army equipment, etc., etc." Well I finished up going to CSIRO electrotechnological in Sydney headed by a Dr David Myers, who later became the Vice Chancellor of Latrobe University, and he saw

14:00 the significance of it and said, "We'll design it for you." And they designed this circuit with two coils which we put into the glass tube full of mustard gas. We dropped the ball into the tube and the needle went over and we timed the fall and determined the viscosity. It saved us an awful lot of trouble. Many years later I found in a British scientific journal details of a British patent that had been granted for that circuit so someone was alive

14:30 to the commercial possibilities. The sampling of the shell in the ammunition depots was the remaining task, which we left with the lab in Brisbane and left sufficient task there to do it while the rest concentrated on the task of the getting the Japanese equipment examined and reported on. I think the nastiest

15:00 little item we found was a spherical glass grenade which was about, a glass sphere about that size, like a scent bottle I suppose you could say, and that was full of hydrocyanic acid with the idea, the Jap idea although I suppose Churchill might have thought it up. It certainly wasn't my idea of anything humane but the idea was if you could lob it into a foxhole with a couple of enemy soldiers in it,

15:30 as soon as it broke they would both be dead. And even if it didn't break on falling they would probably be curious enough to take the cap off and kill themselves. That was the nastiest piece of equipment we came across. That was recovered, I think, in Bougainville. We passed other pieces of equipment on to us. We only recovered one gas shell, which caused horrific panic in

16:00 army headquarters and it was instantly flown to Maribyrnong so the experts could examine it. We had been formed for that very purpose and we weren't even given a look at it.

This was while you were in Lae?

I think I was in Lae. I'm not sure. It was '43 or '44. But it turned out to be a standard. I think it was a mixture of mustard and lewisite which was a lebescican that the Americans developed in World War I.

16:30 **So how tricky an operation was it getting what you created over to New Guinea?**

What, the lab? The mobile lab?

The mobile lab, yeah.

It was just put on a truck, sorry, just put on a ship with the usual primitive gear they had in those days. The dockside derricks and so on. And it was unloaded at the Lae wharf

17:00 and trundled out to the 1st Army Headquarters and parked under the trees and the boys got to work. Nobody knew what we were doing and everything related to chemical warfare was so secret that we

had no occasion to discuss it with anyone else. Even the senior officers didn't display too much curiosity.

17:30 They used to describe chemical warfare by various derogative terms and didn't seem to want to bother about it. The other thing that happened while I was at Lae that I was going to discuss was the Japanese attempt to feed themselves, particularly on Bougainville and I think on

18:00 north New Guinea. They were growing vegetables and some bright spark thought it would be a good thing… The other thing about the Japs was vegetable crops. Well somebody got the idea that these crops should be used to starve the Japs out and the chiefs of staff in Washington sent Humphrey Pagent, a British army colonel who had been

18:30 a First World War officer and a brother of Bernard Pagent, the commander-in-chief in England. So he was a very nice chap and no side about him. But obviously it was a pretty high powered thing and he was sent out to assess the pros and cons of killing the Japanese by destroying their crops with herbicides. So he asked for a

19:00 suitable officer to accompany him to introduce him to the Australian operations in the south-west Pacific and I was dobbed in for the job. And he came to Lae where I met him and accompanied him to Bougainville where we… The New Zealand who was running the war in those places flew us at tree top height over the

19:30 field areas and when I said, "The branches brushing past the wings are worrying me," the pilot said, "We can't go any higher or the Jap anti-aircraft guns can reach us. We're keeping at the lowest depression." So I put up with that. The colonel was more daring than I was because he said he'd like a different aircraft that would go even closer.

