Australians at War Film Archive

Ronald Currie (Ron) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:35 **Give us a overview of your life so far, starting at your birth.**

I was born at a place called Narre Warren North and my father married my mother in England in the First World War.

01:00 I wasn't, I was pretty delicate, I believe, and another lady next door sort of done the main part of rearing me and, anyway, they unofficially adopted me and me own mother and father went to Queensland and she sort of adopted me and they reared me from then on till the period when I joined the war. They had a general

01:30 store which I worked in after school, I went to the local state school. When they left, I didn't go with them, they left to go to Mount Macedon with their own daughter. And I stopped in Narre North, in the same district, I worked on farms, in a florist, general, you know, rouseabout sort of thing, till war was declared and I joined the army

02:00 when I was, I put me age up actually, I was only, I think I was seventeen or eighteen, I put me age up. Anyway, me father found out that I joined up and he claimed me discharged and I was discharged and out for about a fortnight and I went and re-enlisted again, though with his consent, and I come back with a new number.

02:30 I enlisted at Dandenong, we done out, a bit of training at the showgrounds at Melbourne. Then we [were] sent to Puckapunyal, we done all our training at Puckapunyal till the time that we sailed. We sailed on the Strathaird, it was a real luxury ship, she hadn't been converted from a passenger liner. Me and another bloke had a two berth cabin and all

03:00 the amenities that went with it, we had a ball. We was about six weeks going over, we stopped at Fremantle, we stopped at Hayden, we went up the Suez Canal and then parked at a place called El Kantara. We were put on training and taken up to a military camp, prepared at a place called Beit Jirja. We done all

03:30 our training there and the Italians come into the war, they took us down, we went up through Egypt. We, done the first push up through Egypt, went through Bardia, Tobruk, El Alamein, Deir Suneid, all those places, up the Mediterranean coast until the Germans, we had the Italians,

04:00 we chased them right out of it, now Germans took over and they come back and they, soon as they come into it, they fought us, all us blokes back and they brought a new division out from Australia and sent them all up the desert and brought us all back and sent us over to Greece. Am I going on the right track?

You're going on the exact right track, that's perfect.

04:30 We copped a hell of a hiding in Greece because there was only one division, German, put, I forget how many divisions of the best equipped army in the world, the best gun we had was a Boyce anti-tank rifle that you used just to see a white mark on the tank after you fired at it. It was just a debacle then, from then on, and we were taken off at a place called, I've got it written down there.

05:00 **You're taken in Greece?**

Yeah, yeah. I got off on a ship called the Costa Rica and she was torpedoed and I got off, then a little navy ship called the Heroine, I think it was, and they took us, it had too big of a load on to try it across the Mediterranean and they took us back to Crete

05:30 and, that's when the rot really set in you know. He dropped thousands and thousands of parachutes on us and we had him beaten and it was just through bad leadership that we got beat. We had a – am I allowed to mention names of [people] I don't like? – a bloke called Freyberg. He was a New Zealand general and he made one big hash

06:00 of it and if they'd have held the Maleme Aerodrome, we had the Germans beat because they dropped thousands of chutes on us and we just about cleaned them up but they took the Maleme Aerodrome and then they started landing plane loads of troops and that's what sort of beat us, you know. From then it became, after I was taken prisoner, I was, I was sent to, we went

06:30 over on barges back over to Greece and we finished up at a place called, I just can't remember the name of it, it's a prison camp pretty close to Athens. We found a sewerage drain which was, a few blokes was getting out, and one night I was going to go and they, luck would have it, or it was bad luck,

07:00 the Germans found out and they blocked the other end and a lot of blokes were still in the tunnel and they got fumigated with the sewerage fumes and they just died in there, you know, but I hadn't gone down at that stage. Anyhow, we were put on a train and sent on a, to go on away to Germany and me and two other blokes, second night out, we were going through Bulgaria and

07:30 we were put in dog boxes, just, you know, forget how many blokes to a dog box, was the whole truck the whole cattle truck type of thing. And we had a little iron bar, somehow, I don't know where we got it from, but anyhow we broke the wire, they had barbed wire across the windows and we snapped, managed to stop the wire and my mate went out first, we had to pull

08:00 him back because there was a tunnel coming up. And anyhow, we got him back in and he jumped and then they lifted me up and I went out next and we arranged to walk back up the line and meet each other, and anyway the third bloke that went, he killed himself, he got killed, he broke his neck or something, bloke named Jones, and me mate and I met up and we just sort of took to the hills and we were

08:30 travelling through Bulgaria for a fair while or, when I say a fair while, a few days. We didn't have any food and that, you know, we were pretty crook. Anyhow, we went into a village and, they wanted to know, they thought we were parachute troops, but Bulgaria then was an ally of Germany and they said, "Where are you going?" and we said, "Oh we was trying to make for the Turkish border," and they said, "Oh well."

09:00 They give us a feed and they said, "We'll get a bloke who will," you know, "guide you through the mountains to the Turkish border." So anyhow, a young bloke come out, he, well we travelled for about half a day and we come to a village and he said, "Would you mind just waiting here till I see if the track's clear." The track was clear alright, he come out with a brand spanking new German rifle and he had a full magazine and he bailed us up and he,

09:30 he then marched us into the village and they then handed us over to the Bulgarian Army and we had, we was with them for about a week, they treated us really well too, they, you know, give us a shave and bath and showers and plenty of food and they interrogated us and they said, "Do you want us, to stop with us or hand you back to the Germans?" And we said, "Oh stop here." Anyway, the, one

10:00 morning, oh about, before daylight, they come and woke us up and there was another train load of prisoners coming through and they marched us down and we were put in with that. But the train we jumped out of, they all went on to real good jobs. We were, went to a place called Moosburg and worked on a railway for a while and then they transferred us all up to the coalmines in Poland. I was at a place called Piaski Don Brova,

10:30 yeah, they was the only two mines we was in, we was in them for about two or three years which was pretty crook, you know, the going was tough. And that went on for, yeah, for about a bit over two years or something, I think it was, until the, after the D-Day [6 June 1944 – commencement of liberation of Europe] landing and then the Russians started to push from the other side and we

11:00 were, 'They must start marching,' we were marched around Europe for about three months, you know, sort of getting us away from the advancing forces, until we was finally, Patten's mob cut one night and we sort of, after that we were, we made our own way back. I'm a little bit vague on it, you know, how it all, put it in sequence, but it's –

11:30 I know there was about four of us, five, half a dozen of us, we knocked a German tractor off, it had a hay cart on it, and we set off to make our way towards France, and that night the Yanks, we struck the American forces, and they said, "Get off the road because there's a curfew on and half of them are trigger happy."

12:00 So we stopped the tractor and we went to a hay shed or something and slept and the next morning, it was very cold and a little bit snowy, we couldn't start the tractor, so then we just split up in pairs and me and another bloke, well we got a ride back to Nuremberg, I think it was, and we camped with the Americans there for two or three days

12:30 and then we, from Nuremberg we went to, we made our way to, I think it was, back to Regensburg, place called Regensburg. You just have to give me time to think, I'm running out of it.

Look, that's fine Ron because what we'll do for the rest of the day is actually go through everything you've just told us in a lot more detail.

13:00 **So that's fine, I'll just quickly ask you, after the war, you got out of the army, and what did you**

do?

Not, me first, what I done when I got out of the army, I couldn't settle and I travelled with a buck-jumping show for about, oh I suppose six months, seven months.

13:30 We come all up through Queensland and around here and then we, oh it broke up and I went back home and I was in the pub in Dandenong having a drink and I struck a bloke I knew and he said he had a shop in Springvale and he said, "What about coming and working for me?" you know, so that's where I went and started working for him and I finished up buying the shop or the, that adopted mother of mine, she bought it for me sort of thing, you know.

14:00 That was, I was in that shop for about ten years, I got married, after we sold it, we went, I built another three shops over the other side of the highway and one was a butcher shop, a greengrocer and a barber. I run the greengrocer meself – alright if I fold me arms?

Absolutely.

14:30 Oh God, what'd I do after that? I forget.

How did you like being in charge of, being a store-keeper, being in charge of shops?

I tolerated it. But it was sort of, yeah it was alright. It was a, then it was small like a country town, you know, and you got to know all the people and you got involved in the social part of it and,

15:00 no it was alright, it was hard work but it was, well when I say it was hard work, it was long hours of constant, you'd have to deliver you now 'Heralds', get 'Heralds' delivered of a Saturday night and all this business, and missed out on a whole lot of social activity you normally would have had.

So after ten years you decided to do something else?

Yeah, we sold that shop, then I built three shops over the other side of the highway, a place called Springvale, alongside

15:30 a hotel there, and I ran that fruit shop then for a few years. There was a second, a son was born, the second born, and the doctor fractured his skull when he was born and he was left a bit physically handicapped and we had to give it away because we had to devote most of the time to him, you know. And then I just, you know, worked around any job I could get. I

16:00 was, worked with a shop-fitting crowd, I worked with a hot water crowd, I worked at a racecourse for a while, Sandown Park Racecourse. And, then life just went on, me first wife died, and then we lost the boy when he was twenty seven, I

16:30 think. And then the, I lost me daughter when she was, that's her up there, when she was in her early fifties, she had breast cancer, you know, then Beverly and I met up and we finished up getting married.

17:00 Best day's work I ever done. I got, but.

And now you're here on the Sunshine Coast?

Yeah.

But you were just saying before that you're moving back to Victoria because you miss your mates.

Yeah, I'm, I've, I come up here to see, we've only been here a bit over,

17:30 nearly three years. And I just haven't settled somehow along the line, I, when I retired I took out a, just for a hobby, I took out an owner trainer's licence and race horses and, I got to know all the blokes at the track and that, you know, and I sort of miss them and they're still down there, they often ring me up to see how I'm going, but

18:00 no, I like Queensland and this is a terrific place to live in here, but I haven't settled some way along the line, you know, I don't know what it is, but, I, I just can't put a finger on it, but me heart's still down south, put it in a nutshell.

Well that's a good place to start talking about your birth and your childhood, being

18:30 **born in Victoria. So you were born in Victoria and you said that you ended up becoming friends or getting to know the next door neighbours?**

Well me parents did.

Your parents did.

Like when, you mean when I was born.

Well you

19:00 **said that you weren't reared or you weren't brought up by your parents?**

No, no I wasn't, no, because they lived next door to these, well they were a middle-aged couple, and they only had one daughter and they, I was, wasn't very strong, and this lady was a sort of a, had a good idea of nursing and that, you know. And then me parents left me with them, they pleaded with them to leave me there, and they all come up here to Queensland.

19:30 I think me old man come up with the idea of growing cotton, he didn't know what a reel of cotton looked like, you know, and that's the last I ever seen of them, I think, of, for a few years. And they lived at a place called Mentale, which was only about fourteen mile away, but they, me brother was born, they had him in the meantime, and they just sort of didn't bother about me, in the early stages, but later on. But I'm not going crook, I

20:00 mean, I had a better life with these people that had me than I would have done with them because they weren't rich but they had money and they had a store, a country store, and my father was only, finished up working for the railways and, you know, and he only worried about himself, so I was quite happy.

How old were you when they left to go up north?

Oh, about twelve months. I think I was about a year and nine months old or something when these other people

20:30 took me for keeps, you know.

They must have really wanted you, though.

Oh yeah, they did, because they only had one daughter and they badly wanted a boy and, I was the lucky one I suppose, yeah, it was good.

It's such a strange thing to occur though isn't it, because these days you wouldn't get away with it. I mean, it would have to go through the legal court system and what have you, to become adopted.

21:00 I never took their name, I was still, retained me father's name but, oh he was a bloke that only sort of worried about himself like, you know, so long as he was right, the world was right, and they had. me brother was there and me mother was, you know, he was the only kid in the world to her, so. No, I was quite happy, happy as Larry, it didn't worry me one iota.

21:30 **Tell us about this couple that took you under their wing and loved you, what were they like?**

Oh, they were the best people in the world. Yeah, terrific, yeah. Like, you know, I could never, ever speak highly enough of them. There was never any show of me not one of them or I was treated as one of the family. As a matter of fact, I think in lots of cases I was given more consideration

22:00 than what the girl was, or just as much anyway, but they finished up, she got married and her husband and her went to Mount Macedon to live and, after a few years, they wanted to go up and sort of live with her for a while, so. I suppose I could have gone, but I thought, 'Oh no, I'll stay in the district, I can look after meself.' So I stayed around and just worked around the district.

22:30 I lived with a family milking cows and it was a live in job, so it was alright.

What about those early days though? This would have been the tail end of the Depression when you were growing up.

Yeah it was, yeah, when they had the store it was the full Depression because next to the

23:00 old shop where the, next to the shop they had at Narre Warren North was a Church of England building and they had ground and they had four cypresses in each corner, like one on each corner, and I used to see blokes of a, humping the bluey, you know, carrying the swag, and they wasn't the average swagmen, they'd be good types of fellows, would

23:30 be camped under that [at] night and they'd come out from under this pine tree of a morning with their swags, you know, just looking around the local, because Narre North was all farms and orchards and market gardens, you know, picking up a day's work here, or half a day's work somewhere else to send home money for their family and that, it was right in the heat of the Depression. I can remember, well I wasn't fending for meself because, you know, I was well cared for. But these blokes, they used to, I can remember them as well as anything,

24:00 they'd all be camped under these cypress trees, you know, and coming out of a morning, getting on the road, making for the farms and that, seeing if they can get a day's work. Yeah that was, it was right in the middle of the Depression.

I suppose it was fortunate for you that you were taken in by this family – what was their last name?

My own family?

No.

My adopted family, Bullman.

Bullman, it

24:30 **was probably luck that you were taken in by, because so many other veterans that, well certainly that I've interviewed, have said how hard it was with no food and what have you.**

No, I was never hungry and that, and always had plenty of clothes and that, you know. I was, but the, what I noticed, that during that Depression and the,

25:00 '39 was the latter end of it, I suppose, I don't know whether we're coming out of it or not, but the minute war was declared, money come from everywhere, there was no, you know, there was, everybody joined, well a lot of blokes joined the army, money just seemed to grow on trees there for a while, like it always does when a war starts.

You mean that money grew on trees in the sense that you finally had money in your hands, or …?

25:30 Yeah, well I mean, I was working on a, I think I was working, I got a job on a florist just when I joined the army, and I was getting thirty bob a week, one pound ten, and working half a day Saturday, you only got Saturday afternoon, Sunday off.

26:00 And when war was declared, well you['re] going to get five bob a day and all your clothes found, your food found and so on and so on, it was good.

What about in those very early days growing up, do you have any recollections of your parents at all, because you were quite young when you were adopted?

Yeah I, I only lived about fourteen miles away. I was, I mean I don't like running me parents down or anything but they,

26:30 you know, they were just irresponsible and, I just can't work it out, you know, but in the latter stages they were, they, you know, they come good. Yeah.

I guess parents are humans as well and they make mistakes as much as anyone else.

Yeah, well that's right, me mother was only very young when she, me father married her in England after the

27:00 First World War and they were both, sort of didn't know where they were going, just the grass and over the hill was greener type of thing, yeah.

Yeah, some people should be screened. But the, the early days of growing up with the Bullmans, can you remember the life that you led, the everyday kind of life that you led, did you walk to school?

Yeah,

27:30 yeah the school was only a couple of hundred, or five hundred yards away. Yeah, I went to the, that was the only school I ever went to. When I left, I worked in the shop with them, they had the mail, few mail contracts and I done two or three mail runs. I done the mail run from Narre Warren North to Narre Warren for a few years. I used to take

28:00 the outgoing mail to Narre Warren and it was sort of down the highway about three mile, where there was the sorting depot, pick up all the mail from there and done a wayside delivery, you know, the houses on the side of the road, there wasn't too many. And then three days a week I used to do another mail run to what they called Narre Warren East, was out in the scrub. I used to do that on horseback but,

28:30 they were, that was in the Depression era too, that was a pretty tough era.

Who taught you how to ride a horse?

Oh, I always had a pony, and they had an old black pony there I learnt to ride on, I just naturally took to it, I've always liked horses, that's why I have an owner trainer's licence. I've got half a dozen winners out now, up on the wall, that I just done for fun,

29:00 you know, just a hobby after I retired. But no, yeah, I just sort of learnt to ride on this old black pony and then I've, from that I bought better ones, you know, it's good.

And the old black pony didn't mind you riding it?

No, no, she was very quiet. That's why I learn to ride, easy, yeah.

And tell us about what school was like for you, did you enjoy it?

No I didn't, I hated school

29:30 because we, it was a country place and the school I was with, it was only a one teacher school and a one

room school and it was all the kids from the first grade to the eighth grade, that's when you got the, you left, you got your merit certificate, I think it was, and you left when you was fourteen. And we used to, at school we always got the old teachers that was always, that was the last school before they were pensioned off from the education department.

30:00 And they used to, the only way they used to teach you was with a strap about this long and about that wide and if they couldn't teach you by fair means, they teach you by foul and I was always seen to [be] getting into, bit of a rebel I suppose. I remember one bloke one day, one teacher we had, I'd been to the beach and I was red headed when I was young and I had fair skin and I got badly sunburnt and he,

30:30 that was on the weekend or something, I went to school on the Monday, I went to school and I got hammered for something and I had all little blisters and he broke all little blisters, he belted me from the shoulders to the, me behind. And the old lady come when I went to bed that night and I had to soak the shirt off me with olive oil, he made that big of a job. Anyway, she went and got him and showed him, he was full, very apologetic that he'd done it, you know, but that was the type of teachers we had. They were the,

31:00 they were the sort of blokes that sort of lost their sense of humour and they shouldn't have been there, you know, they're on their last stages of teaching and I think I had about two young teachers, was good, I can remember that part of it, we never had them for too long, but these old blokes, I didn't like them, they didn't like me.

That horrible old English style of schooling.

Yeah, they taught by the, you know, the strap.

My mother's English and she was telling me

31:30 **that one day in her school, one of the girls at a girls school was brought out to the front of the class, in front of all the other girls, and was made to take her pants down and she was whipped on her bum. And the humiliation of that, you know, such as stayed with her for life.**

They'd lock a bloke like that up now wouldn't they? If a teacher done that now, he'd be locked up for sure. Yeah.

What about

32:00 **social things, girls, going out, dancing, did you do any of that stuff?**

Yeah, done a lot of dancing, used to be a local dance at the local halls around the town, you know, like Narre Warren, Clyde, Cranbourne, and of a Saturday night, rotations, and Lysterfield. Yeah, I used to go to a dance nearly every Saturday night, yeah. That's where I met me first wife actually.

32:30 **You met her at the dance before you went to war?**

Yeah, yeah, I was dancing before I went to war.

Yeah really, so she was sort of a war sweetheart?

Yeah, well I knew her, well I, we went to school together, matter of fact, yeah, I used to, you know, go dancing, I never sort of took her, I'd meet at the dance and we'd have a few dances, yeah.

33:00 **What was her name?**

Lesley.

Lesley. So were you much of a dancer, was that what attracted her to you?

Oh, we used to dance alright, but yeah, she was good dancer, yeah.

What about you?

Yeah, I used to get around alright, yeah. I wasn't a Fred Astaire [dancing film star] or anything but I was alright.

I always have this idea of the little country dance hall with the wall flowers along the back wall and,

33:30 **a big bowl of punch, is this how it was?**

No, they all used to sit around, yeah, they had seats around the walls, you know, and when the band started, you used to go up and pick out the girl you wanted to dance with and just go up and [if] some bloke didn't beat you to her. And then it was like that and then they had supper, used to have supper and tea and coffee.

34:00 And a few of us local boys, if we could raise enough money, you know, have a couple of bottles of beer planted outside and go out and have a drink or something and, which was frowned upon, but we used to do it.

Who would actually go and buy the beer though, somebody that looked older?

Oh yeah.

When would you start going to these dances, when you were about fifteen?

Yeah, not long after I left school, yeah.

34:30 **And what about movies? You probably didn't have a cinema where you were.**

Yeah, no, well there was one at Berry, a place called Berry, they used to have a picture show every Saturday night.

Do you remember the movies from those days?

No, look I can't really. You're going back to the old stage, you know and they,

35:00 I just can't remember their names even.

Would you go there for a date, would you take a girl there to the pictures?

No, not really, no. We, sort of be flat out buying your own ticket in.

That's right, because in those days you would have paid for the girl.

Yeah, that's right, meet them in there.

Well what about sport, were you much

35:30 **of a sports person?**

Mainly with horses, I used to go to gymkhanas and that. They'd have, you know, I had a pony, he used to jump alright, and flag and barrel racing and bending racing and all that type of thing.

What's flag and barrel racing?

Yeah, it's probably all foreign to you, but they still have it. You know, where you got a barrel one end and half a dozen flags spaced out the other and you start out at the barrel and you gallop up and,

36:00 the end one and grab your flag and bring it back to the barrel and till you've got the whole six or eight, whatever it is. It's a novelty event, musical chairs. They used to have hurdles for ponies and horses and all that, not the big ones that you see now on the television, the Olympic ones, these were only, that wasn't heard of in that era, these were only about three foot six, you know.

36:30 We had a lot of fun with it.

How old were you then when you were doing flag and barrel races?

In me teens, yeah.

Did you ever have aspirations to be a jockey?

Yeah, I did, I would have loved to have been a jockey, but I was too big and heavy, just no hope you know.

What kind of, you said you had red hair, what were your 'physicalities', were you quite a beefy boy?

37:00 No, I, just a normal build, yeah, I was, I think when I just had a look at me and another mate I was in the army with, we sent away and got the freedom of information on myself in the army, and I was eleven stone five I think. But when I come home I used to smoke pretty heavy, I was only about, not much over ten stone,

37:30 but when I give up smoking, I stacked on a bit of weight you know.

When did you give up smoking?

Oh, about twenty years ago. I got crook in the chest, and I had to.

What about religion, did the Bullmans have a particular religion that they brought you up with?

No, they were Methodists and there was a Methodist church in the district, so I always went to it, yeah.

Are you a Methodist now?

38:00 If I go to church, no, I, well yes I suppose I was brought up a Methodist, yes, but I couldn't care whether I went into a Catholic church or a Seventh Day Adventist Church or a Church of England, they're all the same to me, you know.

What about the kind of food you

38:30 **grew up on, has that changed over the years, have you seen a lot of difference in what you would eat then, and what you have now?**

I suppose the basic foods for home hasn't changed that much, I mean you still got your roast dinners and your plum puddings and you're made to eat vegetables and bread and butter. But, there was never the cafes and the eating out places there are now and you never got these pizzas and all this fancy food

39:00 that you can buy around in the cafes now, there was none of that. I can remember when a hamburger first come out and we reckoned it was champion, we lived on them, yeah, when we got the chance.

I remember growing up, those hamburgers you used to get with the lot and they were fantastic.

Oh yeah, I know.

With eggs, beetroot.

Get the lot.

And it'd be this big. Yeah, times have changed now, they're like this big.

Tape 2

00:35 **Just interested in where you grew up, what was Narre Warren like?**

It was a country town, the main things was diary farming, orchards, apple growing and market gardening because it's about, I suppose it's about

01:00 forty mile from Melbourne. The milk was, in the early days the milk was taken to a central point into town, they used to have what they called a milk stand and all the farmers had to be there and the milk truck would come and pick it up, but in the later stages, yeah, pre-war, the milk trucks used to come straight into the farms and pick it up. And then they

01:30 invented the vats, so all the farmers had to put in the big and all the milk went into the vats and then the tankers just used to come in and pump it out. Apples was all taken to cool stores, big cool store down the railway siding at Narre Warren. The lot was taken to Victoria Market, I don't know whether, I think, I don't know where the export stuff was taken too, but, no it was a pretty big

02:00 apple growing area that sort of supplied all the locals with the work and that.

As a young fellow, what future prospects did you have in mind, what did you think you were?

I don't know, not too many mate, not too many because the best school that you could have gone to was a high school,

02:30 that was seven miles from where I lived, at a place called Dandenong. Now it's, it's nothing, but then it was, you know, you had to catch buses. No I was never a top line scholar, and I'll admit it. I was flat out spelling cattle a lot of times, but I sort of got through you know. I think I leant more after I left school

03:00 than I did at school. When you're working in, I was working around the shop and that, you sort of, you know, learnt more figure work than what I ever did at school. As I told the lass, I didn't like the teachers, number one, and, there you are, your heart sort of wasn't in it. I mean I got through alright, but I was never a brilliant scholar, no. I never had

03:30 any ambitions of being Prime Minister or anything like that, you know.

What did you think you'd end up doing, did you think you'd end up on farms or a shop?

Yeah, yeah, I was always been interested in farming, although I finished up with having a shop meself, I sort of went back to what I knew after the war, I don't know, I did, I never had any ambitions

04:00 during the war years, I just didn't know what I was going to do when I got out. The day I was discharged they sent us through, a few blokes had asked us what we was going to do, or did we want to be apprenticed to anything, or what we done pre-war, and nothing that they ever said to me turned me on, like, "Did you want to be a bricklayer, did you want to be a builder, do you want to be a – ,"

04:30 they asked me, 'Did I want to go back to – ,' I was working on a florist when I enlisted and they said, "Do you want to go back to that game?" and I said, "No, I don't." and so I just freelanced, you know, I, when you come out of the army and especially when you've been a prisoner or war for a fair while and been down mines, you know, you, it's, I don't know,

05:00 it used to, I had a bit of a nervous breakdown after the war, there was a lot of us the same, they, I was in the, what they call the thirteen, or fourteen, the barrack at Heidelberg Military Hospital. And they wanted to put the battery on me at that stage, they used to use a battery, did you ever hear of that?

They put headphones on you, and clamp down your

05:30 throat to keep you from swallowing your tongue, and shoulder pads, and then they'd, two or three dirty great orderlies would come in, ex-military policemen, and then they'd hook you up and then press this button and it'd knock you rotten. Anyway, they'd roar like a bull and you always knew when you were going to get it because your name was left off the breakfast list. Anyhow my name was left off one morning, so I went up to the officers, I said, "Am I going to get the battery?" They said, "Yes." And I said, "I'm not going to have it."

06:00 They said, "Why?" I said, "It wasn't doing any good." I didn't reckon, you know. I was in with some bad cases, there was one bloke, he was the troop carrier that hit the, to, of the Owen Stanleys, and anyway, they said, "Well look, that's your option to do it but," they said, "what'll you do?" I said, "I'll go home." And, they said,

06:30 "The day you walk out of here without treatment, don't ever come back to the army for help," they said, "because you won't get it." And I'll tell you what, they was right too, any application you made for a pension, I get one now, but back in that era, if you knocked it back then, you'd had it. So.

What did you think of this after, you know, going through service for the army for all those years?

07:00 Yeah, well, I don't know, you, you're terribly unsettled, or I was, you know. You, I missed the blokes I was with, I sort of, even women's company didn't interest me too much until I got married, but when you're living with blokes and you're worked with them, you know, you see them skittled and all this business, it,

07:30 I think this is what made a lot of us go troppo for a while. But, anyway, I sort of got out of it. But no, I never had any ambitions to be anything but a working bloke, you know. And as it's turned out, I've done alright, I've, you know, through no, through good luck, because after the war, when I went into the shop and me

08:00 adopted mother bought me the shop, it was, there was that much money about, everybody had deferred pay and there was no, I only had this little country store and there was no supermarkets or anything like that you know. And I just, through good luck I think, I had enough money to buy one or two properties, houses,

08:30 and I've, when I sold out, I bought, I built another three shops meself and I sort of, you know, had a bit of a kick on from there. I mean, I finished up alright, I mean, I'm not a rich man but I'm not a poor man type of thing, you know.

When you mentioned that you go a bit troppo and the story about getting out of the hospital, what helped you personally, what sort of things helped you get over some of that?

09:00 You had to get over it yourself I found out, and I suppose it was mainly me wife, my first wife was very good like that and, yeah, you had, I realised that you had to help yourself, like sometimes you felt dreadful, you know, you, when your nerves go it's a, unless you've been through it, it's a horrible thing. It, yeah,

09:30 I gradually, I gradually sort of pulled out of it meself you know. I think me nature sort of changed a bit, I was terribly easy going at one stage and then I got, used to, went through the stage I got very agro over nothing and …. But no, I gradually, I got meself out of it, you know, and realised that you had to.

10:00 **When you say your nerves go, what exactly does that mean, what kind of thing would happen?**

Oh, it's very hard to explain, sort of a nervous breakdown. It's, and Heidelberg, that military hospital, it was full of them. You know, we had fellows in the prison camp with us that went through it alright.

10:30 And the conditions was crook, you know, you went down mines and I reckon you was miles under the bloody ground and you didn't, when they were blasting, all the lights used to get blown out and, it was, I think of it now and it was a frightening thing, you know, and I was with a crowd that was shaft-sinking down a mine, we're putting another shaft

11:00 right down, trying to get another level. And these, like a lot of fellows survived that and they went through it quite well because, but the minute the strain come off you, when you were released and put back to a normal life, that's when you're, a lot of them cracked, and I don't know what it was, but that was the case with me, anyway, I sort of ….

11:30 And it never happened for sort of a while after but I don't know, something just went wrong and I ….

Could you talk about it to the other blokes, like in the hospital or even outside the hospital?

What, the fellows I was in with?

In with them or even outside of the hospital, like what was going on?

Oh, I was, this one bloke I was telling you about, he was, he was a sole

12:00 survivor of a troop carrier that hit the top of the Owen Stanleys and he was in a bad way, like he'd get up of a morning, he'd wrap his pyjamas in bloody newspaper and take them, and hide them in the culvert up at the main gate. You know, you shouldn't laugh, but that was fourteen, well the next barrack was fourteen A, and they were under lock and key, nobody went in there, only the orderlies, you know, the big orderlies and that.

12:30 No, there was some hard cases in there but, you know, just blokes, their nerves had cracked, talk all the rot in the world, they'd get you depressed, say, "Oh I won't be here in the morning," type of thing, you know, "This is it." No it was a pretty rugged period that.

You mentioned the battery which is like shock treatment.

Yeah.

13:00 **What would happen to the men after they had that, that you observed?**

It was an American idea, I believe, but I don't know how successful it was, I, whether they've perfected it in any way. But this shock was supposed to counteract another shock or something. I think in some cases it might have worked but in some cases it didn't, like it sent some blokes

13:30 right around the bend and that's what I was frightened of, because they, they send two or three big ex-military policemen as orderlies in with the machine and you see them getting hooked up and, that era, they never put a screen around both, they were going to you and I, and they were going to do me, they wouldn't put a screen around me or anything, you'd lay there and watch it, and when they pressed that button, they used to let out a roar, it just used to knock everything, just used to knock them rotten

14:00 and they'd be unconscious for two or three minutes or probably longer. But I was, I wouldn't, you know, I said, "Well, I'm just not having it and that's it." And they said, and that's when they turned dog and said, "Well, if you walk out, don't come back to us," which I didn't for a long time. But no, I couldn't, to describe, you can't sort of describe it, you sort of got to go through it to – you know.

14:30 Nothing's worthwhile and you, you know, you go and no-one can talk to you and, it's a dreadful feeling. And the people that's closer to you and the people that you love the most are the ones that you sort of take it out on, you know.

Well, how did your first wife cope with that?

Don't know, don't ask lots of times, wouldn't have a clue.

15:00 Wonder she didn't blow through, but she didn't, she stuck to me, yeah.

Good woman?

Yeah, yeah, good woman.

Just interested, one question about the shock treatment, you didn't have it, but what was some of the symptoms after that some of the men would exhibit, like after they'd had it?

I can't actually remember properly because, I think some, they used to go sort of very quiet for a long time, you know.

15:30 But then I wasn't there that, long enough to sort of see what the long term effect would have on them. Some of them were that crook, I don't think they've ever got over it, you know. They'd have been nerve jobs for the rest of their lives. I don't know where they'd finish up or how they'd finish up, but no, I just couldn't tell you.

Did it ever strike you as a strange way

16:00 **of dealing with people?**

Yeah. What, the shock treatment? Yeah, but see there was that many of them and, that their nerves were cracking after the war with what they'd been through and, well I suppose they had to try something and this was an American idea, I believe, they first come up with it. But, and other than that, a man that had a breakdown,

16:30 a nervous breakdown or something like that, there's no cure for it, there's just no cure and you got to come up and try anything, but I don't know whether they still use it or not, but I certainly wouldn't have had it.

What about talking to you, you know, someone to talk to, someone to get, you know, get counselled so to speak. Like, did anyone?

No, unheard of in that era, unheard of, you wouldn't have,

17:00 and, they're that troppo, the lot of them, probably meself included, you wouldn't have taken any notice of them anyway. You'd have said, "Well, you're as mad as I am for talking like this," you know.

Well tell us, one last question about that, what were the staff like, the orderlies, the doctors

and nurses, were they nice to you?

Yeah, they were alright, yeah. Or what I remember, it

17:30 was a fair time, while ago, but yeah, I had no complaints, probably a lot of them still in the army and that. No, I could, I can't remember any cases of every being stood over or ill-treated or anything like that.

Did anyone talk about how, 'This is war related,' to you or did they mention that [it was], 'From your war experiences,' or did they just kind of gloss over that?

18:00 No, not really because they'd all sort of been through the same boat type of thing and, see, there's a lot of blokes now, still haven't forgot the war, you know. They ramble on whenever they can and, as far as I'm concerned, I sort of try to forget it.

I might just bring you right back to before the war,

18:30 **we were talking about your wife, and you mentioned that you met her at a dance. How was your romance developing, were you quite serious at this, before the war?**

No, not before the war, no, we was only just casual. I never ever had a serious girlfriend before the war. It was only after I come back, this girl that I, me first wife, she used to

19:00 write to me when I was in the prisoner of war camp in the army, but it was only after the war that we sort of got serious you know.

Well she must have liked you to be …?

Oh yeah, I don't know why but she did, well she married me, so she must have.

But also all those years, writing to you, like several years between?

Yeah, yeah, it's,

19:30 yes, I, well I suppose she wouldn't write every week but she, you know, I got a fair few letters from her, yeah.

How important was it to receive those letters?

Oh it meant everything to you. The lady that reared me used to write, me wife used to, first wife used to write a bit. Yeah, it was everything and that was all you'd look forward to, you know, it was, oh we used to get a Red Cross parcel a week for a while,

20:00 that was one thing, another thing you looked forward to, you, but other than that, that mine era was crook.

Do you remember anything that she would write about in particular in those letters?

No, just about her family and, you know, what was happening in the local town or something like that, but, who'd joined the army or some bloke had got out, or,

20:30 no, just in general, nothing, you know, nothing serious type of thing.

Was it almost like a little ray of sunshine in a …?

Yeah, that's right, yeah.

Did you carry a photograph of her through …?

Yeah, I did have a photograph as a matter of fact, I had it on the wall above me bed till one night the Pommies come over and blew our barracks up and that was the end of the photo and half me gear and everything.

21:00 **Would you show the other blokes and would they comment and talk about their girls, showing off the photos?**

Oh yeah, to a certain extent, you know, they'd, there was a couple of blokes that I can recall, that they, the Red Cross got in touch with them and wanted to know whether they wanted their allotments stopped to their wives,

21:30 that they'd got on with the Yanks. And I don't know how they found out but they must have had spies out somewhere, and I know one bloke was from Sydney, a bloke called Slappy Pearce, and his wife went off with a Yank, I think she had a kid to him or something, and the Red Cross found out and wanted to know, 'Did he want to know, did he want his allotment stopped?' But he took it pretty hard, like, you know, when you a prisoner and can do nothing about it and you know that's happened, you can quite imagine how he'd feel.

22:00 Yeah there was a bit of that going on.

How do you help a bloke like Slappy?

You don't, you can't help them, you don't know how they're going to think, a lot of them you wouldn't be responsible for their reactions. But I had another bloke from Melbourne, same thing happened, and come home and done the right thing, he half killed the bloke but he finished up in trouble. I think they might have locked him up,

22:30 he made a good job of him, probably his wife too, but.

Well tell us, we were talking about your girlfriend and times before the war. Were you aware of the build up to war, like were you following what was going on?

No, not really no. I'd never

23:00 sort of [been] one for politics, or, first I can remember about the war, I remember there was a measles epidemic and the place where I was staying, they had two boys that, about my age and one got it and the mother made us go over to the barrack hospital and get inoculated against these measles, it was in 1939 I think, there was an epidemic going about. And I remember I was,

23:30 that was the night war was declared, I heard about it. And I remember I was panicking, I finished up getting the measles and I was dead frightened the war would be over before I could get there, you know, I was, that's how stupid and mad you are.

Why were you keen for the war not to be over? What did you think would happen?

Look I was, I wasn't any

24:00 hero, I was just as frightened as the next bloke, but as I've already said to you, you was going through an era where there was no money, no future. You were going into the army, you were going to get five bob a day which wasn't a fortune, you was going to get, I think, three bob a day deferred pay once you were three mile out of Australia, you got all your food found, you got all your clothes found.

24:30 It was a carefree life, you're going to get a trip on a boat overseas, which you never got under normal circumstances. Like, I went on, we sailed on the Strathaird to Hemel, and it was a passenger liner in that era and it hadn't been converted, it still had the mod cons [modern conveniences] of a, you know, we had a ball, and that was, that was just adventure as far as I was concerned. There was no,

25:00 you know, I didn't want to win a VC [Victoria Cross] or anything like that, it's just plain adventure, just something different from the, you know, the horrible drag of the monotony of getting up, going to work, same old thing, day after day, and day after day, you know, with, you couldn't see any light on the horizon type of thing. So, that's all it was as far as I was concerned, I mean it wasn't even

25:30 king and country as far as, I couldn't have cared if they'd had blown the king up in that era, type of thing, you know. It was just a free trip, good time, and that's exactly what I had until the Germans got me.

And well, that's interesting you mention, did any, like, stories that you'd read or movies or anything like that influence what you thought would happen?

No, it didn't, I seen a couple of movies on the great wall,

26:00 but it did, no that didn't have much to do with me. Me old man, well I was, I'd never seen much, I'd only seen him a few times, I heard him rave on a couple of times. But no, that, that was not, it was just sheer adventure and good time and, you know, you never thought out, you might get knocked over, anything like that, that was the furtherest thing from your mind, until you got there,

26:30 you found out they were fair dinkum.

What about your mates, were they all joining up too?

Yeah, but I was the first bloke to join up out of our district. But yeah, the, they got a role of honour up in the local hall now, I was down the other day to a turn out, yeah, a fair few did join up but there was about, I think it was about two or three joined up

27:00 pretty near the same time as me, we sort of finished up in the same battalion and ….

And you mentioned your father, had he been in World War 1?

Yeah, yeah.

Did he ever talk about what he went through?

No not a great deal, because I wasn't with him much anyway, you know. Just a few times I've seen him in, I heard him raving on a couple time about something, but forget what it was.

27:30 **You mentioned also earlier that you joined up and he opposed that. Tell us the story about that, when you first joined up, what did you have to go through, the process, you had to get him to sign something?**

Yeah, I was under age and I got this adopted lady to sign me papers and he found out that I was in and I don't know why he done it, because he'd taken no interest in me whatsoever, it was just that I think he didn't want anyone else to say that they'd been through what he'd been through,

28:00 and he went into Victoria Barracks and claimed me discharged. And I done most of me training and we were pretty close to sailing, because we'd had all our inoculations and vaccinations and that, and this day we'd had that bad vaccination one where your arm gets crook and swells out if it takes it and they give us the afternoon off and I was laying up,

28:30 we were laying up at our barracks at Puckapunyal, and the battalion runner come up and he said, "Do you, the adjutant wants to see you." And I said, I was on the way down and I was trying to think what I'd done bloody wrong, you know. And I went in and threw the salute as you do and called him sir and he said, "Currie, how old are you?" and I said, "Twenty one, sir." He said, "Now tell me the truth," and he threw this discharge

29:00 paper that me father had claimed was me right age and everything. Anyway, he was very good, he said, "Do you like the arm?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "We're pretty close to sailing you know?" I said, "That's right." He said, "Look, go back, see your father, see if you can get him to sign your papers," he said, "Go back to the drill hall where you enlisted," he said, "sign up," he said, "and leave the rest to me." Anyway,

29:30 I did and I got the old man to sign me papers, I threatened to nick off and sign up somewhere else if he didn't, so he signed then and I done what the adjutant told me and I got sent, was getting sent back to Pucka [Puckapunyal] but I was getting sent back to a different crowd to what the battalion I was with and we got to brigade headquarters and he was there and he yelled out me name, he said, I said, "Yes sir," and he said, "Right, throw your gear over," and I got back with me same mob.

30:00 Me number went from, me first army number was five, eight, four six, and me second, after about a fortnight out, went to five, nine, oh, three, but I got back with the same old crowd and everything, you know. But I went back as a new recruit and they wanted to vaccinate me and inoculate me all over again and I had to go through it. I had no hope of getting a disease because I was that full of antibiotics or whatever it was.

30:30 **How had you convinced your father, apart from threatening to go to another state, I mean, was there any other methods you used?**

Nah, not really, I mean, I could have gone in under an assumed name or something, I suppose, like that, but I just didn't actually want to go to that trouble you know.

Did he explain his …?

No, he, he was, I can't say much about the poor old bugger, he's dead, but

31:00 he was a funny boy in lots of ways.

Were you hearing news about how the war was going, about where you'd end up fighting and this kind of thing?

No, not really, we were in camp in, place, we got off in a place called El Kantara in Suez Canal. And we went up to a place called, camp

31:30 in Bellascause [Belarus?] called Beit Jirja. And I was amongst the first batch to get leave into Tel Aviv. And we were only there two days and the Italians come into the war, and the military police rounded us all up and told us to report back to our units. That was about, no,

32:00 oh we knew it wasn't going too good, when, you know, France capitulated and all that, but, then our first action was against the Italians, we took thousands and thousands of prisoners.

We'll get to that in a bit, but back in Australia, when you're going through the initial kind of joining up?

Did we know how it was going?

Did you know where you'd be fighting?

32:30 No, no, no, wouldn't have a clue. Well, we took it on the first war idea that you'd be fighting in France, that the Germans would never get any further from France, but he showed them just how far he would go because she was a bit dicky there for a while. If Russia hadn't have come in, we were gone.

Well, tell us about that initial training, how did you take

33:00 **to army life?**

Loved it, yeah, I loved it, yeah. We trained at, oh I done a bit of training at the showgrounds in Melbourne, then they sent us up to Puckapunyal, that big army camp at Puckapunyal is, was then only in the raw you know, it was in bush, and we was digging out stumps on a parade ground and getting the camp into order, one thing and another.

33:30 But no, we, we never was only, see, they classed it as a phoney war for a while because the Germans never made any move when he went in through Poland, he just put a line out to hold it, well the French couldn't have attacked anybody anyhow, and there was no shots being fired and they were all saying, "Oh it's a phoney job, you're going to have

34:00 a real good time." But when he said, "Go," like we, he was ready after he got Poland and that he, then he swung into France, it was, we found out how good he was. Because in Greece, I think, he, I forget how many divisions he poured in there, and we're trying to hold him with one Australian division with .303 rifles. But we struck him, the first we struck the German was in the,

34:30 when my battalion was up, we got right up the desert end too, or over the Tripoli border and Rommel's mob come in, and I can remember the first German plane we seen. We, I was in an infantry battalion, a company, and a mate of mine was in the transport and was a scrounger, and he looked me up one morning and he said, "Come over

35:00 to the, where me truck is." He said, oh he had all the fancy food he'd been knocking off, you know, other rations and that, and we seen these planes swooping and diving about and we said, "Oh, they've got to be ours," they all had red noses and that. Then there's one coming straight at us, next thing the sand started to fly up around us and there was tin dishes and everything going up and I said, "They're ours alright," and we took off and hit the slit trench. It was the first German strafing

35:30 job I'd been under. And then they, the silly part about it, we were trained, a desert battalion or division and they'd just brought the eighth, yes, one of the divisions out from Australia, and they had them all there at Alexandria instead of sending them across to Greece, they went to all the trouble of bringing us back, that we knew the desert, and putting them up there, and they only lasted

36:00 three weeks and the German got the lot of them. Then they sent us to Greece and wasn't long before he had us.

Well tell us, before you left for war, what kind of propaganda was being spread and said about the Germans?

Oh, usual bull dust, I never heard any.

36:30 The only thing you'd hear, I think, is if the Germans sunk a Red Cross boat or a Red Cross ship or any bad little things they done, but there was no, see, there was no serious fighting actually until France fell or we were sort of over there at the time then.

And you mentioned also that you were enjoying army life. What was it that you were loving about being in the army?

Just the general atmosphere of it, the carefree life it was,

37:00 we had enough money to go to the canteen at night and get half drunk if you wanted to or, you know, go on leave and, yeah, it was, you know, it was an entirely different life than being, you had to do this and you had to be there and you had to get a quid, you could just do what you wanted to within army reason and it was such a carefree life. That's what I liked about it, you know.

37:30 **Less of a struggle.**

Yeah, different lifestyle altogether.

And, what about the discipline, was that hard to take or get used to?

Oh yeah, it never worried me, I sort of, I got on well with the officers. The officers I struck weren't permanent army blokes they were fellows that

38:00 might have been in the militia or something, but they wasn't the mad strict discipline officers like an officer out of the English army would have been, you know. They were real good blokes, a lot of them, there was one or two snags amongst them but you got to know.

And did you feel well prepared in that, after a few months training?

38:30 Physically in ourselves we were but we'd never had any arms. They, when we were training at the showgrounds when I first went in, we'd, we were in squads, and they might send my squad down to the ordinance mob and we would draw, say, forty rifles, we'd go out and train for two hours with those rifles

39:00 and we'd get marched back and we'd have to hand them in and then another squad was come in and they'd get the same rifles, that's how much equipment they had. When we went into some of our real heavy battles, all we had was the, your rifle, I had a, they brought out an anti-tank rifle and I was one of the first blokes to fire it and I nearly walked back to it, nearly busted me shoulder and everything, it'd kick

39:30 you from here to that what's her name. You were frightened to pull the trigger and when the tank went past you, all you'd see is a little white mark on it where the bullet hit it and skidded off it. That's what they expect you to fight the best equipped army in the world with.

Tape 3

00:33 **Ron, you said at the showground is where you did your very basic training when you first joined up, now that, how did that differ from the training you did at Puckapunyal?**

Oh, the basic of what we done at the showgrounds, they brought all the warrant officers from Duntroon down that trained us and it was only really virtually

01:00 teaching us how to march, left turn, right turn, form fours and just a general basics of the early soldiers life. It was a, you never went on bivouacs or manoeuvres or anything like that, it was just drill, mostly drill, parade ground drill, we never struck the real serious training until we got to Puckapunyal.