20:00 So they put him in a Corsair, which is a fighter aircraft, and flew him all over the Japanese held areas. Fortunately they didn't get shot down. So he and I talked about it and we assessed the feasibility of destroying these crops with herbicide, which seemed quite straightforward. And then took him to

20:30 New Britain and to the areas around Lae. There was no Japanese close to Lae at that time but we had a look at some areas that looked suitable for other types of trial and then went to Tarakan where the Australian 26th Brigade had just captured the island from the Japs and had a good look there. And he also wanted

21:00 to know about flame warfare, which had been regarded or classified by the army as overall chemical warfare. And we had done some work in flamethrower fuels for the 4th Armoured Brigade which was then stationed nearby. And to show how effective Australian ingenuity was I had a chap who had worked

21:30 in a laboratory of a soap company before the war and he devised a mixture employing ordinary Lux soap flakes, which were successful in treating petrol to give a range for a tank flamethrower of I think 275 yards, which was better than anything the Americans had been able to do. So then somebody

22:00 got a rap over the knuckles for doing this research and the work ceased. But getting back to the tour with Colonel Pagent. After seeing what the occasions or places where flame throwers had been used in Bougainville. I think again we had a look in New Guinea. His next object was to have a look at what the Americans were doing in the Philippines so we went to Manila

22:30 and met up with my old friends of the 42nd Lab Company as well as a US navy unit I had got to know, which was the Mobile Explosives Investigation Unit. They were very efficient people at delousing mines. In fact their commander had a decoration for delousing mines in Scotland. The Yanks had sent him to the UK really before they were in the war to learn about delousing and bomb disposal

23:00 and so on. And he did a job for them and so was rewarded with a British decoration. He was Mark Ravinas, who later on became the head of Smith Kline & French, an American drug company who has now amalgamated with my old employers, so that was an interesting episode. Nothing else was

23:30 achieved in that field because Colonel Pagent compiled a very detailed report on all he'd seen and on the Japanese crop situation. And I believe it got to Washington the same day as Truman decided to drop the atom bomb so put paid to any suggestion like that. But it was rather interesting to me because while I was working with Glaxo

24:00 we grew opium poppies in Tasmania, which is an industry which is still going on. This was to make morphine which was required by Glaxo subsidiaries all over the world. And the poppies were very susceptible to normal weedicides and our man in Tasmania, who was a close colleague of mine,

24:30 carefully developed a weedicide program which destroyed the seeds without the poppies being damaged because the big seeds of the poppy are easily susceptible to damage. It's strange how various things you came across during the war had reared their heads again in later life.

If the A-bombs

25:00 **hadn't been dropped, do you think the order would have been given to…?**

They seemed dead keen on it. I've got no idea what might have been going on in the minds of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff. It was out of my range but I take it they wouldn't have sent a British army colonel all the way out to the South Pacific. And everywhere he went there were, things were arranged at the drop of a hat at top priority. The American army has this habit

25:30 of the signal starts from… They have all these acronyms. For example, the Commander-in-Chief South Pacific was the CINCPAC and then the signal reads 'from CINCPAC signed MacArthur' as though MacArthur himself had. So you had no idea

26:00 whether any frightfully senior person has got a hand in the matter but you know his authority is being used by somebody, someone is authorised to do it, so usually you take serious note of that. But at least it enabled me to get around the south west Pacific on a priority two, which a mere major would never get normally. And as I knew one or two of the chaps who were, you know, had sort of retired from the

26:30 duty and had become regulating officers in the air traffic system, they were constantly able to help me because as long as I had the priority on the documents I would get a seat on the first flight instead of getting involved in the great wartime occupation of 'strip sitting' as it was called, where you sat all day and the next day trying to get onto a plane to go where you wanted to go.

27:00 You see the Americans never really gave the southwest Pacific a fair share of air or sea transport and various Australian operations, according to the official history, were held up because of the lack of sufficient boats or ships or aeroplanes.

And how were your dealings with the Americans? How close? Would you share information, for example? Were you working?