01:30 **At Puckapunyal, is that when they did the whole of the, the blanket on the bed or, you know, bounce a coin on the bed, that kind of thing?**

How do you mean, on the ...?

Oh sorry, I'm thinking of 'Private Benjamin' actually. Remember when you make the bed really tight and it had to be perfect.

Yeah, yeah.

Did you have to do that?

Yeah, we done that, yes we done that in the showgrounds.

02:00 I'll tell you a funny story, like I, I can tell it to you because I know you got a sense of humour. The, our general in the first, in the Second World War was General Blamey, remember him? Now he used to be Chief Commissioner of our Police. This, what I'm telling you isn't going to go out all over Australia is it?

Not now, no.

And he was a bit of a playboy. And him

02:30 and some big head detectives got caught one night in a car at St Kilda with two pros [prostitutes] in the back and I think he nearly done his job over it, actually. So he come around one morning and we were all in big Dodge motors shed that I was camped in, and we, what you just said, had our beds made and all our blankets folded at the, up the right way and,

03:00 you know, all standing at attention alongside and he put his head in, and something didn't suited this Blamey and he said, "The place looks like a brothel," and one bright spark said, "Well, you ought to know." Jesus, we all got, and I thought we was all going to go in the boob over it, you know, because the bloke wouldn't own up that said it. And that's fair dinkum, this bloke roared out, "You ought to know."

What did Blamey do?

03:30 I can't remember, he went red in the face and the officers got him out quick smart before he climbed the whole shed because he was a, he definitely was a playboy.

Do you reckon that guy that said "You ought to know?" knew about Blamey.

Yeah, because everybody knew, all Victoria knew, it was in the papers and everything.

What is it about Victoria and prostitutes and gangs and underworld crime?

04:00 I'll tell you what, it's an underworld capital at the moment, that Victoria, they're shooting the, right, left and centre.

And you want to go back there?

Oh I'm not mixed up, they're alright to blokes like me, they'd give you a quid rather than take one off you, those underworld blokes. It's just that they're own, it's control of the drug market, that's what all the shooting is about.

So, okay, how were you doing those kind of,

04:30 **I know they were important, but for a lot of blokes they were unnecessary, those chores that you had to do like make your bed with a blankets and, how did you have to do it, hospital corners and things like that?**

Oh that's army routine, that's part of your training, that, everything's got to be uniform shape. It's, which I suppose is only natural with a mob of blokes, if you just let them go, they'd have things all ways and, yeah, your bed's got to be made, rolled your blankets

05:00 a certain way and everything, you know, all stacked at the end and not, that's good training, that.

Did any of the men sleep on the floor so they wouldn't mess up their bed?

Not to my knowledge, no, not unless you come home drunk and couldn't find your bed or something.

But you couldn't actually drink in the camp could you? At Puckapunyal?

No, the era I was there, it was a dry canteen, you couldn't, no,

05:30 there was no grog there, but the first wet canteen I struck was at, Beit Jirja in Palestine. And then the quartermaster sergeant that was running it got into trouble, he started, got his fingers caught in the till and so he put a match in it and burnt her down one night. The whole lot went up, there was all these bottles of beer laying around in the sand that had been boiled and then went cold

06:00 and the blokes were getting them and, you know, the colonel had to stop them because it would make you crook. But he burnt her down.

Deliberately?

Yeah, yeah, oh yes, he'd been fiddling the till a bit and nothing, you know, was going broke and he was in trouble so that was the only way out.

The colonel was in trouble.

No, no, this quartermaster sergeant who was running it was in trouble so he stuck a match in it or got somebody else to do it.

06:30 **Oh wow, like an insurance claim.**

Exactly the same thing yeah. Make sure all the books are burnt and that, you know.

Now when you were in Puckapunyal, did you go on bivouacs?

Oh yes, you'd go out for two and three days at a time.

How did you fare on those?

Alright, yeah, alright.

Where would they take you in Victoria to bivouacs?

07:00 All out around the country around, like Puckapunyal, like Tooborac, Seymour, Tallarook, all those places, just out in the bush.

Was it something that you enjoyed to do Ron?

Yes, yeah. It's like a big picnic, yeah, it's good.

They've got this thing at the moment, well I know they had it ten years ago, that you could pay money and they'd drop you somewhere with no food

07:30 **and see if you survived. I don't like the idea of that myself but is that sort of what a bivouac was? Like out you go and …?**

No, they, I suppose if you was in separate, if you was in a commando unit or something like that, yeah they possibly would, but not with an infantry, like our bivouacs was sort of done just on battalion strength. But if you was

08:00 in commando units, well you was going to get, say, dropped behind enemy lines in a parachute or something like that and you had to survive yourself, live off the land, blah, blah, blah. Yes, they would, yeah, we got a, they issued us with a tin of chocolate about, oh about that square and about that long, which they called an emergency ration. And if you was caught without this, this chocolate would keep you, it was that rich

08:30 you could only eat a little bit of it at a time but it would keep you going for quite some number of days.

So it's not like today's Cadbury Family Block?

No, no it's a special concentrated chocolate. And then you had, like, your little first aid kit, you know, one thing and another.

What did the chocolate taste like?

Look, I don't ever remember eating it because I was never in the position that

09:00 I had to eat it. And, you had to sort of get something to open the tin with and, you know, at kit inspection, if you couldn't produce this tin of chocolate, they'd what to know, thought you'd sold it or something, so I never, ever bothered to try it because I never ever wanted it. If I wanted a chocolate that, I had enough money to buy it.

Isn't it funny that the chocolate was in a tin though, but I suppose it would melt.

Yeah, well it was a special concentrated chocolate,

09:30 I don't know what, it was an army ration, but it would, you could survive on it probably for days if you was cut off from your unit or something like that.

Did any kind of accidents occur in your training at Puckapunyal?

Oh yeah, I seen, I think there was a bloke drowned one day and, I don't know what, they were probably getting across a river or something. Yeah, there would have been numerous accidents, but I just can't

10:00 individualise on any one of them because I just can't remember them unless it happened to someone – the only one I can remember is a fellow, a bloke called Frank Leighton. I was with the transport mob for a while when we trained in Puckapunyal and we had horses and we used to take them out of a morning and of a day and exercise them and Puckapunyal was full of those little grey kangaroos,

10:30 little like wallaby things. And we used to take off, chase them on these horses, and one day we caught one and he ran up into a hollow log or something and this bloke was off his horse trying to get him and the horse took fright and ran past and kicked as it ran past and hit him in the chest and knocked him rotten, but that's about the only one I can think of.

Did he get back on his horse?

No, I think we had to take him to the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] or something, he was pretty crook for a while,

11:00 but he died a few years ago, I went to his funeral.

I guess that's the thing with getting older and going to funerals, that's, it's ….

Reminder when yours is coming.

I guess you got to have a kind of attitude about it.

No good worrying about it. We've all got to go there.

What's the saying, death and taxes, you can't – ?

Those are the two things you can't miss.

11:30 **The Puckapunyal, did it prepare you for what you did actually come across in the desert later on in Alamein and in Tobruk?**

No, I suppose in some ways it did, but the training was altogether different because we went in from a bush atmosphere of scrub and Australian bush at it's best as you would know it

12:00 into sand, now, I mean, it's two entirely different kinds of, that's what I said when the Germans came into it, the desert when the Italians were beat, they brought a fresh division out from Australia that had been training in this, these bush conditions, that would have been suited, ideally, to go and straight to Greece, they had them there ready to put on a ship. They brought out a division that was trained in sand and

12:30 used sand, to desert fighting, they pulled us back and put a bush division into the sand a sand division into the bush in Greece, it was all stupid. No wonder we nearly lost the war.

I wonder why they did that, were they conscious of that?

I don't know, just high brass or somebody sitting behind a desk said, "This will be the best way to do it."

Okay so then you learnt on your bivouacs

13:00 **pretty much how to get by and ….**

Yeah, the basics of it, you would, yes, but see, we would go out on a bivouac in the desert, and you'd be given a water bottle full of water and that had to last you for possibly two days, to teach you to, you know, conserve water and handle the stretch of drinking when you were thirsty

13:30 and those type of things. But in the desert, every time you put your foot down you went up to your ankles in sand and, you know, when you're lumping a twelve pound pack or something with a rifle and ammunition, it's, you've, you know, we were that fighting fit that we could have fought Joe Louis.

Sorry, who would you have fought?

Oh, I just said Joe Louis, the fighter, the heavyweight champion of the world,

14:00 you wouldn't remember him, you're probably to young.

My father would have known.

Yeah, he would have known him, it was only a few years ago.

So, what about food in the army, did you like the, what do you call it, the Bully Beef?

The food? Sometimes it was alright and sometimes it was bloody awful. We used to get in one camp, in Helwan, was

14:30 in Egypt, I think, and we come down and we used to get issued with, or the cooks did, with a two pound ten or something of John Hunter bacon. And what they used to do was just boil the coppers and just put the whole tin in, not take it out and fry it and cook it, just put the whole tin in, take it and then put it on the tables and when you opened it. If you could get something to wrap around it and open the top of it with your bayonet, all the oil in it would just run out like hair oil and it was violent, you know.

15:00 And then we used to get something else, they used to call it camel shit, and that's exactly what it looked and tasted like. I forget how, that come in a tin too, I think. But on the whole, you know, sometimes it was good, sometimes it was crook.

Boiled bacon wouldn't be very nice.

No, no, boiled bacon, that's what it was.

Did you have these, I know you came back into your

15:30 **unit having, getting your dad's permission and everything, were you with these same men throughout the war? I mean I know you got taken POW [Prisoner of War], but, were you with any of these same men?**

Yes, it was during the fighting period, yes. I, no I left, I left the transport section. There was two of our fellows come over from the same district as from where I came, lived, from and they went to a

16:00 rifle company, so I transferred and went to rifle company because, sort of, there was two blokes I knew well.

And were they all Victorians?

Yeah, all from Narre Warren North, they were, yeah.

And was that the first time at Puckapunyal that you'd actually handled a gun?

No, I could shoot rabbits when I was twelve year old. I was, I could shoot shotguns, was good on them, yeah.

16:30 I used to lay, I always had a gun when I was a kid, only to shoot rabbits and hares and that type of thing, never went around shooting people or anything.

So the Bullmans would actually allow you to?

Oh yeah, yeah, it was a different era, a kid was trusted, you know, you're allowed to go swimming in waterholes and all that, which you know is pretty risky but no, they, I sort

17:00 of was taught to swim.

It just seems that life then, the children then was so unsupervised.

Yeah, they were.

Whereas today they're so supervised.

Yeah and the kid virtually, they had to learn, they had to start working and helping on the farms from the day they could, you know, I mean it's, helping milking and running the farm, there was no, you know, there was no easy ride because

17:30 it was a tough era and everybody had to work.

So tell us then about being in Puckapunyal and getting your orders that you're going to take off, you're going to go on the ship and go overseas, where were you, do you remember, when you found out?

We always knew we were going overseas, it was just a matter of when. And they couldn't keep it quiet very long because

18:00 the rumour always sort of got out and then when all the equipment started to get taken away and taken down to the wharf, you knew it was pretty close.

And that would have been exciting, I suppose, for a bunch of …?

Oh yeah, thought it was Christmas.

So you got this luxury cabin. Did it have a, you mentioned it had all the amenities and I somehow in my mind that it had like a mini bar fridge?

No, no there was no mini

18:30 bar fridges in that era. No, this was just a basic, a basic cabin, what a middle class person would have had if they went over on a sea trip. You know, they had wash basins and a shower and there was bunks, there was, no, there were two bunks. You sort of had mirrors and a dressing, little dressing table and showers and all that business, yeah, and it was ….

19:00 **And a toilet?**

Yes, yes, I think there was a toilet yeah, I'm pretty certain yeah. It was a la carte conditions for that era. It was the Strathaird, it was the old Strathaird.

Can you spell that for me, the name of the ship?

No I can't, I'm sorry, it was STAREID or something.

19:30 I think it's, the Strathaird line is still going somewhere.

So where were you on the ship, do you remember, were you up high or down quite low?

I think about middle deck somewhere, because I remember we had those air condition things that came in, so we might have been down a bit. No I can't remember actually

20:00 what, the seventh AGH [Australian General Hospital] hospital unit went with us. That was the nurses and the doctors and all the hospital gear that was going over and they had all the, the A one, yeah, we were down because I remember they had all the top decks, the nurses and that. Because I copped, between Melbourne and Fremantle, across the Bight, was very rough,

20:30 and I copped almost a permanent sentry position on the stairs, because all other ranks were forbidden going up where the nurses and that were. Only the officers was allowed, because we'd be green with envy, they'd be parked around them life boats and everything at night and those poor buggers would be down below, you know, hoping and wishing, but nothing happened.

How many nurses were there?

Oh, full, well a,

21:00 I don't know what nursing, whether it's battalions or, it was a lot of them because it was a whole hospital unit going and that was the boat they were sent on. They were on the same boat as we were.

But the officers wanted them for themselves probably?

Yeah, the, the officers was allowed up to socialise with them but no other ranks were.

Were you seasick?

No, that was the reason I copped the permanent, almost permanent

21:30 sentry post, because half of the boat got crook, it was very rough. And I, well I don't get seasick, I never get seasick. I could put me in the middle of the ocean in a rowing boat and I still don't get seasick.

So now Fremantle was the first stop over though.

Yeah, we picked up, in our convoy there was the Strathaird, a boat called the Ettrick, a boat called the,

22:00 **it was the Cameronia I think, and another one was the Westralia, well we picked up the Westralia with the Western Australian blokes on in Fremantle. There was four ships in the convoy.**

What were the Western Australian blokes like?

What were they like? Good blokes, yeah all good blokes, same as us, same as us really. You know, you get your hard cases and your different types of blokes in all states.

22:30 **Do the officers that you were involved with, did they treat you alright on the trip over?**

Yeah, yeah, good. We had one bloke I was a bit frightened of, a bloke called, Harry Marshall was his name, we used to call him the Monk, he had a face like a monkey but he, he was a little bit, he always had me bluffed because I was only very young you know.

23:00 But other than that, no, the officers were good, were real good.

And did you get to go ashore, in Fremantle?

Yes, had a day's, full day's leave in Fremantle.

Do you remember what you did?

Yes, I was, for that, one of those photos I told you, that young bloke I was with, Fred Mitchell, he had relations, and we caught a taxi out, we had their address and we caught a taxi out to some suburb in

Fremantle,

23:30 I don't, or Perth, I just forget which it is. And he had their address and he took me and another bloke with him, and they give us, his wife cooked a dinner for us, then he put us in a car and took us around and showed us all the sights around Perth and that, and took us back to the boat, we had to be back at nine o'clock on the boat so they took us back in their car.

Sounds like a nice day.

Yeah, it was a good day,

24:00 terrific day, yeah, remember it well.

Is he still around, Fred?

No, he died, he died about, oh I don't know, about six, seven years ago. His wife was up here the other day matter of fact, she was a Queenslander.

And what was the food like on the ship, was it better than what you were getting back in Victoria?

Yeah it was, the food was alright, it was on a,

24:30 I would say it would have been a slight bit better than army food, yeah, but it was quite good.

And what about keeping fit, were the men drilled on …?

Yeah, they drilled every day. I was a bit lucky I, there was another friend of mine, name of Stan Cooper, he come from Sale and he got the job as the permanent mess orderly, going over. And after we left, Perth I think it was, he had to have a mate and he said to me,

25:00 "Do you want a good job?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Come with me, I've got a permanent mess orderly job." So I went with him and they had all the tables there set out on this mess deck. So this was a square and we used to, used to have to be up a bit earlier than the ordinary blokes, go down the galley and take the crockery up for our table, just the one table, like Amberley blokes was on it, and, then carry the food out for them, then when they were finished,

25:30 pick up the dishes and take them back to the galley, and every third day we had to get picked for doing the washing up and had to sponge a little bit of the floor around each place, we drew chalk marks to make sure we didn't go over into the next bloke's place. And, you know, I, and then of a, well we'd finished about nine o'clock and we'd be going up the back of the deck, reading a book, and all the other blokes would be, just be going up drilling, you know, in squads. Yeah they drilled the buggery out of them.

26:00 **Well what about you, did you do any, well I suppose that would have kept you fit being an orderly anyway?**

Yeah, it, we never worked as hard as the other fellows at drilling did you know.

You mentioned before that you got five shillings a day when you first got in there. So you just have got, did you get extra money for being an orderly.

No, no, there were some units you did get specialist pay like the LAD [Light Aid Detachment] bloke,

26:30 the fellows that fix motor cars, fixed the trucks and kept them in, the machinery and that, mechanisation, going. They, I think they were on a specialist pay, but no, I was every, on a privates pay.

Did you have an allocation, was it called an allocation, when you allocate some money back home?

Yes you had to, for any parent, to get a,

27:00 an army pension type of thing, you had to allot three shillings of your five shillings pay for them and then the army would give them, I forget how much, I don't know, but that only left you two bob a day and it was a bit light, and so I never, I stuck to my mates, you know, practically all the time.

Had you saved any by the time the war was over?

Yeah, because our pay went on all the time we were prisoners of war.

27:30 In our pay book, we come out with about, it was either five, six, hundred dollars, pound, it wasn't dollars, it was pound. No, it could have been five hundred and fifty but I think it was near enough to six hundred pound I come out with.

Still, I suppose, being a POW [Prisoner of War], you know, wasn't as much fun as …

As spending that six hundred pounds.

28:00 **Spending the six hundred pounds. So, okay now, so overseas, Western Australia was the last stop in Australia, where was the next stop on your way over?**

Colombo.

Colombo, where, the cigars area?

Beg your pardon?

Where the cigars are, you know, the Columbian cigars.

No, no, it's now Sri Lanka isn't it?

Oh I don't know, I failed geography.

No, Colombo is now Sri Lanka.

28:30 **Oh I know what you're talking about, sorry. How was that?**

It was alright. Me and this bloke I was doing the mess orderlying with, we went to the race meeting in Colombo and we went broke or I had a, about equivalent to one of their pounds left, and we were coming out of the course and there was a two-up on, a couple of our blokes was running a

29:00 two-up game, and he said, "Eh, give us that quid you've got," he said, because, you know, we were both, that was all we had. He said, "I'll build her up." He done it in the first spin. And anyhow we got, we bludged a ride back to the town, the main town, and we struck our officer walking up the street with two or three other officers, he said, "Hang on." He's a character this bloke and he went up and he threw him a salute and he said, "Excuse me sir," he said,

29:30 "Could you lend us a couple of quid?" and he said, "Oh you're making it a big hard coup," but he said, "Alright." Anyhow, he give us a couple of quid, we paid him back, you know, next pay, but he was a funny man, bloke named Jack Young that officer, good fellow.

It's nice of him to loan you a couple of quid, what did you do with the couple of quid?

Oh I couldn't remember now, we threw it in grog or something. Yeah.

Well you were only in Colombo, what, overnight?

30:00 Yeah, I think we were. I remember the Strathaird had a bit of trouble getting into the harbour there, it was, it wasn't a deep harbour and she churned up a lot of yellow muddy sort of water. And all these little, they're sort of a small native type of bloke, they all come around in boats and they were selling us vegetables and we let a rope down and they'd, with the money and then they'd put vegetables in

30:30 and, we'd pull it up, it wasn't vegetables, it was fruit. Anyway, one, a couple of them, got on board and two or three of our blokes went up the to deck and they were champion divers these fellows. And they'd throw a coin into this muddy, murky water, and these little native fellows would dive from the top deck of the Strathaird, and when you're, the top deck of a boat is like getting up on top of the

31:00 Taj Mahal, it's that high, and they would dive into this water, this murky water, and they'd, nine times out of ten, get that coin. And our blokes couldn't do the right thing, they were wrapping pennies up in silver paper and stamping it on it and the poor little buggers thought it was two shillings and they'd dive after it, when they got it they found out it was only a penny wrapped up in silver paper and that. But that's an Australian to a tee, that's an Australian to a tee.

31:30 **So these were kids jumping?**

No ,these were men, they're men, but they seem to be a sort of a small type of native they were. Oh no, they were champion divers, probably blokes that done pearl diving and all that, you know.

And now you, after Colombo you went on, and did you have any more stops before you went to Egypt?

Yeah, we went to, we was going to go into Aden, I think we went to Aden, but they wouldn't

32:00 let us off because there was trouble there, and they were crooked on the British over something and they were frightened of, you know, we'd get into trouble, so they wouldn't let us land. And then from Aden we went through the Red Sea because I remember they put us on, oh they were issuing us with glasses of this special lime drink or something because it was terribly hot. And then from the Red Sea, we went up

32:30 into the Suez Canal, we got off at a place called El Kantara.

What was your first impressions there?

What of, of the Middle-East? Well we got there, I think we got there at night, and we got off the boat at night and there was, we were pushed, they give us a feed of mashed potatoes and sausages and we got put into like dog box trains, you know,

33:00 that you see are goods trains around here. And the damn things, you'd reckon they had square wheels because they thump for the next, all night we was in them, and they had a prepared Australian camp

right up the desert. We went to, my battalion went to a place called Beit Jirja. That's where we done all our desert training, in there, before we went back down to Egypt.

Beit Jirja?

33:30 Beit Jirja, don't ask me to spell it. Biraj, oh no, I think I might have it there somewhere anyway, I could if you really want it, I could get it.

I'll get it off you later. Okay, so in Beit Jirja, that's where your battalion did your training.

Yeah, our battalion done that training, yeah. But there was a row of camps, there was DS and E, Kylo 89.

34:00 Yeah, there was a string of camps with all different units, you know, right up.

Were there any sort of different smells or different, temperature was very different from Australia?

I suppose the air it would have been, but I can't remember ever feeling it that much. We were issued with

34:30 all summer clothing like shorts and light shirts and all that business. But no, I can't, I remember, well it must have been because I got terribly sunburnt. So yeah, it would have been hot, yeah.

It must have been hard for you, being a red head out in, there in the sun. What about your hat, didn't you have a …?

Yeah, we had our army hat but after about, oh half the time, you'd go out without it, or just around the camp and that, you know.

35:00 I got picked for battalion guard one night and you had to do, they inspected before you, a battalion guard of a sergeant major and he was a real soldier, you know, pretty nasty type, he used to be a, in the black and tans or something in Ireland when the big trouble was on,

35:30 and anyhow, I went to the MO [Medical Officer] and I said, "Look, I can't, I'm picked for guard," I said I, you know, and sunburnt, and I couldn't shave, I had, you had to be spotless. He said, "Don't worry." He said, "I'll give you a chit [signed voucher]." So he give me a chit and I had all this yellow stuff over me face and the growth. When he got to me to inspect me, he went red in the face, but he must have woke I was armed with a chit, you know. And, anyway, he had

36:00 to hold your thumb in the butt of the rifle and he looked down to see if the rifle was clean and he picked me on that and he get me on something, but I never got into trouble over it.

What is a chit?

A, the MO would write a note to the effect that I couldn't shave, see, because you had to be spotless. So he give me this chit to say that I, you know, me face was too sore and I couldn't use a razor.

I see.

36:30 He said to show him that if he picked me over it.

I see, yeah, but what about sunscreen, didn't they have sunscreen in those days?