We would share information freely on the…

27:30 For example, on the Japanese offensive equipment and defensive equipment the Americans had collected much more than we had because they had these operations in the south west Pacific, in the South Pacific, under a different command from the south west Pacific, and they got quite a lot of Japanese stuff on Guadalcanal, for example, which as I said earlier in New Guinea the Japs were too busy giving priority, I would imagine, to feeding their troops.

28:00 And we would hope they were. Various things have been published that seem to indicate that the Japs started to starve their troops to death in that campaign and many chaps of the battalion told me of capturing Japanese positions where dead bodies and sacks of rice were just heaped on top of each other. I didn't personally see

28:30 anything like that but I think it was well authenticated.

We've heard one account from troops who fought in New Guinea who said they had come across Japanese who had little pouches of white powder, suggesting they had a drug of some sort. An drug or amphetamine or something like that to…?

I've got no direct knowledge of that. We were never asked to analyse anything of that nature. We came across various

29:00 containers of powder, which always turned out to be bleach, which is a common decontaminant for mustard gas. There were a lot of… I'd have to go through all the… I've still got copies of all the reports that we prepared and I would have to examine those very carefully, but there were certainly indication of any sort of suicide provisions in these things. They all

29:30 had a use if you could work it out. Fortunately one of the officers was able to read Japanese and he was quite good. You could give him a package of bomb case or something like that with a Japanese label and he would instantly tell whether it was of any significance or not, so it was a lot better than having to wait for this Allied translator service.

Which was based in Brisbane, was it?

It was headed strangely, although there was a nominal American head, most

30:00 of the work was done by Ben Meredith who was a contemporary of Trelloar and myself at Melbourne University. Meredith had lost an arm in the first desert campaign I think on the attack on Bardia and as he wasn't fit further for infantry duties he some way became involved in intelligence work and was allotted to ATIS [Allied Translator and Interpreter Service] to

30:30 organise the translation of Japanese documents. Again I don't think he did it at university because it wasn't taught as far as I was aware before the war.

You said you did 100-odd reports in that time at Lae. You mentioned some of those, for example. Are there any others that are worth noting, that would be of particular interest that came in from the field that?

31:00 Well it's hard to remember all the details. The general impression I had which I have given to Geoff Blunkett for his, not his thesis, his magnum opus as I call it, he… I said the main conclusion I reached was that the Japanese had fairly elaborate chemical warfare organisation. They had done a lot of experimental work

31:30 and it was found out. The Americans captured their unit where they were using human volunteers and the Americans, so it is said, agreed not to prosecute them as war criminals provided they handed over all their information. So that's all in American hands and I don't think anything has been released to the public, but it may be. The overall

32:00 impression was that the Japanese knew a great deal about the use of chemical agents in war. They had been discouraged from employing them because they must have known… After they had captured a few American installations in places like the Philippines, they must have known the Americans were pretty prepared. They certainly would have known that

32:30 Britain would have had extensive experience from France in 1917-18 and I think they were just… Tojo or whoever ran their war was reluctant to be the initiator, realising it might prove to be biting the tiger by the tail. The Americans certainly

33:00 had put in an enormous amount of work. They had the Edgewell Arsenal in Maryland, which has been used since the war for chemical warfare for research. And didn't seem to me that there was a great deal of activity on the British side, but again it would have been a closely guarded secret. And when I was at the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories

33:30 I realised that they had a civil subcommittee going in the late 1940s for various biological warfare situations because the CSIRO had the facility for producing cultures of organisms in quantity would have been well placed if Britain or Australia ever wanted to produce things like anthrax as the Americans

34:00 apparently did. There was a recent TV program that said America had something 1,000 tonnes of anthrax ready to distribute, but the Russians had five times that. So whether you get the truth or not I think it's a matter of being aware of it and keeping it in mind should it ever become necessary.

34:30 **But not evidence that the Japanese had been developing that type of thing, biological…?**

I was never involved in examining any intelligence of that nature so I wouldn't even try to guess, but I would be surprised if this work they did in this unit. What was it called? Unit 781 [actually 731] or some number anyway. It wasn't designated anything. Even in Japanese language. But the sort of work they were doing there

35:00 was actual human guinea pigs. It would have been very strange if they hadn't, having such facilities at their disposal if a somewhat doctor who had subscribed to the convention, the Hippocratic oath, would cheerfully go

35:30 ahead infecting a helpful victim with some disease that he thought would be useful for war.

That's that camp up in Manchuria, wasn't it? In northern China.

I've got the photos somewhere. It was somewhere in that

36:00 northern area, you are quite right, but I have no official information about it and no source of information that I deem worth reading up.

In this investigation into the flame throwers, what was the purpose of that and what were the results?

Well there was a flamethrower made available to the

36:30 infantry in around in the Wewak campaign and again on Tarakan. I can't recall any 2/14th chaps telling me about being trained in flame thrower work. But the big disadvantage as I see it as an ex-infanteer, the man with the flame thrower is going to draw

37:00 all the enemy fire because there is no way it can be compressed into a small piece of equipment to hold in your hand. It means you've got to have a couple of gas cylinders on your back and it just seems to me a suicide mission to expect a chap to go into a combat operation with that sort of gear on him. The Americans certainly had these flame throwers. I'm not sure the ones that were used in the Australian

37:30 forces were American or British, but I was never involved in anything but the work on tank flame throwers as I mentioned earlier, and that obviously required considerably more equipment than a man could carry. The I think the one tank flamethrower that… I recall

38:00 a chap who we were working with was telling me was the thickened fuel was propelled by a continental red seal engine which used a very high air pressure. And I'm not sure of the design of it but this chap was in charge of the

38:30 workshop following the 4th Armoured Brigade which was headed by Denzel MacArthur who was a very enterprising Australian officer who started his career in the 6th Division Artillery Brigade, the one that helped us in Syria. He was no longer with them when we worked with them. He served with them in Syria but his… He fairly rapidly became a brigadier and had this 4th Armoured

39:00 Brigade which seemed to have some priority in equipment with the Australian Army. I don't think there

are any other aspects of that work that are of interest to historical researchers. This paper of Geoff Blunkett's will provide

39:30 a much… I don't know if much needed, but previously unavailable account of what was put in to being prepared in case it happened. And anyone who had family members gassed in France would tell you what a dreadful effect it had on the soldier's health both in

40:00 operations and after the war. I've got a couple of friends whose fathers were gassed and they really, you know, firmly of the opinion that it should be banned by all civilised nations if you can get agreement all around. But when you have got people like Saddam Hussein trying them out

40:30 against people like the Kurds, and you know that anything is possible.

You mentioned how, sorry.

Tape 7

00:31 **I just wouldn't mind going back over a couple of things. One of them was by the time you got to Lae and set up the unit there, where were you getting the Japanese chemical and gas equipment and evidence from? How was it coming to you?**

By that time the army what was

01:00 called the salvage units were well established and all enemy equipment captured in dumps and so on was returned through salvage. And their instructions were provided by what was called GSIA that was General Staff Intelligence

01:30 Subsection A, which roughly covers enemy information and their chap at LHQ that's Land Headquarters, which was General Blamey's headquarters, they provided policy directives for all such matters as enemy

02:00 equipment and they would direct the salvage units and give them some guidance as to what to look for and put aside. And although I made a couple of visits to such salvage dumps, I never found anything of significance. Usually Frank Simpson, the chap that was in charge of that work at GSIA, had

02:30 alerted the people concerned to what was of interest and the items would come to us without our having to go and search for them. The… I just can't recall the detail of… There was no great fanfare about it. Packages

03:00 would come in and be checked and if they seemed to contain a time fuse or anything like that, we had one officer whose duties were called ammunition officer and he had done ammunition courses, so he was trained to recognise the different types of fuses in the armies and which were explosives and which were supersensitive so we…

03:30 Occasionally if something of great interest had been located the details would presumably be signalled from army headquarters to Melbourne and we might get a phone call or a signal saying, "Watch out for such and such, which is on its way to you. Let's have the details as soon as possible." But it very much settled to routine after the initial

04:00 indications around early '43 that the Japs didn't have any massive storages of chemical weapons in the south west Pacific. If they had them they were in Japan or other theatres because apart from this one shell with mustard and lewisite in it there was never any major panic. So does that answer the…?