Yeah, but it was no good for me because they had, remember they had my face plastered in all yellow stuff but never done much good and I think I put it on after I was sort of burnt, you know.

So they didn't have anything to prevent …

No, they never had sunscreen or anything like that, or, dark glasses were unheard of. You'd, anyway, you'd be out, if you were on a bivouac you'd be out in the desert for days and you, you know you'd, it'd all melt

37:00 anyway, you couldn't use it.

This yellow stuff you used to put on, could you rub it in or did it …?

No it was just sort of painted on, yeah, I suppose a bit of it went in, yeah. But it would be just like, oh I don't know, some oily sort of stuff, you know.

Well, it must have done some good because you don't have a lot of, you know you see a lot of veterans and they have big globs of their skin taken off.

37:30 That's right, yeah, oh no, I survived it yeah, but I was terribly sore.

So tell us, then, about, now would you sleep in tents at this camp?

Yes.

And how many men per tent?

I think there was one, two, three, about eight men to a tent I think. They had, in this camp where we trained, we filled sandbags and we had sandbags and the tents all

38:00 sunk down into the sand. And sandbags up around that high, right round the outside of the tent. There's a, Italians were doing a bit of bombing but they never hit anything, safest place be was where they were trying to hit. It's right, they used to be that high.

What about, I've heard a bit about the natives there being, into selling oranges and fruit, did you come across any?

Yeah, we did.

38:30 **What did you buy? Did you buy anything?**

We were forbidden to buy anything off them, because there was all grown and they've got mud villages over there, well they did have, I suppose they still have, and the whole community lives inside the mud villages, they usually got walls around them and that. And everything, and like, goats lived with them, pigs lived with them, WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s lived with them and they grow all these own vegetables but they grow it

39:00 with their own excreta. And you could, the whole battalion could go down with some violent disease and we were, was forbidden to ever get anything off them. But we had one bloke at a place called Helwan. We was right on the, the tent I was in was right on the railway line, and these fellows used to come around but they were forbidden to come over the railway line. Selling these, oh they had these big

39:30 oranges and watermelons and this bloke used to con them across, and he'd, as soon as he got them across, he'd take the fruit off them then kick their behinds back over the line because they shouldn't have been there, and we used to eat that stuff, some of us.

Did you get sick?

No, we didn't, it's a wonder we didn't, but we didn't or we never ever gorged or done a lot of it, but this bloke, this, Frank Hall is his name, I've got a photo of him there, he won an MM [Military Medal] in the islands,

40:00 he used to con them across, he used to call them George, side Sieda George, and he'd get them across and then take the fruit off them and then kick their behinds back because they shouldn't have been there and they knew it, you know. They woke up to him to the finish. But oh these villages, they were ….

They smelt?

Oh yeah, well I never went right into one but I went right around one a couple of times. But everything lived in there, that was their whole world,

40:30 WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, pigs, goats camels, you know, and no, sat toilet just wherever they were, oh God it was putrid.

I'd like to talk to you more about that.

Tape 4

00:34 **We were just talking about the locals around that Beit Jirja area. What did the men think of them, what did they say about them?**

What, our blokes? We used to treat them as a bit of a joke, I mean, we shouldn't have, probably just as good as us, but, it was the environment that they lived in. You know, their main transport was on the back of a donkey and,

01:00 oh I don't know, they was, they got that way they dressed because their belief is that the second coming of Christ will be born to a man and they used to wear these baggy-assed britches, all that rot, you know. And our blokes used to sort of make fun of them. But no, we sort of never, the real, there was a real dinkum Arab that lived in the desert, the Bedouins,

01:30 was a fellow that you had to watch. They tried to put the yarn over us, it was only propaganda on the part of our officers and that, they reckoned they could roll you ten yards in your sleep and not wake you up. And in the tents, where we lived, in the tents, the pole, they had a couple of poles and the one I was on, you used to have to take the bolt out of, this is how silly our blokes was, you had to take the bolt out of your rifle,

02:00 stand the rifles in a ring right around this pole and then run a chain through the trigger guards and they'd have to be locked. Now, seven out of ten blokes, you probably, you'd have, you'd go to sleep and you'd take the bolt out of your rifle and you was half drunk, it'd finish up it was half buried in the sand, you couldn't find it, you didn't know where it was. But if you got onto the right Arabs, these Bedouin fellows, a rifle would make a lot of money,

02:30 so you had to guard it with your life, because if you lost your rifle, you was almost court martialled, and they reckoned you'd sold it to an Arab.

Did anyone lose their rifle?

No, not to my knowledge, no one that, but I tell you what, we lost a few bolts, we was digging in sand and, everything trying to find these bolts for these rifles.

And did you get any time off or leave during this period?

Yeah. We used to get leave into Tel Aviv,

03:00 Jerusalem, I've been on the Wailing Wall, into Gaza, where all the trouble is now, and, oh, Tel Aviv, yeah they were the two main areas we used to go in, yeah.

And did you get up to any shenanigans?

Yeah, yeah.

03:30 **What are we talking about here?**

Could be talking about anything. you're not going to trap me into that one because this might get out and my wife, can you get these, we can get videos of this can't we?

Oh maybe some time down the track, yeah.

My wife will send for one for bloody sure.

So that's a no comment there.

04:00 **So what about just drinking and mateship, like what kind of stuff would you get up to?**

They used to have stuff Arak that'd drive you mad. But no, we only drank, I only drank mainly their beer. And we used to, first time we were there we ever struck beer in cans we thought it was horrible, it was, it used to be that English, Bass they used to call it. Oh, can about the size of our cans now,

04:30 but to get beer in cans at that time we thought was, you know, wasn't right, but that's how far in front of us they were. But, I forget what they're, I can't remember what we was getting, I think you could get Australian beer and that but it was pretty pricey you know. But, oh yeah, we had some great nights in Cairo.

05:00 I seen the original can-can [dance] done in Cairo, I couldn't describe it, but she was red hot and she'd stand your hair right on bloody end.

Well, without being specific, what was it like being a young bloke to see some of these shows?

Oh horrified, never seen anything like it in our life. You know, innocent kids going into something like that, you come out fully grown up.

What was the kind of decor and arrangement

05:30 **of these kind of clubs, what was it like inside them?**

Oh yeah they were, they were pretty well, you know, pretty well up to date of that era, you know. They had stages and dancing girls and blah, blah, blah and, yeah.

06:00 **How was your mateship developing through this period, through these bonding sessions and …?**

They were alright, some handled it better than others. Yeah.

Well, I might move on. Tell us

06:30 **how prepared you felt, like, no, tell us the story first of all, you're in Tel Aviv having a good time and all that, then the Italians enter the war. Tell us what happened to you?**

I was on leave in Tel Aviv when the Italians declared war, and the provos [Provosts – Military Police], the English provos and that, our own provos, went around and rounded us all up and sent us back to camp.

07:00 We wasn't Acwilly [AWL – Absent Without Leave] or anything, because we had leave passes, but we didn't know that they'd been recalling us and we had, that night we had to go out in the desert and dig slit trenches and man them up, you know, for doing different shifts and that and, other than that, there was no …. Until we, they took us down to Egypt, we went down to Egypt and we struck the Italians the first time at

07:30 oh, Hellfire Pass [Halfaya] I think it was. But we didn't have any trouble with them, they, throw a packet of crackers, you know, and come out, but they had beautiful fortifications, and Bardia and Tobruk and that, they had underground railways and hydraulic guns that would come up and fire and go down again, and they should have been taken, but

08:00 our blokes didn't have much trouble. We got them, in twelve hours, I think, in Tobruk. The attack started about dawn and we had them all out by there, then, because it was gone by nine o'clock at night.

Well, tell us about personally the first time you saw action, describe it from your personal point of view and

08:30 **where were you and what happened.**

The closest, my first I mean, Bardia and Tobruk and that, as far as I was concerned, it was, you know, it wasn't any hand to hand business, not to my particular company anyway, or area, but Crete was crook, we done, the

09:00 first real man to man job was a bayonet charge at Suda Bay, the Germans had got right up onto us and he was hammering hell out of us and one of our officers said, "Righto fellows, this is it," and we fixed our bayonets and he led the charge and we fixed a couple of companies of them in an olive grove one day. But

09:30 I still say, with that I'd seen before in the desert, that was me first initial baptism to hard, I remember the bloke alongside of me copped one right in the face, you know, that far away and it could have been me and blokes were going down like nine pins and you was jumping over dead Jerries [Germans] and that was the hardest, you know, sort of,

10:00 I become from a man to a boy in that era. A boy to a man, I mean.

We'll come to that a bit later. I guess I better talk about that desert times, first up, just to a bit of order, so tell us what happened in the desert from your point of view, like were you, did you have to fire a shot at all or what?

Oh yeah, but

10:30 there never seemed to be any, other than Tobruk and Bardia, and Tobruk was, yeah, you sort of distanced, more distance fighting you know, but once they were out, the Italians just took off and we were flat out catching them, you couldn't get close enough to them to shoot at them because they were gone. But, then we got as far

11:00 as the Tripletranium [Tripoli?] border and Rommel's mob come in. We were wondering what the hell had struck us, we didn't know it was them for a while, we said, "These fellows don't want to run any more," you know, and then we were the blokes that done the running.

What was the sight like, what would you see of the Italians? Would you see convoys in the distance, what exactly were you seeing?

The first lot I seen was thousands of them marching one behind the other as far as the eye could see.

11:30 And up the front was one Australian, walking with, in front with a fixed bayonet and another one walking right at the back with a fixed bayonet and there were thousands of them. All just pouring out, all didn't want to fight, give it up, prisoners of war. They taken them back to, took them back to a place called Fort Corpoza and they penned them all up there and then I think they shipped a lot of them out to Australia.

What did you think of this sight,

12:00 **of them all, two men with bayonets?**

We said, "Well, if this is what the fight's going to be like, bring it on," type of thing, it was just ridiculous. But we hadn't, we never seen, I still say we never seen much hard fighting with the Italians because they just sort of didn't want to be in it, you know.

Well, were any of the men on your side getting wounded, killed at all?

12:30 Yeah, we had a few killed, yeah, not in any great numbers or anything, but yeah, I mean, where there's bullets flying around, everyone's got to get hit sooner or later I suppose. No, there was no real loss of men, you know, and, like Gallipoli or anything like that. The German was the bloke that

13:00 sort of found you out, you know.

Well, what happened exactly, you said you were chasing the Italians and then struck Rommel and what happened exactly, what was the change?

Like what do you mean, the battle?

Yeah, you said you were chasing the Italians and then all of a sudden you met Rommel's mob.

Yeah, well, well after Bardia and Tobruk we went on and the next place we stayed

13:30 they give us a blow, we stopped at a place called Giovanni Buta [?] I think it was, and it was like an oasis type of country in the desert, there must have been underground springs or water somewhere and there

had been an Italian, Italians or something stationed there because, see, they ruled North Africa, but there

14:00 was a big dairying place, they grew, you know, crops and dates and had farms, pigs and all that type of thing, big army barracks, and we stopped there and they give us a blow for a week or something, and because I remember we was going around shooting pigeons and pigs and that and boiling them up, you know, cooking them, barbecuing them, until we seen a pig eating a dead Italian one day and that stopped

14:30 us eating pigs. The, we had a pretty good time there, sort of, and the Italians used to drink this, had these big casks of wine, but they used to drink it as it should be drunk, you know, with mineral water and everything. Our blokes, we got gallons of that, we used to be drunk as monkeys, and we went on from there. I think the next stop was Benghazi,

15:00 they put a bit of a fight at Benghazi, then we went onto a place called Agatibear [Biet Jirja?], it was over the Tripletranean border and that's when Rommel's mob, when we struck Rommel's mob, they were all landing at Junee and Tunisia, and he pushed the tanks through on us and we had a, oh I think few Pommy tanks with us but not enough to try and stop him, you know.

15:30 And then that's when they withdrew us all back to Alexandria. And they put the fresh division from Australia that they just landed, they come up and took over from us and we come back and went to Greece.

Why did they withdraw you?

I wouldn't know. Look, I wouldn't know and nobody else knows, if they'd have left us where, as I said before

16:00 if they'd have left us where we were, not that we could have held Rommel anyway with, you know, with what we had, but it would have saved a hell of a lot of trouble, and the fresh division would have put up just as good a show as we put up in Greece, because we were outnumbered ten to one and on equipment. And it's just a big mess up.

Well, tell us about that first striking of Rommel's

16:30 **mob, of the tanks coming. Like, what did you see, what actually happened from your point of view?**

First we struck was his aeroplanes, was the main thing. These Messerschmitt, 109s, 1010s, they was sort of, the 109 was a straight out fighter and the 1010 was a fighter bomber. But, see, we had no air support at all, they were just flying around as though it was Sunday afternoon, and the minute you stuck your head off,

17:00 up, you're nine times out of the, then you'd get it blown off, because they were just going around like a fox shoot. And then the tanks followed through on that and our mob moved out, we were on, they, we started to come back, I just, I wasn't, the like, I don't know what the rear guard struck, but we didn't strike much fighting with Rommel because they pulled us out.

What was it like to undergo,

17:30 **like, air raid strafing for the first time?**

Oh, bloody frightening, I [they] had what they call a Stuka [dive bomber], and they reckoned they could put a bomb in a forty-four gallon drum because they used to come straight down, you know, just vertical like that. And they used to have sirens on them and they'd scream and it was just as though they'd let a mob of bombs go and you were waiting for them to hit. They were deadly, if they knew where you were, you wouldn't want to be there, because it was like

18:00 their mortars, they give them three shots and they'd blow you right out of it. Of course they were the best equipped army in the world and they had oodles of it, that, you know, tanks and that, but squadrons of tanks used to come through, we had no hope.

How did this strike you after the Italians, after seeing all the Italians?

Wondering what in the hell hit us.

18:30 Wasn't so good any more, we found out what war was all about.

Were many killed on these sort of raids, these strafing and these bombing raids?

Yeah, there would have been, yeah, yeah, yeah we lost a few blokes.

How were you coping with this, seeing men die around you for the first time?

Look, in the finish you just had to think, 'Well thank Christ it's not me,' type of thing, you know.

19:00 You got past, you got past anything like, yeah, it affected you for a while but, I seen two brothers killed at Suda Bay the morning of the bayonet charge and I, you know, it affected me a little bit, but in the

finish, I think, 'Well,' you know, 'thank God it's not me,' type of thing.

And so what were you thinking as they withdrew you from Benghazi to Alexandria?

19:30 It was just another phase of the war, you know, we didn't, I think we had an idea we was going to get sent to Greece and I think we sort of, [were] looking forward to it because we was going to get out of that sand for a while, you know, and it'd be a

20:00 different atmosphere, something like, well in civvy life you'd be used to a bit of bush or something like that. But we didn't know that we were going to strike the full force of the German Army. But, oh, the fifth column, and that was that bad in Greece, and I remember Piraeus Harbour, you're getting blown up before half of them got off the boats and that.

20:30 **Well tell us about arriving in Greece, what were your first impressions? How did you get there?**

I went over on a boat called the Cameronia, I think it was, was, yeah. It was only, it was only a couple of, one night or two nights, I just forget, we got off at Piraeus, at the Harbour there, the port and went into a transit camp for one night and then we got put onto a

21:00 train and sent up the front, up the, the eighth battalion was already up there, and they sent us up and we only got as far as a place called Larissa and the fifth column was that bad that the train stopped at this Larissa and we had to get out, and his aircraft come over in pitch black at night and pinpointed right where we were camped. Anyway, we had, they give us the order to

21:30 pull back and we, the engine was still there but the driver had blown through and I don't blame him because there's sparks flying out and flames, she was a sitting shot. Anyhow, one of our blokes, a bloke named Edwards from, he was in my company, he could drive a train and him and a couple of other blokes fired her up and we all jumped on and it took us back to a place called the,

22:00 Don McCass Pass [?], and then we just fought our way back, you know, as we, like, he'd keep coming till he engaged us and it might be a five or six hour skirmish or fight, you know, and then we'd have to pull back, we were getting too big of a hiding. And till we got back and we got back to a place called, we got off at a place called, I've got it written over there.

22:30 And we got taken out, I got off, you know, got off and this destroyer come in and got us and took us out to a boat called the Costa Rica and I remember climbing up these rope ladders and pitch black at night with all the equipment, it was a bit rough. And we was on her for, and she got

23:00 going and all the next day the last bomb of the last two or three of the day got us and they sunk her and I got off on the little destroyer called the Heroine. He had too big of a load on, so they dropped us, this other, dropped us all at Crete, and that's how we become to be there because he said he couldn't survive another torpedo attack in the Mediterranean.

Well tell us, in Greece itself,

23:30 **the mainland, did you, you have a chance to set up and try to face the German advance at all?**

Yeah, well the eighth battalion, not, I wasn't in the eighth battalion but they fought him at, oh there's a place up further, up past Larissa I just forget the name of the place, that they put up a good fight against him. Then we tried to block him at each pass

24:00 but he, you know, the weight of numbers and tanks, you had nothing to fight them with, and they'd gradually hurl you out of there and we got, yeah, that's, I just sort of a bit vague on the last part of it but it was just sort of a stalling situation, you try and hold him as fast as you can and then run, until we got back when they got us off that night.

24:30 But then we got sunk, got torpedoed the next day and got landed back on Suda Bay.

When you're trying to hold the Germans, how would you do it exactly, like how would you set up the defences?

You never had time to set up defences, digging slit trenches was all you had time to do. I mean, you couldn't put up barbed wire entanglements or anything like that because you didn't have the stuff to do it with, you didn't have the men to do it with, you wouldn't have

25:00 had time, I, we was holding a bridge, our mob was holding a bridge one day and I seen the engineers trying to blow it, our engineers trying to blow it. And they had Buckley's chance, they put about five charges into it and they said, "You all now keep your head down." The charges would go off and you might just see a little buckle in one of the girders, they couldn't blow it. It was that, you know, well constructed. And of course that let all his trains and troops and everything through,

25:30 they're around behind you and that before you even knew it.

What was the effect on you personally, of suddenly being in this position where it felt you were losing the war so much?

Yeah, that's right, you knew you was losing it and losing it bad. Yeah, when we got off, 'Oh I can't,' you know, your mind is that fuddled and you're half frightened

26:00 and you're sick of running and you know. I just couldn't describe what me thoughts, when we got off, when they got us off Greece that night I thought we were safe. But then who knows if, the, you know the blokes that did, there was only four ships and ours was one that was torpedoed.

26:30 Those blokes that was on the other boats, they done the Syrian campaign and then they were brought home and then they were up here and they done the island campaign you know, Wewak, Bougainville and all those places, see, and a lot of them got, escaped, went through all that and then got killed up the islands, so you don't know whether you was lucky or whether you was unlucky. If we'd have got, that ship hadn't have got hit, it was the last bomb of the day,

27:00 last torpedo of the day, if we'd have missed that, we would have done the Syrian campaign, been sent home and then straight back up the islands so, you know, a man could have got out of that lot and then got killed up there, so, it's just luck of the game I suppose.

And how chaotic was the atmosphere in Greece especially when you were withdrawing at that last?

Oh everybody was panicking, you know, bods running left, right and centre.

27:30 A lot sort of, got a bit crooked on us I think and said, "Well, what are you running for," and we said, "Well, go back and have a bloody look and see why we're running." And, but that's all me first, yeah we were,

28:00 after Greece, after Crete, after I was taken prisoner, we got taken back to Salonika, the camp in Salonika, oh it was a cruel camp, the only way they could keep us was by starving us into submission you know. And you were that weak and tired, you was like these pictures they show of the Jews, what the Germans done, that's what we were like at one stage, the only way, you know, too weak and tired to get up and walk.

28:30 **Did it surprise you when you were still not taken prisoner, that stage when you were withdrawing through Greece, just how strong the Germans were?**

Yeah, yeah. That's when we found out how good he was and that's, that Greek campaign was the cause of him losing the fight in Russia. If he'd have, hadn't have done that and he'd have gone straight into Russia, he'd have nearly got Moscow they reckon,

29:00 because he lost three weeks or a month or something and it was just enough for the snow to set in and the winter to set in and it buggered the German Army, they couldn't, you know, they couldn't use their heavy stuff, bogging down.

You mention also the Stukas in Benghazi, were they being used in Greece?

They used them everywhere, everywhere the German's fought they used the Stukas and they would mainly

29:30 use them prior to an attack. Whenever you got a bad Stuka raid, you knew there was going to be an attack coming. And his artillery was, see he was, in my book he was the best soldier in the world at that time, the German, and he had the best equipment. His artillery, I remember one night on Brallos Pass we, putting up a stand, but we was right on top

30:00 of a mountain and there was all rock, you couldn't dig in, you might get behind a bit of a rock. But there was an English unit there, I don't know what they were transferring, they had mules and everything tied up everywhere. And our artillery were just behind us, but anyway, they were plastering me, he was timing the flashes of our guns, our artillery guns, to when they landed and he got the direct ranges to where we were and these shells were landing on top of this bloody bare rock. You're laying there like a, you know,

30:30 shag on a rock, God, there was mules getting blown up on top of the mountain and blokes going and getting blown everywhere. I'll tell you what, I've never been frightened in my life until that, well, yeah, I have been frightened but that was the worst fright I ever got. Oh you could hear the bloody things coming, whistling, crashing into the bloody bare rock.

Pieces of rock going everywhere.

31:00 Yeah, rock, bits of rock and shrapnel, oh it was an unmerciful barrage he put up. You could see the flash of his guns when the bloody shells left it, said, 'Here's another one coming,' you know, had about half a dozen batteries firing, it's a wonder any of us got out of it.

And with the Stukas, you mentioned the sound they had, what effect would this sound have on you?

Well, it was just as though they had, they were sirens, they were sirens on them, and they could come straight down, they reckoned, and I believe it, they could put a bomb in a forty four gallon drum

31:30 they were that accurate, and then with these sirens on them into the bargain, that didn't improve it. Like there's no good on the nerves, no wonder a man went a bit troppo when he got out of it.

Talking about the departure and being hit by that last torpedo, the boat, did it actually go down, was it sunk?

No, she got hit under the screws and I was about four decks down, we were

32:00 just getting our first, in Greece we never, all we saw was bully beef, hard biscuits and bully beef, not even a cup of tea or anything, water. And I was down in the queue and the navy blokes were, the sailors were getting the, oh, plate of stew, a dixie [pot] of stew and a lump of white bread and a cup of coffee I think. When the torpedo hit her and she, or she lifted

32:30 as high as that couch out of the water and all the lights fused. And we had to get up and, as you know on a ship, you only got the narrow stairway and when you get something like thousands, hundreds of men trapped down, you didn't, make sure you didn't fall over or fall because you get trampled to death. Anyhow, I got out, I got up on the top deck and, no, she didn't go straight down, she lists badly and we only had one cruiser

33:00 with us I think. And I said, "Well, this is it," you know, but I've never had any great fear of water, I thought, 'Oh yeah, I reckon I'll float around here for a while.' Anyhow, within half an hour there was bloody battle ships and cruisers and everything come over the horizon. They come in and they hooked onto one side of her and righted her until we got off. I jumped, they were going like that a bit, the sea was a bit rough, so

33:30 I just waited and I jumped off onto this Harrier wit. There wasn't many blokes went overboard, I think two or three got crushed between the ships, other than that there wasn't many casualties at all.

How chaotic was it on board, especially going up these corridors?

Oh, panic stations. I was, you know, every man for himself, you and I are real good mates, if you was down getting trampled to death, I'd say, "Bugger him, let him get out of it himself."

34:00 When you get into that position, every man for himself is that's when.

And so you got on board this other ship and they took you back to Crete. What was it like there for a few days when you …?

Oh, it was alright, we went in to see Suda Bay and Suda Bay was a graveyard of ships, the Huns had sank a lot and all you could see was tops and bottoms of ships poking

34:30 out the water, and masts. And we had nothing, because all our equipment, rifles and everything went. And our mob were there, they order, every man had to be shaved and nobody's got a razor and they come to light the, I don't know how many razors they had, but our company or my section got one razor. And I think I was about he fifth bloke that used it and we had to shave with salt water. We took skin and everything off, you know,

35:00 because we had to be shaved and then they got, there was a lot of ack-ack [anti-aircraft artillery] blokes there, units. They took the rifles off them and give it to us, and bunged us out onto the island, at a different place. I got, we was out there for a while and I got crook and I got sent into a field hospital and after a couple of days,

35:30 two or three days, I started to come right, we used to nick off at night and get out to the villages and buy this wine, you know, this Greek wine, it was alright.

They made you shave like …?

Yeah, they made us shave, that was the bloody order of the army and we'd just been torpedoed. God strike, no water,

36:00 ever tried shaving with salt water? You try it one day and see how good it, make sure it's sea water, with a blunt razor, it's a wonder you haven't struck some of those Crete blokes told you about that that was there.

Well, what did this make you think, combines, I guess, the chaos of the whole group?

How bloody stupid they was, no hope of us ever winning it, no hope of us ever winning it.

36:30 **Did you think this as you were actually shaving, like?**

No, I don't know what I thought when I was shaving. When I was in hospital there was a, they'd just sunk the, some Indian ship and they brought this little Indian in and he was covered in oil and he was burnt, the poor little bugger, and everything. And he's just in the way they got him out of the water

37:00 and they brought him into this ward, in this tent, it was only tents, big long one. And he got into the bed and all his clothes and everything, you should have seen the bed. Another bloke alongside me had got a shrapnel wound in Greece and they didn't, you know, didn't have time to do any dressing see, so gangrene had set in. A couple of doctors come around one morning and said,

37:30 “Listen mate, we’re going to take you down to the theatre,” which was another tent job, they said, “If you come back and your arm’s gone, don’t worry about it, it’ll only be for the best.” Anyway, they brought him back, his arm was gone, took it off right up. Gangrene had set in and that night there was a Pommy orderly up the end of the tent with a bloody lamp and this poor bugger, he’s still delirious with aesthetic and that, he got out and he was trying to walk, you know, and

38:00 with his arm gone he was sort of out of balance and he’s hitting the side of the bed. Anyhow, we all screamed out, two or three of us screamed out at this Pommy orderly and when he seen who it was he panicked, I don’t know how that bloke finished up, they took him away somewhere, he’d have been repatriated home I think.

Alright, we’ll pause it there.

Tape 5

00:35 **I heard from somebody that the Italians in the desert had a brothel.**

We found it.

Really, can you tell me about that?

We never went in there on business but we found out where the girls were. And they got them out, it was an underground dug out. Which is only natural I suppose, because they had

01:00 a lot of troops in that garrison, the Italians in, where was it, Bardia or Tobruk?

I’m not sure, I’ve only heard that the Italians had their own brothel.

Yeah, well I, I’m just trying to remember if it was at Bardia or Tobruk they had it. I just couldn’t, I think it’d be only a guess now. I’d probably say Tobruk, but then I could be wrong, it might have been Bardia. Yeah, they were there alright.

01:30 They were there. I never, we seen their set up one day when we were scrounging, but we never seen the girls, they got out pretty quick. But we seen the set up they had, yeah. That was dead right.

When you say it was a dug out, you mean underneath …?

Underneath the ground, yeah, it was covered with sandbags and, you know, as bomb proof as they could get it.

02:00 But, they, the girls were got out very smartly, I don’t know whether it was the Italians that got them out or our blokes that got them out, but no, that was right.

Were they Italian girls, Italian women?

Yeah, they said they were, I didn’t actually see them but they were Italian girls, yeah.

So they brought them over from Italy?

Brought them over from Italy yeah, they could have rotated them or anything, you know.

02:30 **I wonder if they were sort of there on their own free will or they were taken.**

Oh, they’d be there of their own free will if they were getting enough money, probably be a paying proposition because they would be living under, well I suppose not the best of conditions.

Well, you wouldn’t be out of work either.

No, that’s right, not with them mob that was there.

03:00 **So they had their own vino, their own brothel.**

Well vino is, see vino was an, Italians drink vino like you and I drink tea. It’s sort of their national drink, the drink. They used to have those bottles of spa water and they were all done up in, packed with a sort of a straw container around them with wires around it that held it together,

03:30 and mixed with this vino, yeah, it was a nice drink.

Chianti. Is that what it’s called, Chianti, with the little straw …?

Yeah, I couldn’t remember. I remember I drank, I had a drink, I drank a bit of it, but I just can’t remember you know, how it was, whether we drank it, being Australians, they, if the Italians could have raised five hundred men after the battle

04:00 of Bardia that night, they would have retaken it, because the Australians were laying around drunk as monkeys in the sand everywhere, because they captured vast quantities of this vino and stuff and they

just drank it like water.

They would have had sore heads the next day.

Yeah. Probably would have.

Now, I know you don't want to go into too specific details but, can you tell me about, when you had leave in Tel Aviv,

04:30 **can you tell me about the girls, if they were pretty or not?**

Yeah. They were alright.

So they were good looking?

Yeah.

And did you see queues of men coming out the doors up the street?

No, no.

Maybe that was, I heard about that in Brisbane, there were queues of Americans coming up the street.

I'll tell you where we did see, we got off, we got off the boat at

05:00 Fremantle, I think it was, and they took us up to Perth in trains and we passed a place called Rose Street, in Fremantle, or something, and the bad girls seen the train of Aussie soldiers coming past and they all come out and were waving and carrying on like this, which, I would never be surprised, yeah, a lot of them

05:30 found their way back, there could have been queues then.

Okay, well then, going back to Palestine but not talking about you per se. Could you, were you a virgin before you went overseas?

Hardly.

Hardly. So, so that was really your first experience, being overseas.

Yeah.

06:00 **So, I mean this must have happened to everybody, I mean there was your opportunity, your parents weren't around, no-one knew you, you could ….**

No, I knew what it was all about before I got there, to them.

Before you went overseas?

Yeah.

So you'd had a girlfriend in Australia?

Yeah.

But I mean, certainly there must have been a lot of blokes that hadn't.

Oh yeah. I know a lot of the bush blokes hadn't.

Did any of them

06:30 **tell you stories, you know, after losing their virginity say in Tel Aviv, did they say, 'Oh that's nothing to crow about,' or, 'I'm so glad it's over with,' or …?**

No, they all went back so they couldn't have been.

Right. Yeah well I suppose for a lot of those men, where would you find a woman in the bush, also, they came from …

That's right, yeah.

… isolated areas didn't they?

07:00 **Okay, well then, one other question that I had from your early childhood that I meant to ask you before, that you said that you weren't very strong as a baby.**

They tell me I wasn't, yeah.

What was wrong with you?

Oh I wouldn't know, wouldn't know. I think the lady that reared me was the one that sort of got me over the bit of a crisis that I was in but, no, I probably,

07:30 no, I wouldn't actually, no, because I've been healthy ever since, you know. I was surprised that a delicate, it would have only been when I was a little baby type of thing, you know. All little babies are sometimes hard to start off and once you get them going, they're good.

So you may have been a bit sickly?

That's about all it was, yeah.

And did the Bullmans try to keep in touch with your parents and let them know how you were going?

Oh, not necessarily,

08:00 they were close enough to find out how I was going myself if they were interested. I mean, I never even got a card from them on me birthday. It's not worrying me, I mean I was doing alright.

There comes a point in your life when you've got to get on with it.

Yeah, I wouldn't have swapped places for anything. Possibly missed, you know,

08:30 being reared with your brother, that's the only thing, type of things.

But do you feel like you were an only child or that you had a sister?

No, they had a girl, you know, but her family still all keep in touch and everything. She's dead but her family all keep in touch and everything.

What was her name?

Alice.

Alice.

One of the old fashioned names, yeah.

09:00 **I love that name, I think it's great. So did you get to know any of the Italian prisoners?**

No, no, not at all. No, other than, no I don't think I even struck one that could even speak English actually. In Munich, when we were prisoners there, the Germans, there was a lot of Munich people spoke English, English was a second language type of thing.

09:30 You know how French is the second language of a lot of places? English was sort of the second language there.

Now when you're in, we'll just go back to Crete. You were talking to Kiernan [interviewer] before we had lunch, when you were in Crete and that whole debacle that unfolded, can you walk us through what actually happened on Crete from the day you actually arrived there?

10:00 Oh that'd be pretty hard, can't remember all the places that we were dug in at. The Germans done a big drop, a parachute drop, at, oh, about a mile from us but there was the, it wasn't directly over us it was over a New South Wales battalion and they had them nearly

10:30 all cleaned up by about six o'clock that night, but no, other than being transferred from one place to the other, sort of as quick as they could. You know, it was just a, any other manoeuvre type of thing.

Tell us about the conflict that occurred there and being taken as a POW.

11:00 I was, I told what's her name that I was in a nasty bayonet charge one day at Suda Bay.

Can you tell us about that in detail, Ron, I know that it's not very comfortable, but if you could just ...

Yeah.

... perhaps give us a little bit more information.

We withdrew to the position and it was right on, virtually on the edge of Suda Bay and it was held by,

11:30 when we got there there was a lot of wounded New Zealanders there. they were dug in and our, we occupied a lot of the slit trenches and that, and there'd been an English ordinance crowd there before us and we got out there sort of scrounging, you know, looking out tents up, and we found one ordinance depot and it was full of clothes, English overcoats and tunics and, me and me mate I was scrounging

12:00 with, we went, was trying on these Pommy overcoats because they were beautiful, they were double breasted and like, you know, and we looked out the tent door and out about a hundred yards we saw a German walking past and we thought, 'Holy hell,' you know, 'they'd caught up with us, they were right on us and we didn't know.' So we shot out the back and we got out to our own lines and it was then that the bulk of the force started to move in on us and this

12:30 Captain Crawford, I think his name was, he rallied about two companies of us and he said, "Right, let's

go," and we went over the top and, yeah, I had to do something I regret ever since, but I had to do it, it was his life or mine. But I thought after, I could

13:00 have, you know, gone about it some other way, but it's just one point I'm not proud of meself about. We were charging over sort of undulating ground and we jumped over a bit of a trench and the bloke next to me said, "Look out, there's a German in there," and I looked down and he was crouching down, the poor bugger, he was just as frightened as I was, and, oh, and under normal circumstances

13:30 I wouldn't have done it, but I just, you know, I just pulled the trigger and that was it, I didn't give him a chance, but I'm not proud of it, no I'm definitely not. But that's the only, you know, but still I could have bypassed him and he could have shot me in the back or something. You know, I look at it that way, but still he might have been a good bloke, you don't know.

14:00 But it was a blood bath while it lasted and when we, we frisked a few of them coming back and they all had Woodbine, packets of English Woodbine cigarettes and that on them. They'd taken an ordinance depot somewhere, you know. Our blokes were doing it tough for smokes and these blokes all had a lot of our cigarettes and that sort of stuff on them.

The Germans had the cigarettes?

Yeah, yeah,

14:30 you know, English brand, Woodbine cigarettes and all that. Yeah, they'd taken an ordinance depot somewhere. But other than that it was, you know, just kill or be killed type of thing.

Well I suppose in a way that's why the government sent you there.

Yeah.

Well, sent you to war more directly.

15:00 Yeah, that's right. Yeah. You know I suppose much the same as sending our blokes to Iraq now type of thing. You don't know whether it's right or it's wrong. Excuse me, I've got a frog in my throat.

15:30 **Alright, well that time, I'm assuming then that there were a whole lot more of Germans than there were Australians at Suda Bay?**

Oh yeah, they outnumbered us, I don't know, probably five to one, you know, better armed and everything.

Do you remember what happened when they said, "Okay, that's enough no more fighting, we're taking you prisoners"?

16:00 No, we retreated to a place called Sfakia and the barges were going out, there was British war ships evacuating our blokes and a lot of our, well lots of Australian and English but mainly English had deserted and they'd withdrawn to this place and they, our battalion colonel,

16:30 we retreated in an orderly fashion, he had us all lined up starting to go off on the barges, and all these deserting blokes, blokes they were, deserted back and they were living in caves and that around this place and they all rushed in at the side and they broke our ranks and the navy said, "Well, if this is the way you're going to carry on we'll leave the lot here," and they just, because they value the warship more than the do the hundred or two lives. So they just pulled out and just left,

17:00 that's how we come to get left. If the deserters and the blokes that had done the wrong thing, if they could have kept them out we'd have got off, yeah. They were starting to evacuate us but they just rushed in from the side, broke our ranks and everything, and stormed the barges and the navy couldn't handle it, they just pulled away and said, "Right, stop there, you'll have to stop there."

So did you see a lot of Australians and New Zealanders, I guess, get onto the ship, and ...?

17:30 Yeah, I seen, I don't know, see the navy was taking a pounding from the air and they couldn't, they didn't want to lose any more warships and they wasn't going to sacrifice and stay there, this was sort of prior, just prior to daylight, and they just couldn't afford to stay there long because they would have lost, they'd have lost, a warship's far more

18:00 valuable than two or three thousand men. And that's why they had to go and leave. But a lot of the blokes did get off, I believe, from Crete, they said, they nicked off when they seen it was all up, they went to the hills and the navy was sending subs [submarines] in for a while, getting a few of them off, but a lot got off, a lot did and, you know.

18:30 **Well, what happened then, you know, you were saying having the men flank you from the sides, and what have you, what happened then with the Germans, did they say "Okay, alright you lot, over here," kind of thing, or ...?**

No, me and two or three other blokes, we were that tired and we hadn't been eating and we just, the, our colonel went out with a white flag and we just went and lay in a, there was a bit of a cave there

19:00 on the side, so we just laid in there, and the next thing, we seen a German standing there telling us to come out so we just come out and they just marched us back to an organised camp.

How did that guard treat you, that German?

The blokes we fought, the blokes that were, the actual parachute troopers, treated us well but when we got back to camps like Salonika in Greece and that,

19:30 we struck the back, you know, the holes and bowls and that, they were horrible, they were real sadistic. That, do you ever remember that Max Schmeling, that, the world heavyweight fighter, that Joe Louis fought him? No you're too young to remember, he was there, he was one of their parachutes, he could speak beautiful English. Yeah.

Did you meet him?

I heard him talking to a couple of blokes, yeah, yeah. He was,

20:00 you know, having a yarn about America, he knew America better than half the Yanks did. We never bragged about him getting a hiding or anything like that, but yeah, he was a good bloke.

You just mentioned before that unfortunately, what you had to do because it was wartime. Were you thinking, when you're so tired and hungry and you're just lying when your colonel came out with the white flag, were

20:30 **you lying there thinking, 'Oh my God, I just killed somebody'?**

Yeah. No that didn't, it didn't worry me then because you do those things in the heat of battle. When you've been hammered day after day, week after week, with, you've been bombed, you've been machine gunned, you've been, put your head up and you get it blown off and you become a, that sadistic yourself, you just shoot anyone in your way and you don't, you

21:00 do it, it's only after, when everything boils down, and you think, 'Gee I could have saved that bloke's life,' or something like that, you know. But no, it, I often think about it and wish I hadn't done it, but, well, I've done it and there's nothing I can do about it. I mean, I, you know, I don't hold meself responsible for anything, because it could have been his life or mine, so how was I to know? And you do it in the heat

21:30 of battle you know. I've seen a bloke alongside me killed and sort of get stirred up and ….

So now, you were led away with this German man, where were you led to first, just a holding camp, was it?

Yeah, we went to a place called Skines.

Skines?

Yeah, in Crete.

22:00 And, we were there for about, I don't know how long, probably a week or a fortnight, horrible place. All our mob went down, including myself, with violent dysentery. They were taking us out on working parties, when you realise that Crete was only a hundred and forty miles long or something and forty miles wide. And one of the fiercest battles

22:30 of the war fought there, it was summer time, and a body would only lay there for a day and a half and it'd be blown up and black, we had to go around, they took us around picking our own blokes up and you had to get the dog tags off them. And their own blokes, you know, on a, burying parties. Oh it was violent, I think I only got in about two days or something and then that's all I was on, thank God.

23:00 **Were there a lot of Australians that were buried?**

Yeah, fair few, yeah. I read the other day how many Germans was killed there. Hitler never done a, Hitler wiped the parachute battalion after that. They never done, never took another place by parachutes because the loss was that great on Crete. Like they were coming down like,

23:30 and a lot of their chutes got hooked up, there [are] a terrible lot of olive groves in Crete and their chutes were getting hooked up in olive groves, it was like duck shooting you know, you didn't know who you shot but you just kept shooting type of thing.

Where all these, this place Skines, why were all the bodies there, was there a huge …?

Well, there was a very savage fight going on,

24:00 and if your mate was shot, there was no time to bury him, he just had to stop there. And when you're in heat like that Mediterranean in summer time, the bodies are blown and black in two days.

What do you mean by blown?

All, they're all blown up, you know, just as though they're going to burst. And then they go black. It's like a, you know, if you see an animal was just lay there, it all blows up, humans are just the same.

24:30 **But Skines, where all these bodies [were] there, do you know what Australians were killed there?**

No, no, I know two or three blokes out of me own mob that was killed, yeah, but the majority, no, you didn't know them, no, no. You took, you had to get the dog tags off them and they were taken and registered and one thing and another, but, other than that, but yeah, there were a few of our blokes

25:00 that I knew, but the majority I didn't, no.

Did you have any good mates killed there?

Yes, yeah. I had, three or four that I knew well.

All around your age?

Yeah, would have been, would have been, about me age at the time.

Are they blokes in the photograph with all those old bottles of beer at the table?

25:30 No, none of them were, they all died of natural causes. No, there was none of them killed but they, I wasn't with them in the, just trying to think, no they wasn't with us sort of when the fighting was on, they were probably be with somebody or other, you sort of all got split up.

So you'd go from

26:00 **the holding camp in Skines, to where all the fighting had taken place in Suda Bay.**

Yeah, we were marched back to Suda Bay, I think it was, and we were put on, oh just any craft they could get, and taken back to Greece, because Greece isn't like, Greece is not very far from Crete.

And when you got back to Greece, what was, what did the Germans do?

26:30 **Did they have a particular place for you to go to, or did they accommodate …?**

No, we, they had, they'd organised camps, prison camps. First off, we was back in Athens for about, a week, and then they sent us up to this Salonika, it's up the top of Greece, going towards the Turkish border.

And that's where you and your mate escaped.

27:00 We were going to but no, we didn't escape from there. We escaped, then they put us on trains from Salonika to take us through to Germany and we escaped on the way back to Germany but if we could have got out the first night in Greece, we'd have stuck, you know, we'd have had a rough chance, you know, because the Greeks were sort of a bit sympathetic towards us. But the Bulgarians, we was in Bulgaria before we got out, and

27:30 we sort of, you know, didn't have much chance, didn't know where we was or which way we was going and, no food and …

Before we talk about that, what was it like in this camp in Greece before they started training you back to Germany?

In this Salonika, it was horrible, terrible. It was the worst camp I was in,

28:00 and we never got any food, the barracks they had us in was lice ridden. And they'd, you know, they'd shoot you at the drop of a hat. They'd, we're standing out on the parade ground, you see blokes just collapsing with weakness and fainting and, no, it was the worst camp I was ever in.

28:30 **Do you think that was intentional on the behalf of the …? You do?**

Yeah. It's the only way of holding us, because if we'd have got out, the Greeks were a bit sympathetic towards us. And, you know, they had to stop us from escaping, well they were losing a man, they were losing men every hour, blokes dying in that camp, it was a notorious camp, and they were horrible, they were the worst guards we struck,

29:00 sort of blokes that is, wasn't physically fit to fight but just physically enough to, you know, to do other work, be guards, and one thing and another.

What, did you see anything happen there like the guards picking on someone in particular?

Yeah, oh yeah, not, oh yeah. Shoot, they just shoot at anything, they were trigger happy.

29:30 I had a funny, we had a, oh I had a funny experience in that camp. There was a lot, there was Cypriots locked up with us, and they used to have a Paddy's market out in one of the parade grounds. And these Cyps [Cypriots] used to, they were the blokes going out the sewer network for a while before the Germans sprung them. And they were, bring back stuff and trading you know. And me and me mate, we got hold of a packet of cigarettes,

30:00 I don't know where we got them from. And it was a sort of a cardboard box with a lid and a slip of paper over the thing, and we undone it as quick, we never tore anything, we took the cigarettes out, and we put a bit of cloth back in about the same weight as the cigarettes and done it all up as …. I went out on this Paddy market with these Cypriots and traded it. I think I traded it for a tin of jam or something and he, but he opened it before

30:30 I could get away from him and I started to run. Anyway, he was right on me hammer and the, they got steps up the barracks and there's a mob of English blokes standing on the rail, you know, egging me on. Anyways, they let me pass and soon as he went past them they flattened him but I wasn't game to go out in that market for a day or two, he'd have remembered me. Yeah, we come

31:00 at all those sort of things, you had to.

How did you find the English blokes, did you find them to be …?

Yeah, reasonably good blokes. Yeah. In, there's a lot of them in the prison camps, blokes taken at Dunkirk and Narvek and all those places. Yeah they were alright.

You didn't come across any of that sort of classist or racist sort of stuff that happens sometimes?

31:30 No, they soon got brought back to size if they did, yeah. No there's no class distinction in prison camp.

So what were you able to eat or drink in that horrible place, before you got trained out to Germany, I mean?

Nothing, I mean you got, we was living on that lentil soup.

Lentil soup.

Yeah.

32:00 And that's about all you was getting and a, oh you might have got a small portion of black bread. But if you stood up too quick you just black out and go out to it, you know, you were that weak. It was a horrible place.

So how did you, then after a while they decided to move you on, take you back to Germany. How did they round everybody up, did they have somebody who spoke English and would talk to you?

32:30 No, no, they just got you out in, say, bunches of twenty or thirty or fifty, whatever the case may be. Oh occasionally you'd get one that might speak English but no, they just ruled you by, the night we got to Germany, on the second train that I got put on, they unloaded us at a place called Stalag 7A, which was in Moosburg.

33:00 We got there about nine o'clock and it was, oh there was heaps of us, hundreds of us. And there was a mob of German guards waiting for us on the station and not one of them had a gun on them but every second bloke had a bloody Alsatian dog on a lead and that's how they got us to camp and not, you wasn't, you step that far out of line, out of your ranks and you'd get this great Alsatian dog whack his teeth down alongside your leg.

33:30 And before we got properly used to the camp, in this 7A we was in, they used to, you had to be in barracks by seven o'clock and they used to let the dog go about ten to, and this particular night I was crook because when we got out of this horrible camp, when we got to Germany, they fed us on red cabbage

34:00 and that type of stuff, and there was a fair bit of it and we made a guts of ourselves and all got crook and we were all in the toilet and they let these dogs go. I finished up sitting on a partition, there was a partition sitting along the row of toilets this side and a row that side was a partition, I finished up sitting up there to get away from them. They'd have eaten you, they were violent. But they were proper army dogs, they all had a number

34:30 and a dog ration and everything. I had to get the guards in to grab them all to get us all in the barracks, half of them.