So okay,

04:30 **so you didn't really get very much in the way of…?**

As I say, we only had to produce 110 or 107 reports over the years '43, '44 and '45, which was less than one a week. There wasn't an enormous amount of Japanese material recovered. Probably because the Japanese themselves were careful as to what they let go and because the

05:00 operations were such that we never really captured a major Japanese dump of weapons or equipment. There would have been quite a lot in Lae, but then again the much higher Japanese headquarters were located in Rabaul. That was the Japanese headquarters for that area and although one of

05:30 my officers stayed on and went to Rabaul and was given the job of disposing a lot of Japanese material, although I did see him on one or two occasions, he didn't indicate that there had been anything of world shattering importance discovered. In other words, the Japanese had not planned to initiate chemical warfare from their headquarters in Rabaul. Any decision like that no doubt

06:00 would be made in Tokyo and if they decided to, say, use mustard gas to defend Tarakan it would have been sent there direct from Japan.

So was there anything in the way of chemical or gas equipment that was captured, like in a combat situation that appeared it would have been used in a combat situation?

There was only reports occasionally.

06:30 It's too far back for me to remember exactly now. But we did have the impression that the Japanese had employed a toxic smoke generator, possibly by mistake, in some operations because that contained what the Americans called 'vomit gas', which was chemically

07:00 diphenylcyanarsine, which is quite a nasty thing but it's not a fatal agent. It doesn't cause death in any immediate situation. It's was designed with the intention of disabling enemy troops, not necessarily wiping them out. For that they obviously had things like the hydrocyanic acid.

07:30 **When you got that grenade, it was just the one that…?**

There was only one that came to us. I'm not sure how many might have been recovered and how many were destroyed by the local commander. They were too dangerous to have around.

So what did you do with it when you got it into the lab?

As far as I can recall we would have opened it in a fume cupboard, which is a ventilated cupboard

08:00 for handling toxic materials with a fan exhausting to a safe place. And you can readily identify hydrocianic acid because of the smell that is described by some chemists as bitter almonds. But it's a very characteristic smell and very

08:30 limited association with such things. It's not the sort of thing you handle in a student chemistry situation. It's too dangerous. But you get to recognise the smell of cyanide. I don't know. It just comes automatically. But at the gas school I learned to recognise the smell of phosgene and chloropicrin. They were things that the Germans used. I think Britain may have used them in France in 1918

09:00 but phosgene is very easily recognised and it does make it very unpleasant for anyone that smokes because it gives their cigarette smoke a very metallic taste. Very unpleasant so I understand. As a non-smoker I was never able to use that as a method of identification but a chap I shared a room with at the gas school was a heavy smoker and complained bitterly

09:30 after he had been arranged for him to recognise the smell of phosgene. He complained bitterly it was really spoiling his smokes. They were hard to get and people resented them being spoilt.

Because what? The smell of it lingers?

No, because of this metallic taste it produces in the mouth.

But having smelt it, it lingered with him for some time then?

There must be some

10:00 reaction, I imagine, between the phosgene and the salivary juices, the saliva in the mouth producing these. I've never seen any research done on it. It was just something that we came to recognise.

Sounds like Valerie is getting ready for dinner.

What's she up to?

10:30 **So just finish up on the mobile unit. You were there for two years, is that right? In Lae?**

No, only from 1945 to about. I think we were in Townsville on the way there on Christmas 1944 and eventually reached Lae by ship in early in January 1945. And I was there until as soon as the war was

11:00 over. I had already put my name down under what was the five x two scheme which offered early discharge for anyone with five years service including two overseas, and so I was eligible for transport back to my home state early in August 1945 and I had a friend in the movement

11:30 side of things who rapidly found me a berth on an 800 ton little coastal lugger, I suppose you'd call it, which took me to Townsville. And from there I made my way back to Brisbane where the headquarters of the unit was and cleaned up outstanding administrative matters and applied for leave and met Valerie

12:00 in Sydney in time to witness the VJ [Victory over Japan] Day celebrations when the local population went mad in the streets. We didn't do anything particularly adventurous. We had a short stay there and I think as far as I can recall Valerie went back to Melbourne and I

12:30 went back to Brisbane and cleaned up the rest of things and then came down to Royal Park for discharge and was promptly shot into Heidelberg Hospital with a bowel abscess and spent a month or so in Heidelberg being operated on and recovering. And I was finally discharged on

13:00 January 1946. I was quite lucky because I had gone through all the discharge procedure and went around to the mess for lunch and ran into John Wray who had been an army pathologist who I had

known from the early days of the war. And he

13:30 said, “You don’t look well.” He said, “Have you got all your health side recorded in the discharge procedure? I think you need another check up.” So he sent me for a check up and they found this bowel abscess which had to be operated on. So I don’t know how long it would have been before it caught up with me. I was certainly feeling a bit… I was sort of due to,

14:00 you know, constant being having things to do and get done and not necessarily in a hurry at that stage. Nut there was an awful lot of things to be done with disbanding the unit and making sure everyone was properly attended to for their discharge procedures and that. The usual hocus pocus of army administration, I suppose.

14:30 **When did you and Valerie get married?**

When? February 1944.

So before you went overseas to Lae?

Oh yes. I had just been to a, I might have mentioned it earlier, to an Allied chemical warfare conference in Oro Bay. I think that was October 1943

15:00 unless I’m wrong, and that was quite instructive because all the American senior people were there. They even had a major general in chemical warfare, so obviously it was treated as a more important matter than the Australian Army did where our head man at army headquarters was a lieutenant colonel.

15:30 The Americans had, you know, much better documentation of all that was required and planned and I found it quite encouraging to think that they had given so much attention to the problems we may envisage. For example, they had done a lot of work on impregnated underclothing which would protect the troops from mustard gas

16:00 vapour. You see mustard gas vapour can produce blistering on the skin and it chiefly goes for the sweaty parts of the body, so the groin is usually the first place for the blisters to hit you. So the Americans very cunningly had devised woven underwear which had been saturated with chemicals known as

16:30 impregnites, which are chemically able to destroy the chemical in mustard gas. As far as I know it wasn’t taken up by the Australian Army but the Americans may have offered to maintain stocks. It was just the part of the game I didn’t have any reason to be involved in, but I was interested in the chemistry of these compounds

17:00 because they certainly indicated to me that a considerable amount of research had been needed to develop them. And that was the sort of work that the American arsenal was well equipped for. The other Americans that apart from Decoulter, the other Americans that

17:30 I met were a Colonel named Enz, E-N-Zee as the Americans spell it. E-N-Zed as we do, and he was the most genial and well informed fellow and he, I found, came from Kalamazoo and I said, “Is that really a place? I thought it only existed in songs.” And he said, “Oh yes,

18:00 it sure is.” And another fellow I met was John Riddick who later had quite an important job in Commercial Solvents Corporation I think it was called, and was a leader in the American rush to develop antibiotics after penicillin. Much to their annoyance they weren’t able to patent the

18:30 penicillin but they tried to get a stranglehold on it by collaring all the information they could get from England. And actually Commonwealth Serum Laboratories here were the first to make it available for civilian use, I think, in any country because they… My friend, Edgar Thompson, he was instrumental. He was by that time Army Director of