Do you really think they would have eaten somebody?

I don't say would have eaten you, but they would have killed you, they were quite capable of killing you. You get a couple of Alsatians [dogs], you know, going for your throat and face and that, oh you, tore you to bits. They used them on us, they used them on us in Greece. They'd let a dog go,

35:00 they were trained in front of you, and he could, they could smell you, they seem to be able to smell you from a mile away, and as soon as they got the whiff of you they'd stand like a, ever seen a dog trained to point quail and that. They would stop and they'd sort of stick their head up sniffing. They'd find your position every time just about, if there was a small bunch of you, you know, held up somewhere. No, they were good dogs if you was on the right side, but they were trained to hate khaki.

35:30 **So tell us about you and your mate that actually jumped the train and ended up in Bulgaria,**

well, in Bulgaria near the Turkish border?

Yeah, we was, oh, we, they had us in these dog boxes and they had the sort of air holes, small windows in the, you know, like you see in our trains. They had barbed wire, we broke this barbed wire with a bar, somebody had a little bar and

36:00 this other bloke, he was a bit of a daredevil and he said, "Well, I'm going, anyone else want to come?" and I said, "Yeah, I'll come." Another bloke said, "I'll come." And none of the others would be in it and they said, "Oh you'll get us all shot." And we said, "Oh that's your worry, you can come too if you want to." So anyhow, we bunged Joe up first, and he was on the side, he was going over, there was a tunnel coming up so we had to pull him back, I don't know how they, he must have seen it or something. And

36:30 when it got clear, he, we pushed, he hung on and he jumped, or he sort of fell, you know, and then I went and then the third bloke, he broke his neck or something, we heard he was killed. But, yeah, it was a pretty scary, I had a shirt on and I got it caught in a bit of the barbed wire still on the window and I ripped it meself from the top of me neck to the top of me behind as I went out. Just cut me shirt like that and went straight down me back. And I, then I landed alright,

37:00 I just lay there for a couple of seconds, you know, couple of minutes, until the train got clear and it was doing about forty or fifty mile an hour down through the hills at night. And the, anyhow, we, I walked back up and met him and then we got into the hills and, as a matter of fact, he got an MM for it. And the army wrote to me, just after I was married, when I first went into the shop,

37:30 I got a letter from the army wanting to know the ins and outs of it, and I'd had the army at that stage, I didn't want a bar of it and me first wife, she wasn't soldier minded much and I never, ever bothered, I think I threw it in the dust can. Anyhow, Joe answered his, he is, and he got an MM out of it. Not that I mind, MM's nothing, I didn't want an MM anyway. You don't get a pension for it or anything, it's only a bit of a rip.

38:00 **But you jumped actually from the train, just before the tunnel?**

No, after the tunnel, yeah.

And had you planned it really?

No, really just from when we got in the train to when we jumped. I knew there was something going on and I said to this bloke, "Are you going to go?" He said, "Yeah." And, we asked if some of the other fellas wanted to come, they said, "No, no." Then one of them said, "You know, you'll finish up getting us all shot or something."

38:30 We said, "Oh well, that'll be the risk you'll have to take." No, we was out for about, for about a week I think. We were raiding tomato patches and any fruit we could get, you know. But they were a very backward race the Bulgarians. The village we went into, when finally we were desperate, you know, weak and tired and hungry, and they were still driving

39:00 donkeys and that around on hay to thrash the oats and that out of it, they were still doing it there, what they'd done a hundred years ago, they were still doing it that way. But oh we, we were with them for about a week or a fortnight I think, we had a good time with them, they fed us up and they give us a hair cut and shaving gear and showers and it was good.

So if it wasn't for that bloke

39:30 **who was going to take you to the Turkish border …**

Yeah, well whether we would have got through or not, I don't know. It was, had we been in Greece, yeah, we could have got help, but not with the Bulgarians. See, they were an ally of Germany and to find your way through those mountains there would have been a pretty big, then we would have had to have contacted, negotiated the Turkish border. You can bet your bottom dollar there would have been German troops this side of it.

40:00 Still somebody might have given you a hand, you don't know. I had another attempt to escape in Germany.

Tape 6

00:34 **Just interested to know where the guards were on the train, like how you managed to …?**

There was a, the next carriage hooked onto us was full of Germans going home on leave. So when we hit the ground, we had to, you had to, you sort of laid low, you just hit the ground and lay there. Well, that's what I done anyway. But no, there was no guards in the trucks with us, like we were

01:00 all just pushed in and the doors locked and that was it.

So how were they keeping you in there, like security wise, the door's locked, but where would

you get out exactly?

Those dog box, I call them dog box, our railways used to have them, they're a full, covered in carriage and they used to have four corners, well, the corner's just about enough for a bloke to get out, two each side, remember them?

01:30 But they had them covered with barbed wire, criss-crossed, and we had, or this bloke had an iron bar about that big and we twisted till we broke it, just enough, because I was just telling the girls, I hooked a lump in me collar and ripped me shirt from the collar right to the top of me behind and put a groove down me back, with this barbed wire as I went out. I was bleeding like a stuck pig

02:00 when I finished. But there was a truck, the next one hooked onto us was the Germans, but when you're going through those hills there in the Balkans there and it's night time, they couldn't see you, and the rattle of the train and the noise, they'd no hope of hearing you.

You also mentioned that there were three of you and one died, did you find him?

The third bloke?

02:30 No we never found him, now.

How'd you know he died?

Only by hearsay when we got to the camp, they reported a bloke had been killed who jumped out of something and been killed, so we, we never had any definite proof that it was him but we never ever seen him again and we heard that report, so we, you could back it in, it was him. Well, I think somebody did know him, told us that he'd been killed.

03:00 **And where were you sleeping during the day, were you moving at night, or how did your escape work?**

No, we just took to the bush, we took, it was very hilly and we took to the side of a hill and oh, we laid low for a while and then we sort of just tried to work out the direction we was going, towards the Turkish border. And, in the finish we, they grew a lot of tomatoes there at the time,

03:30 I remember we was raiding tomato patches and, you know, eating raw tomatoes and half green tomatoes and that. And we stuck, we come across this village that I was telling Joanne about that, they were driving these oxen around on the, on the hay to thresh it, you know, the old fashioned way. But they thought we were parachutes, so, we couldn't speak their language,

04:00 they couldn't speak ours and it was, you know, sort of doing it by signs. Anyway, they give us a feed and they made us understand, "Where did we want to go?" and we said, "Turkish border," you know, drawing maps, and they went away and got this young bloke and he come back and, oh, he led us for two or three hours through the mountains until he got to the next village. And they told us to stay there and we did, and he went in and must have notified the coppers or some bloody thing and out they come with a gun and they took us in

04:30 and handed us over to the army. They never ill-treated us or anything, they treated us alright, but had we made a false move, this bloke would have shot us, you know, no worries. But no, they only treated us good.

So what was it like when you thought for a moment that you were going to be with the Bulgarians and then …?

Yeah, very disappointing, because they got an interpreter in and

05:00 he said, "Would you rather," you know, "stop here with us or be handed back to the Germans?" and we said, "Oh, stop here with you blokes." But anyhow, we, they never give us, we thought we did because we was there for two or three days after, was in the, a barracks with them. Got the same food as they done and they give us a haircut and shaving stuff and showers, it was good.

Were there any consequences, like the Germans punished you or anything?

05:30 No, we just went before a commandant down at the station and he said, "What was your idea of, why did you escape?" and we said, "Well, it's our job or our duty to escape and yours to stop us." He said, "Fair enough." No, there was a prison train coming in about ten minutes, so next thing we're on that.

Did you talk to the blokes on this train?

On the next train?

06:00 Talk to our blokes?

Yeah, who was on it and what did you talk about?

I couldn't remember mate, it's too long ago. They knew we jumped out of the first one, but we cut our own throats because the train we jumped out of, they all went to farms and factories and, you know. The next train I was on we finished up in the coal mines in Poland, in Upper Silesia.

Now you mentioned camp seven,

06:30 **a camp, the first camp you went to.**

Yeah, Moosburg, 7A.

What kind of work were they making you do here?

We was working for the council. We'd go out of a morning, one guard to a team of blokes, twenty something, you'd go to the council yard and you'd pick up your brooms, shovels, wheelbarrow type of thing. You'd have your own section of the city that you worked in. The guard would walk around every,

07:00 start at one group around, keep walking around the groups to make sure they were all still about. I'll tell you a funny story. This was in Munich, when we was there and they had a lot of conscript labourers, and conscript labourers from countries they'd taken wasn't allowed in German brothels. And they had

07:30 brought in women from the countries they'd conquered for their own private, for conscript brothel sheilas. And we used to, in the Red Cross parcel we used to get a two ounce block of chocolate, a packet, a two ounce packet of tea, tin of cocoa, various other, you know, small things. The Germans hadn't seen. Anyway, while the guard would do our mob, he'd go on to the next one,

08:00 you know, it'd be an hour before he'd get back to you. So our boys used to go to the conscript brothels with a quarter pound block of chocolate, get what he wanted and probably get a bit of change, because it was that sought after, chocolate, they hadn't see it for years before the war. And tea, they almost kill for tea and cocoa and that. So we done alright with these conscript brothel sheilas. You couldn't dilly dally, you had to hurry up, but it was, worked alright.

08:30 **How did the guards not notice you for an hour?**

Because they were all, blokes that were holes and bowls, like escaping was the easiest part of it, getting away. But then it was, after you got away the trouble started, everything had to go right, or you just did, out of all the blokes that I know that escaped in Germany,

09:00 there was only two ever made it. They got through to Switzerland, and they got to the British Consul in Switzerland and he got them down through, with different agents and that, down through free France, Spain, Gibraltar, Gibraltar across to England, but out of all the blokes that I knew that had a go, and we had two, I had another two

09:30 goes in Germany. And, you know, and you know, it was almost virtually impossible, it was only these two blokes that ever got away. But no, the guards, they never used to, they never used to worry much, it's, because they knew that if you got away, you'd soon get caught again. I mean you wasn't, he never stood over you with a

10:00 bayonet or anything like that, I mean they give you a bashing if you want it but other than that, no, the guards was alright.

And so these conscript brothels that, what were they like inside?

Oh just like any ordinary brothel. Rooms and a bed and you know, blah, blah, blah.

How would it be communicated to the girls what was wanted?

The same as we communicated in Cairo. Because they were all foreign sheilas, couldn't speak English, but they knew what you was there for.

10:30 **So what would you get for say chocolate as opposed to tea?**

Chocolate, a two ounce of chocolate we used to get in the parcel, Cadbury's or something, they'd kill for it because they hadn't, and the German population hadn't seen tea for years before Hitler, practically since Hitler came into power.

11:00 And all those like, stuff that we just take everyday for granted, to them it was luxury. And the people in Munich, a lot of them I reckon, were nearly pro-English. They half of them, English was the second language, they'd never, you know, snub you or anything like that if any of them got the chance to talk to you. They would, but the guards wouldn't let them much.

11:30 But on that street sweeping job, you could, I got that way that I could, when you're with them all the time, I could understand a fair bit of what they said, and oh no, it was good when we was at Munich. But, by Jesus, I'll tell you what, when they took us through that bloody Upper Silesia mines, it wasn't.

Was that particularly weird or unusual for you, like you're in the

12:00 **enemy zone, just sweeping the streets and having a chat to some of the locals?**

Yeah, well besides street sweeping, I was working, I was working on railways. They used to take us out and they used to do that crumping, they'd tell you, fixing up, with a foreman, and you, fixing up patches of bad lines with the sleepers and belting the metal underneath the sleepers, done miles of that.

12:30 **Did you think of doing anything like sabotaging or that?**

Oh, they done a few stupid things, like putting sand in gear boxes and, but then they had to push it themselves, they never woke up that after they put the sand in to wear it out, it made it twice as hard to push and they were the blokes that were pushing it. No, there was, no I never seen any real sabotage jobs because if they could have pinpointed you, if you'd have done one, they'd have blown your head off quick smart,

13:00 you know, blatant destruction like that. And you couldn't do anything worthwhile like blow up a factory or anything.

And just one question about the chocolate in the brothels. How much chocolate would you need though, the whole lot or …?

Oh yeah, but you'd come out with change, you're alright for the next time, build up a bank for you. They used to pay us, oh I forget what it was, five pfennigs a day.

13:30 Pfennig is their currency and we used to get paid in special camp money, it wasn't the ordinary currency like, it was a special printed note, but we used to give it, if we wanted, or we had one guard who was a particularly good guard, he was a bloke named Black, and we, we could, you could get it changed in the camp, or we used to give it to him coming home

14:00 from work and he'd take it in and the shops or anywhere could legally cash it. And he used to let us go into a pub, he'd come in with us, and, he'd, or they used to serve beer about that bloody, in pots like that in Munich, sort of in earthenware pots or something. And we'd give him the money and he'd change it into, you know, the proper currency and we'd pay for it and he'd let us have, he'd let us have two pots

14:30 of a night, going home. He was a real good bloke.

Did you see any sort of younger German men in the area at all?

Young German men?

Yeah, like in Munich, like were there any around?

Oh yeah, it was, yeah. Or they, nearly all of them was in uniform, they was in the Hitler Youth or they had another special unit in Munich,

15:00 they had a brown uniform, I forget what they called them, they were a work unit. Solely for, you know, for relieving the army blokes or doing army work on construction jobs or, just trying to think of the name of them, I can't. They used to call them the brown shirts, oh there was hundreds of them but, no, I think towards the end of the war, because I wasn't in Germany then, I was up in Poland, we was on the big march. But

15:30 yeah, anybody of serviceable age was taken up with something, there was nobody walking around doing nothing. And it was, like Germany was full of conscripted labour, from Poland, France, all the places he'd taken, or Russians, or he, Christ, he killed them like flies.

16:00 **And what about Jewish people, did you see any evidence of what was going on with the Jewish people?**

No, we didn't know it was going on, we did towards the end of the war, we was on a three month march when they, all the, when the Russians was coming, the Yanks were coming, British was closing in on him all sides. We marched through a town in Poland, and they had

16:30 all these hanging things, they had two big poles with a bar across and ropes hanging down. And we never actually seen them do it but that's where they done a lot of, in this one particular town. There was one town, they assassinated that big German general – what's his name? – oh he's a Nazi party right, I just can't think of it, they flattened the town, shot every male they could lay their hands on,

17:00 they just, you know, laid, wiped the town to the ground. But no, as far as like Auschwitz or Dachau, or any of those, I never, ever seen them, no. And it wasn't until the latter part of the war that we sort of found out that he was sort of crucifying Jews you know.

Well, you mentioned a lot of different nationalities,

17:30 **was camp 7A full of different people from everywhere?**

No, 7A was solely a prisoner of war camp. It was, lot of blokes was caught at Dunkirk there, a few blokes was caught at Narvek, Australians, but it was a big area and they had, oh, triple barbed wire fence through it,

18:00 and all on one side was Russians, Ukrainian Russians. See we was getting a Red Cross parcel when we was in that first, in the camp, and our own, like a bit of food off the Germans, and these Russians are, he only treated them, they wasn't in the Geneva Convention, they had no rights at all, nobody worried what happened to the, he could do what the liked and they used to,

18:30 we were, you know, they, you'd see them and all their hands, they're like the Jews you see on there, their fingers were pulled back and, you know, just bone and all their testicles and that were just swelled up like footballs. Legs get, you know, just like that rod there and we used to sort of take a bit of pity on them, if we had a bit of food we'd sort of try and get it to them through the wire. And at night, a lot of them tried to get through to us,

19:00 you know, just to get a scrap of food off us and, you know, they had machine gun turrets up each end of the wire, and the search lights, and if the search lights went up and they might, there might be half a dozen trying to get through at different points, they just rip them open with the machine gun and let them hang there till the morning and then a body bus just used to come through and they just cut them down out of it and sling them into it and take it away.

19:30 But we like, they never done it to us, it was only the Russians they done it to because they wasn't in the Geneva Convention.

Why do you think, did they say anything, their hatred for the Russians particularly?

No, just hated bols, hated communists, Bolsheviks. They, Hitler had them in the gun just as much as he had the Jews.

And from your interaction, did you ever get to know any Russians or have any impression of them?

20:00 Yeah, we was, oh we used to try and talk to them but they were a very illiterate race. Me and another bloke we done a, we blew through in Germany one time, we was out for about a week. We got caught, but we got seven days in the boob, it was in a gaol inside a gaol, you know. We was allowed out for, well they used to let us out for an hour's

20:30 exercise a day. But this one time we was in this barrack, it was sort of a long one that was doing a, where they had us locked up, and there was a Russians' camp, oh jeez, it was attached to it somewhere and this Russian bloke, he was got in the ceiling and he come down and he was talking to us, we give him a bit of food or something. And I had a set of false teeth

21:00 at that time, with, only half set you know, and they were that illiterate that I pulled these teeth out and he was like a little kid, he jumped from here back to the wall. And he come up to me, kept asking me to do it again, you know, they'd never even seen a set of false teeth. No he, he slaughtered them in thousands, Russians, so did Stalin, their own bloke.

Tell us,

21:30 **you mentioned the second time you escaped, where was it from and tell us, describe the events and what happened?**

Oh we was working on a railway job in Munich before we went up the mine, and we had a compass and maps and we was going to make for the Swiss border, me and a bloke named Charlie Wilson. And, oh, we stored a bit of food, you know, we took it out in our hat,

22:00 knapsack, and when we went out on a work party we hid it a, the railway line has a crop and we put all this food in it, well we never had that much, but we had few jars of Vegemite and that in our pocket. And, blow me down, they cut this crop where we hid it on the same day as we put it in there and they found it. But anyhow, we managed to nick off and we hid in the railway

22:30 shed but that night it started to snow, this was, escape that just didn't eventuate. And we hid in this shed and it started to snow and we sort of couldn't go because we'd have died, you know, out in the cold and no food, and anyway, they caught us the next morning. But that was a weak attempt we had. But another time we was out for, we was out for a week,

23:00 we got right to the foothills of the Alps, was a place called Tanzee [?] and it was a big holiday resort and the gigan [?] condition beat us, we'd run out when they, that's when they found our rations and we thought we'd lost them. All we had was a couple of jars of Vegemite and a bandicoot and spuds, and spreading Vegemite on raw potatoes, you know, to eat it. And, anyway, we

23:30 went into a back of a hotel yard there and there's a place called Tanzee, it was a big holiday resort at the foot of the Alps. A woman come out, you know, wanting to know who we were, so she went out and got her husband and we told him, 'We've got Crig, Stefolangolan [possibly Staatsgefangenen – state prisoners],' which is, "We are prisoners of war," and we could speak a bit of German, so he said, "Who do you want to be handed over to, the police or the army?" and his wife then said, "Oh hand them over to the army,

24:00 you'll get a better go, you know." So they went in, they got us a dish of sauerkraut and spuds and that and give us a feed and that and they rang the army blokes and they come and picked us up. But we wouldn't have got through, where we were going to try and get through it was very hard because it was right in the Swiss Bavarian alps and you had to know the passes and he had all the passes pretty well covered. It was, the two

24:30 blokes that got away, that I was telling you about, that got away successfully, was working at the main

Munich railway station. And they got to know the trains that was going into Munich and what, into Switzerland and what time they'd go, so it was only about a forty mile trip from Munich. And they made a rope hammock and they somehow slung it underneath a carriage of one of these bloody trains, these carriages. They knew

25:00 which one to do, what time it went, and blow me dead, they got through. They managed to, when they got to where they're going they managed to contact the British Consul. He contacted, oh, he must have contacted the underground or something, they got them down through free France, Spain, Gibraltar and then across to England.

Well, with your escape here, for that week, what were you doing

25:30 **to escape? Just talk us through how you actually left the guards or whatever.**

Yeah, well they guard, they only ever had one, the group I was in, they only ever had one guard to a group of workers. So just to sort of disappear was, you couldn't be everywhere at once, it was only when he counted you, when he come home, that he knew that there was one and that's how we sort of, we just disappeared into the, it was out in the scrub,

26:00 I think, we just disappeared. I just don't know where we went to, but anyhow, we missed the main, we wasn't there. And, but other than that, yeah, no, getting away, wasn't working real hard, I know dozens of blokes that got away.

Where would you stay, where would you sleep?

Anywhere. Anywhere, at that time

26:30 the snow had set in again, and we, the, sort of annoys us, we sort of went at the wrong time. And we laid down one day and I remember we woke up in the morning and I remember there was snow everywhere, we were covered in snow. You had to be very careful because hypothermia would set in on you. But we sort of, you tried to travel as much as you could in the dark because if you exposed yourself,

27:00 well people say, "Well, these two blokes shouldn't be here and here they are," type of thing. Everything was against you, unless you've got help.

So you'd lay low during the day?

Yeah, as much as we could, yeah.

And you mentioned being in the boob, was there any other punishment, like would they beat you or anything for escaping?

27:30 No, no they, the German took the attitude that it was your place to escape and theirs to stop you, how they stopped you they didn't care, so long a they stopped you. One camp commandant we had, his wife was interned in America, and we got a reasonably good go off him, he, no there

28:00 was no, never any, like floggings or anything like that. You just got solitary confinement in a boob or, you know, just let out for an hour's exercise. If you was a habitual escapist they had a place where they used to send you, I think it was that place the air force blokes

28:30 busted out of, I just can't remember the name, but it, it was escape proof, if you caused too much trouble, they'd just bung you up there. They wouldn't, they didn't belt you or anything like that.

Well, tell us, before we get to Poland, the camp there, just tell us about some of the conditions inside these camps.

In Poland?

No, before we get to Poland, in Germany.

29:00 Well, we was in, up in Breslau [Lamsdorf] at 8B, before we was, no we were sent from Munich up to 8B, up to Breslau. And we was sort of drafted there, they picked out, they must have given us a medial examination I think, and they picked out blokes fit for heavy work, like coal mine work. And, the Germans fed the prisoners of war,

29:30 on account of what work they were doing. Like we would, I see I got picked for the mines, so I was physically, pretty physically fit as I could be on no food. The team I got sent with, we got better fed than the bloke that got, stayed back in the camp and felt he couldn't go out, now that's how he fed his army,

30:00 blokes in the front line got the best of rations and what they had, the base wallahs and that, they had to make do type of thing, sort of thing, with not so good a rations. But we got fed alright in the mines, but just alright, you know. With our Red Cross parcel, we may be open to a bit of training and that.

Well, before we talk about the mines, what would be a typical day, for example in one of the German camps?

30:30 In Germany, what you'd done?

Yeah we had the railway work, for example.

Yeah and there was council work, yeah, all that's, you know you went out at, ordinary working hours, seven o'clock in the morning, whatever. You got home about half past four or something. Yeah that, then you just made your own time type of thing.

Would you do anything

31:00 **that was fun at all with each other?**

Oh yeah, they had a bit of a gym, we had a boxing ring and they used to hold camp concerts and all that. Yeah, there were a few things like that, nothing elaborate but. Yeah it was a bit, you know, it was a bit monotonous in camp, that's why I'd

31:30 rather, would have always rather better [be] out working.

Okay, so tell us about receiving the news that you had to go to Poland and work in the coal mines, did they tell you where you were going, or …?