19:00 Pathology and he took a chap named Basely out of the army who was in the tank unit and sent him to America to learn all the American activities in mass producing penicillin, which the British scientists had been trying to do in bottles and the Americans used what was called deep tank fermentation. The way to produce it in quantity where it was… In the event… I

19:30 understand when I later became involved that the Kaiser Organisation in American had 135,000 gallon tanks all shaking around making penicillin. And I became involved in penicillin because the job I mentioned earlier at CSL [Commonwealth Serum Laboratories] as a result of the budget for CSL and the finances becoming extremely

20:00 troublesome because of the cost of putting in the plant that was built there on the advice obtained from American by Basley, and later he was running the place and I was working directly under him and he decided to take the government on in certain matters and fell out with the government and was sacked. And by that time I had to do his job, even though I didn’t have a medical degree.

20:30 They were interesting years and a lot harked back to what I discovered in the last years of the war when penicillin was obviously going to solve a lot of problems in dealing with casualties and war wounds.

So was Australia manufacturing chemicals for chemical warfare purposes?

21:00 Various universities were doing uncoordinated research and were certainly interested in the problems. They had naturally heard from some of their seniors who went to England to work on gas production at the… Apparently the British government had a big plant at Queens Ferry in Scotland and made the mustard

21:30 gas that was used in France. And various chaps in academic chemical fields here knew of this and naturally wanted to be in anything that was going. But most of the work that was done was done at Maribyrnong, which was later then the munitions supply laboratories and later became the Defence Standards Laboratories. And they were our source of information

22:00 if there was anything that we didn't have the detail or the knowledge of the chemistry of. And we collaborated with their scientists to unravel the problems and they helped a great deal in the field trials, the ones that we were involved in, and then the ones that were carried on at Proserpine and Innisfail at the Australian Field Experimental Station, but

22:30 as far as manufacture of anything here I can't recall. There was a Dr Reuter in the Sydney Technical School who was very interested in chemical warfare gases and I used to have discussions with him, but I can't recall them actually being officially engaged to do anything like that. The only sort of non-military collaboration that

23:00 I was involved in was equipment for measuring the viscosity of… As I mentioned earlier, done by CSIRO. Although we did have another project that was developed by Professor [Eric] Hercus at the University of Melbourne who actually lectured to me as a student, and he helped us with optical equipment for

23:30 measuring the falling sphere of viscometry procedure. There was something else he helped on but it wasn't of any major significance. But everywhere you went, people of the academic world or in industry were always very anxious to help. Anything that would solve… A problem related to the war effort was always accepted

24:00 much without question. I suppose there should have perhaps been more cooperation. The CSIRO established an office called the Scientific Liaison Bureau which stationed a man in London and had offices in each capital city and they did a lot of general scientific liaison work which was all directed at helping the war effort. But I think really

24:30 Australia did very well both in tackling problems and supporting the efforts of the defence services to solve any scientific problem that came up.

And what were the chemicals apart from mustard gas at Maribyrnong, for example, that the scientists or researchers were testing?

25:00 Well I wouldn't. I didn't have anything to do with their overall program. As it was a chemical defence board appointed in the Ministry of Munitions, which in the later years of the war I was supposed to serve on one of their committees but I was always away and never able to get to the meetings.

25:30 But they did a lot of work on protection procedures, methods of detecting and identification of the war gases. A piece of equipment called the CWGT. It was Case War Gas Testing. That was intended to enable an officer in the field who were faced with chaps who were obviously affected by an agent to identify

26:00 that agent. And one of the chaps on my staff did some work on this for them and so it was part of the research that was coordinated by the chemical defence board, but I've got no detailed knowledge of what the program was or what it achieved. It was not my sphere of activity.

26:30 **Just one last question… Do you want to stop now?**

It would be convenient. I think Valerie needs some help there.

Okay, yeah.

You said one last question.

Oh no, it doesn't matter.

Are you sure?

It doesn't matter. It will take too long to answer.

Take a long answer, will it?

INTERVIEW ENDS