Yeah, I think they did yeah, we knew where we were going, yeah, bloody oath. There was nothing you could do about it though, you just had to go. When we got to Breslau they, I think they give us a physical examination or something and they picked out the blokes that was alright to,

32:00 you know, go down the mines and anyone that wasn't, shape up, he was outed and, but no, most of us got sent to the mines. Yeah, the Poles are pretty good blokes. We was in, over in Silesia, we was in a place called Priaska, a place called Dubrovnik, big, they were just big mining towns, you know.

32:30 Then in the winter time, you, few blokes went around the bend actually, not that they sort of there, but what I was telling you about, when they got out they sort of went, because winter time, if you went down, if you was on day shift, you'd go down in the dark and it'd be dark when you come up. And, you know, you never saw daylight and it sort of got to you, get enough of that and it sort of get to you in the long run.

33:00 We used to, we sort of working hard, they used to issue us with, oh, chits about that round with a little hole on a chain and you used to have to, when you filled a, one of the wagons, you used to put it in the hole in the wagon and the bloke on the shaft would take it up and hang it on your hook. We used to have to do eighty of those a shift. Be two shovellers, used to be with

33:30 an old Polish miner bloke. But sometimes you wouldn't be able to start for, you might sit on your bum for an hour and half because you'd go onto the face on your shift and this old Polish miner bloke would have to, he might have to bore anything up to fifty or sixty holes in the face and he used to have to plug it with dynamite, and then blow it and, you know, blow all the coal down. And then you used to have to wait till he went in and made

34:00 safe, he'd have a short ladder and he'd never get down, that was the face, he'd start there, had a little short handled pick and it'd be big lumps hanging over his head that hadn't fallen and lumps to the side and he'd just go whack, whack, whack, drop them all down, you know. Well, then you used to have to go and have to get your trolley off the main haulage, the main railway line, push it up the face, when you filled it, you pushed it out, you hooked it to the cable going to the shaft.

34:30 And there, the first, probably twenty or thirty trucks you'd get easy because it'd be in big lumps and we used to just pick it up and put it in by hand, but after that you used to have to shovel pretty hard, you know.

What kind of hours were they making you to work?

Oh you was doing a full eight hours. And then some places, if you hadn't, if you hadn't finished that eighty or eighty two or whatever it was,

35:00 you stopped there till you did, so it was, you know, your own benefit to get them done.

Describe for us the camp actually at Breslau.

Oh it was a normal prisoner of war camp. It was there that they used the

35:30 handcuffs on us when Canadians raided Dieppe and they found a lot of German prisoners handcuffed and shot and, that's when they used to handcuff us there for a while, when this is sort of a transit camp before we went into the mines. That could have helped us going into the mines a bit I think, too. But I had a couple of smarty, got those little bully beef keys and

36:00 we learned how to undo them ourselves, but you had to be careful if there was a guard about, you had to make out the handcuffs was still on. But other than that it was just a plain ordinary dreary old prison camp you know. Blokes huddled around the huts talking and what they were going to do when they got home and what they wasn't going to do.

Was there much talk about women?

Yeah, I had

36:30 two blokes talking one day and one fellow said to me, “What’s the first thing you’ll down when you get home?” and he said, “Get into bed with me Missus.” He said, “What are you going to do then?” He said, “Take me pack off.”

That raises another point, how important was it to have a sense of humour?

It was everything. It was that, it was always one or two blokes

37:00 in a mob of men that no matter how bad or that the game is going, they’ll always see the funny side of it, or come up with some stupid statement that just keeps that morale, just, you know, without going flat. It’s a, they’re a breed of their own but they’re worth a million dollars you know.

Was there any one particularly memorable character

37:30 **in this?**

No, not really. They were all sort of, as far as I was concerned, all good blokes, you know.

I mean this comic character that comes to mind, like made you laugh?

Oh yeah, I can’t, I know it was one of them but I just can’t remember which, what his name was, but oh, you know, said, “What are you going to do then?” He said, “Take me pack off.”

38:00 **They made jokes about the situation they’re in, like?**

Yeah. Women was half the topic of, you know, yeah. I said, “that’s your share of it fellows, you can only talk about it now.”

Tape 7

00:32 **Working in a coal mine in Poland, you mustn’t have wanted to work in a coal mine back in Australia when you came back to Australia, did it ever cross your mind, I’m just curious?**

No, not really, no not really.

Because the conditions were absolutely terrible weren’t they?

Yeah.

Now they made you work all day, and even Saturday.

And Sunday, you got every fourth Sunday off.

01:00 **And what happened when it was lunch time, did somebody hand out sandwiches or you even get fed?**

No you didn’t, you just took whatever you had yourself and if you had time, if you had time to eat it you did but if you didn’t you didn’t.

Did many men actually, I suppose like the Burma-Thai railway, did many men die by the wayside?

No, not really, no the, see the mines

01:30 was also worked by conscript labour, it was all Polish labourers working with us, well they was under the German thumb, the only fellas down the mine was German bosses or Poles that had gone, you know, over to the Germans type of thing but they would have had to know the mining game. And it was all conscript workers and prisoners.

And can you tell us, you were telling us

02:00 **at afternoon tea about the men getting a bit of a coal ration?**

Oh yeah, that was in the winter, they had little stoves in our barracks, and we used to get a coal ration because, you know, it was freezing conditions and we would have survived but it was much better with the coal, we used to use it for boiling water and making tea and all that business, you know.

Couldn’t you just sort of pocket a little bit of coal anyway?

02:30 No, because after you come out of the coal mines you were taken to the showers. They had a big shower room and you stripped off all your coal mining gear, and you got back into your uniform or whatever it was, so no, you couldn’t have, it wouldn’t have been worth it because your clothes would have been black with coal. And, you know, it just wouldn’t have been worth it.

03:00 **What was your actual role in the coal mine? Were you all assigned different positions, or …?**

Yeah, they assigned me to a shovel, a dirty big square mouth one and that's what I done, loaded trucks.

Horrible tiring job.

Yeah.

And were you allowed to …?

Oh, I occasionally drove an air –

03:30 oh what would you call it? – some of the trucks were air conditioned type of thing, that you worked on air. You pulled levers and one thing and another, I was on that for a while, but very shortly.

Did you come across any civilians during that time that you, actually at Breslau? I mean you were down the mine a lot of the time, but did you come across any civilians at any time

04:00 **that you were able to talk to?**

Oh yes, yes, we sort of made friends with a lot of the Polish blokes, yeah.

What were they like, the Poles?

They were alright, yeah, pretty good fellows, the majority of them were, we struck one or two snags but the majority of them was pretty good, yeah.

Had you kept any communications with anyone you had met as POW?

No not really. Not really no. We,

04:30 There was the bad Poles and the good Poles, but they were nearly all pretty good fellows. You know, some had gone pro-German and would put their mates in, whistle blowers, but. No, taking the Poles on the whole, I found them a good race.

Can you try to explain for us the mind-set, the daily mind-set of a POW? I mean, how could yourself, were you always

05:00 **thinking of escaping for example?**

Yeah, not in, I give it away after we got to Poland because it would have been virtually impossible and, plus the fact that if you done the wrong thing at that stage of the game, they were just starting to find out they were going to lose the war and they didn't care who they shot, you know. So I said, 'Why come this far and then risk,' you know,

05:30 'throwing everything to the wind just for the sake of – ' probably twelve months, it could have been all over.

So when were you aware then of what was happening in Europe, for instance D-Day? You were talking very early in the day about your mates that made a little crystal set.

Yeah, crystal set, yeah.

Is that how you found out?

Yeah, we knew when the push started in Russia and we were only about sixty kilometres from Krakow. The mines I was in, well that was where

06:00 the Russian made his first, sort of made his first push. And we knew that they were closing in on him on all sides. But then they got us out and they started to march us, then, round in circles, like all around Europe, they'd march us away from the Russians, the Americans would make a push somewhere and we were going in that direction, they'd swing us away somewhere else. And the British would make a push in that direction and then the Free French would make a push in some other direction, and

06:30 we [were] just going around and around in circles. We marched for three months.

But the kind of marching with WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s with their heads cut off, not really going anywhere.

That's right, they didn't know where they was going they were just doing anything to prolong the war for, you know, a few more months.

And this was in freezing conditions?

Yeah it was. I remember one night, we camped in a hay shed full of hay and the hay was sort of a bit damp,

07:00 and I made the fatal error of me boots had got wet that day and sort of walking through snow and me boots had got wet and I took them off. And I went to put them on in the morning and they were hard, you could belt them with, they'd froze, all the water in the boots had froze, they were wet. And you could belt them with an axe and luckily I had another pair, I had to throw them away, but I got another pair, a bloke lent me a pair or something. So I threw them away.

How did that second, they ended up taking you from

07:30 **Breslau to Dubrovnik …**

Pieski [?] and then Dubrovnik.

How did that differ from Pieski?

Nothing virtually, it was just a same mine, they must have wanted more men on this second mine than they did, or the second mine was producing well or coal or something, yeah.

Now who's it mainly going to, this coal, I mean who was all the coal for?

08:00 For the Germans.

For the Germans to take back to Germany or …?

For the German war machine yeah, because they created lots of power and, it probably, everything run on coal in that era.

And, from Dubrovnik that's when you heard about D-Day?

Yeah, that's when that push started and that's when the campaign, they marched us out.

And how were the guards acting towards you then?

08:30 Oh yeah, alright, because they could see the writing on the wall. And they, you know, they were probably doing it nearly as tough as we was, I suppose, because they [were] probably getting a bit more food, no they, you know, they never got dirty on us or anything like that type of thing, you know.

09:00 **Did you ever hear any of them, I don't know, confess to Australians or anyone that they knew, that they knew the war was ending?**

Who, the Germans? No, no they would never admit it, right to the last day, they would never have said they were going to get beat, you know. Well, it was more than they were worth because they, if anyone ever repeated it to an officer or that, they'd have paid the penalty.

09:30 **Were they, German men, hard on each other, the hierarchy or …?**

Yeah, the German officer was very hard on the German soldier. The German soldier is more frightened of his officers than he was of his enemy and that's what made him a good soldier. See the SS [Schutzstaffel – 'protection squad'], the Gestapo and that, they were feared, they were a feared mob in Germany and you never know who is one because

10:00 your kid might have signe du [signal?] and you don't know, and, you know, you're talking at the table and you say the wrong word, next thing your house is raided and you're bunged anywhere.

Have you seen any movies from that time that actually accurately depict for you life as a POW?

Like, how do you mean, in …?

Well, like I asked a Changi bloke once what he thought of the mini series Changi and he said,

10:30 **"It was a pile of…"**

Bulldust. In other words, shit.

So I wondered, if you'd seen any?

No, I love watching 'Hogan's Heroes' on the giggle box.

That's not really accurate though, is it?

No, no that's a load of bulldust, that's the greatest bulldust show in the world.

Something that occurred to me, working in the coalmine, what about your lungs?

11:00 **Were you, did you have any problems with that?**

Yeah, too right I am. I have a lot of problems, matter of fact this doctor, he put me onto a new drug yesterday and I reckon that's the wonder drug of the century it's done a lot of good, I've only used it twice and I've, but I won't speak too soon, because I've had this, I've had emphysema for a long time, you know. Yeah I do suffer with lung trouble. We was in a,

11:30 I worked a fair bit on stone faces, and that's like, down a mine, if they're going to start a new level or something, or there's a, they're going into a, for a new seam of coal, it's always covered by layers and layers of slag and rock and you got to drill through that, and, blow, it's all got to be blown and cleared away for them to get at the coal. And very often,

12:00 you know, after they've drilled rock and that, we'd be working in a film of stone-dust all the time. And that's when I reckon, unfortunately I was smoking in that era, and when me lungs weren't getting filled with stone-dust and that, I'd be smoking up top, you know, at the camp at night and that type of thing.

Did you know anything about what was going on in the islands for the Australians

12:30 **during this time?**

Yeah, we knew when the Japs had come into the war. I think we knew about, yeah we knew about Pearl Harbor. But we, yeah, we had a fair idea of what was going on because this bloke used to be able to tune into that Lord Haw-haw – remember him? – always shooting his mouth off. But we always treated it as propaganda, we said it wouldn't be right,

13:00 but it was right, a lot of it was right, we just wouldn't believe it or we didn't want to believe it, one of the two, you know.

About what was happening in Australia, to Australians?

Yeah, yeah, at, oh and the Americans, the Germans put out a lot of propaganda, they used to print a sheet and, that we could read in English about how the Yanks was all on with their wives and girlfriends and having a ball in Australia and you poor mugs have,

13:30 you know, out doing the fighting and all this propaganda which, and that's what made us sort of, didn't believe that it was, half of what they were putting out was right. And they used to, they had a wireless up, a German wireless up in the canteen and they had that Lord Haw-haw on and Tokyo Rose and, you know, and Australians were getting beaten everywhere, getting slaughtered. But, I, probably a lot of it was right, but we didn't believe it. Thank goodness.

14:00 **Do you think that had you believed it then perhaps it would have had an effect on your morale?**

It would have, yeah, if we'd have believed it, yeah, but we never at any stage believed that we was going to lose the war, particularly after America come into it, we thought, 'We're home and hosed now.'

So who perpetrated this propaganda about Americans taking off with Australian women? Who dropped those sheets?

14:30 Oh, the Germans, they get them specially printed.

The Germans did?

Well, to try to break our morale, you know.

That was kind of them.

Yeah.

Now what about accidents in the mine?

Yes, a few of them, yeah.

What about you?

I had one small one meself, I got that hand busted open, yeah, I got that hand busted open, which I treasured

15:00 because it got me out of the mines for about a month. We used to have to push, when we filled these, we used to call them skips. We used to have to fill them and push them out on a main little narrow gauged line and hook them onto the cable and to get up to the face. But they had two handles and they always told us to use the handles, but they had air pipes that used to come down that sometimes the truck would only just get under. And this day I forgot, and I had me hand on the top and I pushed it under the pipe,

15:30 and it jammed and split me hand open, right down there. I said, "You beauty," I could see sinews and everything hanging out, and I treasured it. I went straight, they took me straight up to the shaft and they took me up top and I went straight into the camp hospital. It was in the winter time and they used to lay there hearing the boys going to work of a morning and say, "You beauty, keep it up," you know.

Did they give you morphine for the pain?

It was an English doctor, he stitched it, no,

16:00 he used, it's the first time I ever seen it, he used clamps on it. He clamped it, never used stitches. It worked alright, it cleaned up good, of course I was young and healthy you know.

So, what was the English doctor doing there, he was a POW as well?

Yeah POW, yeah.

Did you know about the Aussie POWs that got taken in Singapore?

Oh we heard all sorts of propaganda, you know,

16:30 whether it was right or not, you know. Why, was a lot of them slaughtered or something were they?

Oh, when you were a POW over in Poland, were you aware of other Australians being taken and …?

No, no we didn't know, we didn't know anything about that. We didn't know anything about Weary Dunlop or any of that business you know.

But this is all the stuff you found out after the war?

After, yeah, as soon as we got out we seen the Jap blokes coming home. See, the Jap blokes have got a, they got

17:00 everything, we got nothing. They just issued all the Jap prisoners of war twenty five thousand, but we never got it. Any European prisoner, I think because the Japanese wasn't in the Geneva Convention and you know, still a lot, I think they would have done it a lot, they would have done it, being fair, they would have done it harder than we did, you know.

17:30 **Well, I guess it's all relative, I don't know. Being a prisoner at all doesn't sound too good.**

No, it's no, it wasn't a real pleasant turn out, no.

What, were they, the Germans, issuing your letters from home during that time?

Yes, yes it was all heavily censored, or anything you wrote home was heavily censored. But, yeah, I received a letter or two, yeah.

18:00 **So tell us now about what happened in those last, now it was the last three months that the Germans were running around like WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s with their heads cut off, so to speak, how did you actually live day by day, I mean, where did the food come from and were you allocated people to cook for you, how did it work?**

No, I can't actually remember how, this big march I was telling you I was on, I just can't

18:30 remember actually how they fed us, I mean what bit of food we did get, I can't remember where we got it from or how they give it to us. I think, slight recollection that when we pulled up at night, we was, could have got a pannikin of soup or a couple of slices of black bread, I think that was about it, you know. But, no, I haven't got a real recollection of how they done that.

19:00 But they, we must have been kept alive, because we'd been marching for three months.

And were you actually physically marching, doing the marching drill that you were taught way back in Puckapunyal?

Oh no, you didn't march, you was, you know, you never kept lines or anything, you just walked, start from staggered, no, there was no marching, if

19:30 that's what you meant, yeah, no, it was just a mob of stragglers actually.

What got you through those days? Was, hopefully, some of those humorous blokes still around?

Oh no, just the fact that you knew it was getting close and you knew that we was going to get out pretty soon and you know, just sort of

20:00 think, 'Well, how much longer is it going to last?' I can remember the night that we were released. We were held up in a little German village and we knew the Yanks were pretty close, and they had us penned up, and the few Germans and the guards and everything, and they sent in an ultimatum. If they, the Germans didn't surrender by such and such a time the next morning,

20:30 they were going to flatten it. We were all in there. So, couple of, three of our blokes got up, climbed up on a roof and got a sheet from somewhere, a white thing, and they hoisted this sheet up, you know. But we got up in the morning and all the German guards were gone. So, we, that was General Patten's mob, we were right then, that was the day we were released.

What happened, did the Americans come in big jeeps or …?

They were all sitting out ready to go,

21:00 they were going to flatten this town if they didn't surrender, but they didn't want to because they would have flattened a lot of civilians and that with it, you know. But no, we, we woke up and all the guards are gone and we're free. So we, me and a couple, half a dozen of us, went into a German cocky and knocked his tractor and hay cart off and started it off, and all got in and one bloke drove it and we set sail, yeah. We couldn't start the tractor next morning, it was too cold,

21:30 it was, or we didn't know how to do it, so we just abandoned it and just all made our own way, you know.

Do you remember what the Americans said, did they say anything to …?

Yeah, they said, “Make your own way back if you want to.” But they said, “Be off the road by such and such a time at night because there’s a curfew on and half of us are trigger happy and you could get shot, so just, you know,

22:00 ‘By all means make your own way back if you want to but make sure yo do the right thing.’ I got, we got back to, oh several places. I know we got back to Nuremberg, I think it was, and we got on to a Yank and he was going back to Luxemburg the next day in a jeep and he said, “I’ll give you a ride if you want to.” So we,

22:30 there was only about two or three of us and we climbed in the back of this jeep and we went through to Luxemburg and then we got transferred to Rheims, that was a transit camp, then they, we [were] sort of handed back to our own army, we got issued with our own uniforms and all particulars taken and new pay books and blah, blah, blah.

23:00 But, it was in Rheims that I had the pleasure of talking to Vera Lynn.

Vera Lynn the singer?

Yeah, I was, per se, talking to her, she was walked up and said, “How are you soldier?” and I said, “Alright, thanks very much.” I didn’t know who I was talking to for a minute. That was about all she said but I always said to the blokes, “I could have got on with Vera Lynn,” and they said, “Oh, you bloody – ”

Was she a looker?

Yeah, she wasn’t bad,

23:30 in that era she was alright.

So how was this feeling, was it almost impossible to believe you were free?

Yeah, it was. It was like being born again, you know, only just coming into the world again. Yeah.

And when you got to Rheims, you said you were issued, you met up with the Australian Army.

Yeah, well we handed back, we handed over to the British army again.

24:00 And from there we were, we were flown from Rheims to – what’s that big other aerodrome in England? – I just forget, anyway, that’s where all these girls were there and they had the tables in the hangars all set out with what food they had and, I was with an all-Australian crew and they’d

24:30 issued us with a special Yankee dressy shirt, oh they were nice to look at. No, no that wasn’t right. Yeah, I had that but it was sort of half Yankee uniform I had, and I had this coat, a fur lined, half duffel coat type, and this young aircrew bloke said to me, he said, “Where did you get that coat?” I said, “We got them issued in Rheims.” He said, “Gee, they’d be good for our job, wouldn’t they?” and I said, “Yeah.”

25:00 So anyhow, just when we’re about to land, he said, “How are you for money? You haven’t got any at the moment but we’ll get paid soon as we get into an organised camp.” And he pulled out a wad of notes that would have choked a giraffe and he peeled off about fifteen English pounds and he said, “Here, put this in your pocket.” And I said, “No, I didn’t, I don’t want that mate.” I said, “I’ll never see you again,” and I said, “I can’t pay it back.” He said, “I’m not lending it to you, I’m giving it to you,” and I said, “Alright.”

25:30 And I knew he had his eye on this jacket, so as I jumped out the plane I peeled it off, I said, “Hey mate.” He said, “Yeah?” and I said, “Cop this.” And I heaved it straight back into the fuselage, it hit him in the face with it. He said, “Nah, nah.” I said, “Yeah, keep it,” and I just nicked off, because he’d give me fifteen English pounds, the coat possibly wasn’t worth that.

Do you think it wasn’t worth it?

Oh well I suppose it would have been, especially in that era. But oh he was rapt.

26:00 He was a West Australian I think.

So tell us about the girls, you were telling us off camera about these girls that I guess the English had organised?

Yeah, it could have been land army girls or something, I don’t know, but they were there especially to welcome us home type of thing, yeah.

And you were afraid of saying a

26:30 **few words.**

Oh yeah, I should have said, because when you’ve lived among men for four or five years and, you know, as I said to you, could swear for a quarter of an hour and never repeat yourself and you had to be, mind you Ps and Qs what you’d said.

That wasn't the first time you'd actually see a woman in all that time was it?

Oh no, no, no. We seen a lot in Germany yeah, never spoke to them or anything like that, you know.

And obviously you didn't see any down the coal mine.

No, no.

So it must have been ...

27:00 There might have been, one of two working out, Polish women working up on the top of the shaft, you know, or the coal, on the shafts. But no, there was no, none down below, no.

And, sorry I'm prompting you here but I think it's quite funny that this lovely English girl said to you, "You don't have to worry about swearing." She was quite understanding.

Yeah, but like, in that era,

27:30 to have used a four letter word would have been, you'd have almost been hung drawn and quartered. But today, I men kids use it going to school, but not in that era you didn't. You got a few, you know, you'd be very embarrassed if you used it. But, however, we got over it.

Did a lot of men though, for instance, some country men get, Australian country men get embarrassed when Australian men would use that word as well?

What, in that era?

28:00 **In the army, yes.**

No, not in the army amongst yourselves because that was the only spoken swearing you're doing lots of times. I mean, you describe an officer, you can imagine what a lot of them described an officer as. They didn't like, but no, you didn't go around saying it in front of women.

And that would have been very offensive to a woman, I suppose.

Well, in that era it would have been,

28:30 I wasn't game to try it anyway.

Did you end up talking to her about it?

Oh yeah, but I never said too much. Apart from the fact that I was frightened of swearing I was, sort of, a little bit embarrassed, you know, when you're put in that situation after all those years and then they just sprayed us and deloused us, she might have thought I was lousy or some bloody thing.

That's right, they deloused you,

29:00 **didn't they, in front of these women?**

Yeah they all seen us get deloused. Well, that was the time wasn't it?

So can you tell us how long it took you to get back to Australia then?

Well, we went back to a camp in Eastbourne and, about, I was in London about seventeen days I think,

29:30 because it cost us a lot of money, a taxi wouldn't pull up unless you was American or Australian, and I was always bushed in London, I could never find me way around, with a lot of other blokes. If, grab a taxi was the easiest way but you might only want to go around the corner, you didn't know but he'd take you, he'd keep you in there for another twenty minutes. And, you know, he knew we all had money, the Yanks had plenty of money, the poor bloody English soldier, he was getting one and six a day or

30:00 something, he had nothing. And we were very popular with the women, we had to beat them off with sticks, just about because half of them, I was, got grabbed for company runner one day for, when we was in Eastbourne, and yeah, I was, had to stop in the office and run messages and that for him, the CO [Commanding Officer], and if you wanted to get married, you had to

30:30 make an application to your commanding officer, and there was a heap of applications of blokes to get married that high. They married, these Pommy women got onto them and they married them like flies. All they wanted was a trip out to Australia, I reckon, half of them. As soon as they got out here, they probably dice the... But anyhow, a lot of our blokes fell for it. Married them right left and centre.

What about you, I suppose

31:00 **you had Lesley back in Australia?**

No, no, now. I was, no, I done alright but I, no I wasn't on with her then, as a matter of fact she was, my first wife was engaged to a lieutenant when I got back.

When you got back she was engaged?

Hm.

How did it end up that she ended up with you then?

I don't know, but she did,

31:30 much to her family's disgust and one thing and another.

So what happened, I'm just curious about this, so you came back and said, "Alright Buster, move over."

That's right, yeah. It was her decision. I mean I'd, she wanted to do it, that was. But he was a little bit high-faulting, you know, I think, you know, she was a bit frightened whether she'd fit into his way of living and that type of thing, but, she would have, but anyway,

32:00 she picked on me, so.

Did you expect Lesley to still hold a candle for you when you came back?

No, not really, no, no, I had no one in mind in particular when I got back. No. No, it just happened, she was, that adopted mother of mine

32:30 that reared me I was telling you about, she knew when the boat, they all got notified when we'd land and she had arranged a party for me with a few of me old mates and friends, and she invited her, she was there, and it sort of, you know, just kicked on from there because the bloke she was engaged to was still up the islands, he was a lieutenant, he was still up the islands, he hadn't got home.

33:00 See I was lucky, I was in England for the victory, European victory, and I was back in Australia for the Pacific victory, got the two celebrations.

And did she go out with you when you got back?

Yeah, yeah, we went, virtually started to go out straight away.

So she wrote him a 'Dear John' letter [letter informing that a relationship is over], did she?

I don't know.

33:30 Yeah, I think she must have, yeah. He put up a good fight, but he, I kept out of it, just let her fix it herself, with her family. I was a little bit wild and they reckoned she was doing the wrong thing and he was a fine bloke with opportunity and a future in front of him and I was a bloody drunken no hoper type of thing, you know. Anyhow it worked out, it worked out alright.

34:00 **So you got married at the end of 1945?**

No it would have been '46, '47 I was married, I think. About '46 I think, yeah.

Just in those two weeks that you were in England before you came back to Australia, was that just amazing, just for you to see London, bombed, and everything it had gone through during the war?

Yeah,

34:30 I seen Coventry when it was, I made a special trip down to look at Coventry and it was flat. There wasn't a thing standing you wouldn't reckon. But then, oh God, it was in a mess. But then, there was sort of lots of parts of London that wasn't, hadn't been hit you know, but what had been hit, had been hit. Yeah, it wasn't a very nice sight, but, oh, you ought to have seen some of those German cities. They just

35:00 levelled them you know, big beautiful city and they just levelled them, how they ever rebuilt them again, I never know.

What did you think of, the opportunity to perhaps stay in England, was that an option for you?

No, never give it a thought, I couldn't get back to Australia quick enough actually.

Why was that, because of the weather or because of your mates?

No, just, well all me family

35:30 was here, I mean Australia was the only country I ever knew, there was nothing in England, although I did have a lot of relations there. I finished up I didn't see them. But no, England wouldn't have held anything for me.

And, what about the trip coming home, do you remember what the vessel, what the ship was called?

Yeah, the Arundel Castle.

The Arundel Castle? And was that

36:00 **the same kind of luxury liner you went over in?**

No, no. Had, we were in hammocks and the hammocks used to be swung over the mess tables in the mess hall. And we used to be up and have our hammocks out of the road and rolled up and everything out of the road so as they could set the tables. And we lived on boiled potatoes and some other flaming rubbish. I think two days out of New Zealand, or something,

36:30 the sewerage broke down and she was washing raw sewerage over one deck, oh it was a horrible thing. But still, they used anything that would float and carry lots, you know. We had a couple of those leaving New Zealand.

What did you think of New Zealand?

Nice.

Nice isn't it?

Yeah, nice country New Zealand. Yeah.

God's kiss on earth, they say.

37:00 Yeah, yeah.

And what about coming home then, was there hundreds of people lining the dock?

No, we landed in Sydney, and we were taken out to the showgrounds in Sydney and we just bedded down. We thought we were there for the night and they come around about, I don't know, about seven or eight o'clock at night, I know it was dark, they said, "Right, grab your gear, you're going down to the railway station," I don't know

37:30 what station it was in Sydney, and put us on a train and we got to Melbourne about, oh, three o'clock or something the next day. And they took us out to Royal Park and there was a big crowd there, there was hundreds lined up the route and, yeah, there was, can't remember much other than, you know, I was sort of looking for me

38:00 family and that. Then we went from there, we went by car out to where me adopted mother was living, and they had a, she had a party set for us, quite a few people there, it was good.

What did you call your adopted mum?

I called her Mum.

What was her name?

Olive Bullman.

Olive Bullman, and what was her husband's name?

John. They used to call him Don for some unknown reason

38:30 but I used to call him Unc and her Mum for some reason, I used to confuse everybody as a kid, yeah.

And did you keep in touch with Alice throughout your life?

Yeah, yeah, and right till the end and she died, yeah.

That was nice of your mum, Olive, to give you a party.

Yeah. It was good. Yeah, she made my life …

And did you say that the streets in Melbourne were lined with people. Were you …?

39:00 No. When we come home?

Yes.

No, no it was really a few streets out around Royal Park where we, they took us.

Like a parade.

No they just drove us up in cars. Dumped us out, I, this, I don't know whether they even, don't know if they even had refreshments or anything. They could have but I just can't remember you know.

Must have been a feeling,

39:30 **coming home.**

Oh yeah, it was good, terrific, yeah.

Tape 8

00:43 **You mentioned that injury you had, that hand injury.**

Yeah.

And you said that was a blessing because you didn't have to go down to the coal mines.

That's right yeah.

How long did you have the injury for?

Oh, I couldn't tell you, you know, it would [have] been,

01:00 I suppose it would have been three weeks, a month, I was out, yeah. Because it was a pretty, it opened up, you know, it was a pretty bad gash. It took a while to heal, but, I think I was in the camp hospital, I don't know, it could have been about a week. But then it was heavily bandaged, I didn't go back down for a while, till the doctor give me the okay. I suppose I could have been out for a month.

Now did you want it to heal, or did you …?

No, I didn't like, I was nearly going to give it a helping hand,

01:30 but the doctors would have woke as to what I was doing, you know.

You didn't cut it open again?

No, no.

You were telling some stories about people which also would get injuries, off camera. What kind of things would they do to get out of having to …?

Well, I said the bloke that stuck his finger on the railway line and the bloke I dropped the rock on his foot.

02:00 Oh, what else, what, there'd be quite a few other incidents, I just sort, they're the two that stuck in me mind, you know, 'cause I was sort of mixed up with them. No, I just can't remember any of the others type of thing, yeah.

Now did you have any nicknames for any of the Germans?

Oh, for the Germans?

02:30 No, we just used refer to them all as 'the square headed bastard' mainly and, you know. No we never sort of tagged anyone with a nickname. It's a, all Huns or krauts or square headed bastards, something like that.

There were no particular guards that reminded you of …?

No, no.

I was interested in the structure of the camps. Like when you were back in your barracks,

03:00 **were officers in charge, how did it work?**

They used to have a commander of the camp, a German commander. But then they'd have an English, well what would you call him, the bloke we had, the first camp, I remember we had a warrant officer. And he was sort of head of the camp. If you had any complaints, you had to go

03:30 to him and he done his best to keep the camp running in, you know, smooth as he could. If you was planning an escape, you went to him. If he could help you, he would, without committing himself. But, the, no, the boss cocky was a German commander.

And did the men follow this order say, amongst

04:00 **the allied prisoners, did they follow the orders of the officers or did they say, 'Oh look, we're all …'?**

No, no they, they abided by the rules of the camp because the Hun would, if he made rules he made sure they were carried out. Like if he wanted trouble, he'd give it to you, but no, there was no, there was no, I can't,

04:30 I think I might recall a couple of incidents of a guard going the bash, but, if he done much he would have to report to the commandant that he'd done it and why he'd done it and, you know, that way they were pretty fair.

What about amongst the actual prisoners, like, did officers have an authority over the enlisted?

No, no there was no, if you was an NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] you didn't have to work, from a bloody colonel down to a

05:00 NCO, they were all in special camps, you didn't have to work. Because when [some] of our blokes got to Germany, half the buggers sewed a couple of stripes on themselves or put them down as corporal and the Hun said he never seen an army with so many corporals in it, you know.

How did you feel about that, having to do all the work because you weren't an officer?

Oh this was, this, those fellows, they stopped in a main camp. We were

05:30 set out on working commando camps and I'd rather be sent out on a working commando camp than being stuck in a camp where you done nothing. You know, you would have been too long and boring, as far as I was concerned. I mean, even though I was down a coal mine, I, it was, you know, pretty rugged and rough and that, and hard, but I reckoned the time would have gone a lot quicker than being cooped up in a camp where you done nothing.

06:00 **Well, how did you cope with those times where you did get cooped up doing nothing?**

I just don't know how you done it. You sort of, you got a bit of reading material or you moped around, and went, you know, walked around between each other talking or something like that, it's just anything to fill in a bit of time.

What about when you were in the boob?

Well, there's always two of us. The first time we was in there was two

06:30 to one cell, you know. No, you just laid about and waited for the next day to come to get out and exercise. I suppose the same as being in gaol here, you know, she'd get a bit monotonous and boring.

Were there any games you played to pass the time?

Yeah, they'd organise an Australian Rules game

07:00 occasionally. And, we had a boxing ring and gym set up. I, a lot of them played cards and that type of thing, you know.

With this Aussie Rules game, what was the football, what did you use as a football?

What, as Australian Rules football?

Yeah, how did you get a football in there?

Oh well the Red Cross, see the Red Cross would get you

07:30 a lot of stuff. When we had the gym, they got us a boxing ring and boxing gloves and all that type of stuff.

And did you have a box?

Yeah. Got more hidings than I give, but I, used to have a go.

You mentioned the Red Cross would get you things, what exactly would they usually have in a package that you'd get?

Oh you got, the Canadian Red

08:00 Cross parcel was the best, but in an average normal Red Cross parcel you would get, say, a tin of meat rolls sort of stuff, you'd get a two ounce of chocolate, you'd get a two ounce packet of tea. You'd get a what's her name of cocoa, you'd get a packet of dates. I just

08:30 can't remember all the stuff, but what they used to do, was you had to pair up and they would only give you one parcel between two of youse, twice a week so as you couldn't hoard stuff and, in lots of cases, they would puncture the, they would puncture anything with meat in it so you couldn't hoard it, you had to give it out, because a lot of blokes used to hoard stuff to nick off with. So they woke up to the fact

09:00 and they just used to puncture anything that was like bully beef or meat rolls or meat luncheon. This Canadian, we used to get this half thing of milk in a, powdered milk, I know it was the best parcel of the lot. I, 'cos I think you got a fair bit more than what you got in the normal parcel, you know. But it was a life saver as far as we were concerned, like I reckon we'd have died if

09:30 it hadn't been for the Red Cross parcel, we, we got them fairly regularly but they were regular a lot of the time, it all depends on what camp you was in.

Well, what food were you being fed apart from these Red Cross parcels?

From the Germans?

Yeah.

Oh, you'd get a loaf of bread between four of youse, it was black bread,

10:00 you'd get a sort of a watery stew type of thing at night which would have, say, a couple of spuds in it, they were big into the sauerkraut cabbage, you got about four ounces of meat at the weekend, you got an issue of margarine,

10:30 about four ounces of margarine or something a day, but made up with the Red Cross parcel, you survived on that you know. Yeah there'd be a few other things in it, but you never got a great lot off the Germans, just the bare necessity. If you was in the mines, you'd get, you know, you'd get a bigger helping of it, but it was all sort of the same sort of stuff.

And you mentioned how you could trade some of the chocolate

11:00 **for favours, but was there any other black market sort of?**

Yeah, oh the civvies. For two ounce packet of tea, we used to get five loaves of bread. For cocoa, we'd get about the same. Tea and chocolate were the main things that our end, the Bavarian when we was in Munich, the Bavarian people wanted, because they were used to it, they were very close to the English race, you know.

11:30 And, he cut tea out, we used to get, all they got was that Ersatz coffee stuff and, oh, it was vile stuff. We got a, most of it too, but yeah we, we used to get, we used to have to bribe some of the guards some of the time. We used to get a round tin of gold flake cigarettes with fifty in it and we'd bribe one of the

12:00 guards with ten cigarettes out of that to close his eyes while we done a bit of trading with the civvies, you know, because the civvies took a bit of a risk too if they were caught. Yeah, there was a lot of, when we was in Munich we done a lot of trading because they were a more easier going people and the guards wasn't so strict. But the trouble is, when you was bringing bread that you had traded from outside, when you were bringing it back in the camp at night from the working party, you'd have

12:30 to say that, say if I just done some trading, I'd get you to carry a loaf and I'd get some, Mick Smith to carry a loaf and Joe Blow to carry another loaf and just pray to God we wasn't searched. They very rarely, they searched us occasionally, they'd spring a search on us but very rarely because the guard, he'd have been in the, he'd have probably been in the joke too with his bribe of the cigarettes, and he used to, you know, say, "They're right, there's nothing on them." And get us through the gate.

13:00 **A bit of Sergeant Schultz, 'I know nothing.' [from Hogan's Heroes]**

Yeah, yeah, Sergeant Shultz job yeah. That's dead right, that's what it was, Sergeant Shultz.

Where would you put the bread?

When we got it? Oh once you got it in the camp you was right.

I mean like how would you just, I know you'd bribe them but where would you put it, like up your shirt or you …?

Oh yeah, or you'd carry a bit of lunch out or something if you'd had, or another sweater in a, have a

13:30 little haversack or something and they soon got used to it you know. And they possibly knew that we had it, but they just didn't bother because they wasn't a bad mob of guards. It's only if you brushed the old commandant up the wrong way or something, but.

You mentioned this little crystal set, like how small was it, and …?

Oh look, some of them were geniuses what they, they, I reckon they'd fit in a matchbox half of them, some of them.

14:00 The blokes, you know the talents you get in a, men like that, it's fantastic. We had one bloke named Lofty McGuiness, he was a beauty, he was. We was in, oh Palestine or Egypt, forget [which] it was, and we got a new issue of dixies, and they was an aluminium square type, not like the old round one, you know. And a few of them started to go off and they woke up and anyhow,

14:30 this McGuiness in Palestine, they had a twenty cent, twenty mill piece, they called it, about that big. Had a hole in the middle and this bloke was knocking off aluminium dixies and making these counterfeit twenty mill pieces and he was, he got caught a few times but a lot of times he was passing them at shops at leave and that, and getting away with it. And that's where our dixies were going and he made a, oh he made

15:00 a little miniature canon and he used to put gun powder in and fire it. He blew a hole in the sergeant major's door one day.

You said, I mean in the coal mines your nerve would go. Was it from the blasts or …?

No, no I think it was just a constant, see, working in the dark all the time

15:30 and different things, it, I suppose it could have been worries at home or, you never know, blokes that didn't' know how the war was going, I know that type of bloke that worried about it. But mainly the nerve cases cracked after it was all over. They were alright while it was on, but the minute the pressure came off that's when you had to watch yourself.

16:00 **And what were the conditions of the beds and where you slept, were they …?**

Oh you had straw palliasse types of thing, it was a canvas, like a chaff bag type of thing full of straw and, but after a while that straw used to go flat and hard and you couldn't get other straw, you know, they only give you one issue of it or something. No the beds were, but still, when you're young you could sleep on that floor you know. You never got a crook back because the bed was too bloody hard.

16:30 **What about lice, was there lice?**

Yeah, we struck a lot of lice at the, this Salonika I was telling you about, oh you was, they used to get in the seams of your pants and, because you forever have your strides off trying to kill lice. Couldn't get proper showers or anything, you know.

So talking of showers, was the hygiene differences that you noticed between say Australians and British for example?

17:00 No, the German race is a very hygienic person. They are a very clean, you know, they were very strict on hygiene. We had one bloke with us and he was in my room as a matter of fact and he was in my barrack and he was a bit lax on having a shower, and we told the guard one day that we used to bluff him but he wouldn't shower. So he come down one Saturday

17:30 afternoon and lugged him out, made him go up and shower, he used to come down once a week to see if he'd showered, but no, the camps inside Germany, like not up in Poland, because we'd, they'd take us to the showers every night when we come out the mines, then we'd change their clothes, but all the other camps had good shower facilities, you know, you could get a shower every day.

Did you get sick during this time,

18:00 **flu, diseases?**

No, I never ever got sick. No, no. I think I got an attack, a bad attack of tonsillitis or something once, but that was about the only sickness I had, yeah.

And just one question about the lead up to the end of your time under German guard. How did the behaviour of the German guards change? Did it change noticeably?

18:30 Yeah they, you could sort of tell that it was getting near the end, they never got dirty or anything but they got very stand-offish and there was a different attitude toward them, you know. They were taking the attitude, 'Well, I'm going to look after meself,' you know, 'I don't care what happens to you blokes,' but no, they were alright, yeah, I mean you'll always get one or two snags in any

19:00 race, I mean, I can remember the first lot if Italians we got out of Bardia, we couldn't get water, supply had run out, it was in the desert and we had one bloke – we had thousands of them locked up – doing guards on them and this bloke was going up with a water bottle full of water and taking wrist watches off them for so much water and all this business, and that was

19:30 one of our own blokes doing that. So every side's got them.

Okay, and, tell us about, you said something about a jeep ride off camera?

A what mate?

A jeep ride, an American driving crazy.

Oh yeah, yeah. And that was in Nuremberg, we were hitchhiking a ride back to, we were heading back towards France and we finished up in Nuremberg,

20:00 and there was still a pocket of resistance there, there were a few snipers sitting around up in the double-decker things shooting up the street, and this Negro driver we had driving, he must have got one that nearly parted his hair and he took fright and he took off, oh frightened hell out of us. He was going around corners flat chat. I said to me mates, "If he slows up the next corner, bail out," which we did, straight out over the back.

20:30 **Alright I'll take it forward to where Heather [interviewer] left off and you were back in Australia, towards, the war had come to an end. Tell us, did you go to a convalescence …?**

Yeah, Ballarat. They took us to Ballarat and they medically examined us, done our teeth.

21:00 I, no, yeah that's where, yeah you got medically examined and they done our teeth, I forget what else they done. But I knew we, yeah that's about all they done. We was at Camp Hell and they paid us up, put us through thing to find out if there was any trade we wanted to do. You know, blah, blah, blah,

21:30 the rot they go on with, and, that was, it was the finish, they said, “Here’s your discharge papers.” But, yeah, Ballarat was the main convalescent camp. If you had anything wrong, that’s where you had to tell them, and like a fool I, you know a lot of us were a bit crook with nerves and one thing or another but you said, “No, I’m alright,” anything to get out. Sort of had been in there for five years, it was a long time out of your life.

22:00 **Well, what was the state of your health after all this?**

It was alright till I had a bit of a breakdown, I was in Heidelberg for a while, but once I levelled out on that, you know, took a few months, but, that was after I was married type of thing.

Well, tell us, how did your wife cope with it?

I don’t really know. But oh no, she was pretty good in that respect then, she was.

22:30 She was, played a big part in sort of getting me back on me feet. And well, I had to then because it was just after then that the old lady put up the money to buy the shop and I was going to let too many people down and I thought, ‘Well, I’m the only the one that can cure meself.’ And it was a bit of a battle, but I got over it alright.

What kinds of things did you do to get over it, if you can remember?

23:00 Oh look, I can’t actually remember, I’ve, you know, you’d fly off the handle over nothing and you was agro too, you’d get agro over nothing and you’d just have to sort of take a grip of yourself and say, you know, ‘I’ve got to try and remedy it,’ that was all I sort of done.

Did you have any bad dreams or nightmares or anything of the sort?

Oh you do occasionally, you do

23:30 occasionally. I, remember I got all me teeth out once, with anaesthetic up in Dandenong, and I swore violence, at the wall, ‘I’ve been hit in the mouth with – ‘ there was shrapnel or something and all me teeth were bloody gone. It was that realistic until I come to, you know, I thought, ‘Oh bloody hell, get me out of here quick.” Yeah, it was, that was about the only thing I had. Yeah, occasionally you used to dream.

24:00 **Why did you have, get all your teeth out, was that war related at all?**

No it was just a, you know, worn out, I wasn’t very old, I was only in me, I suppose I’d be in me early thirties or something. I often used to, you get mad dreams about it, I’m alright now, I don’t, but, for a while there you did, you know, you’re ducking

24:30 and diving around the bed.

What did the dreams relate to, more of under fire or more of the prisoner of war camps?

Oh just war in general you know, you was in an air raid or there’s mob of Stukas coming at you, or there’s, somehow you’re under an artillery barrage or some bloody thing. But yeah,

25:00 it’s a, some sixth sensing, I don’t know what it is, but. Every bloke, I reckon they’d have one.

What about imprisonment dreams, did you kind of have any dreams where you couldn’t get out of somewhere or …?

No, no I never.

What about noises and scares, that kind of thing.

No not really, no.

25:30 **Well, and did you ever talk to your wife in detail with your wife about what you went through or was it kind of not said?**

No she wasn’t, my first wife wasn’t very military minded type of thing. She sort of didn’t want to know about it an-, you know every bloke was the same to her, type of thing, but no, she was never very interested in where we went or what we done

26:00 and it was no good trying to convince, her, she, I suppose, you know, she had a lot of feelings herself that she sort of couldn’t let out, but. No she never ever sort of said, ‘Well, here’s a lot of sympathy,’ she was very good to me when I was, you know, a bit nervous and that. But looked after me well, but she’d never sort of confide in you about war or anything like that.

26:30 **What about your mates, would you talk to your mates about anything?**

Only at reunions and it was, you only remembered the funny things, you know, you didn’t, oh you might say, “Oh remember the day at Suda Bay,” or remember something else. But you only, at reunions and that, you only relate to what funny things and that happened, and so ….

27:00 No. that, I suppose a lot of them you fight the war over again and it doesn't sort of interest me.

Were those reunions important were they?

Yeah, not so much now because the majority of them's gone, you know, and the fellas that now turn up are fellas that come to us as reinforcement

27:30 that you never had much to do with. But all the old, like the crowd that I went away with and trained and fought with, they're all sort of gone. But I don't actually go, I think I was talking to one bloke and he said there was only five of our blokes, the original blokes, at the last Anzac [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps] march in Melbourne, so there wouldn't have been much point in going.

28:00 **Was Anzac Day important to you or important?**

Yeah, yeah, I like Anzac Day. But, you can have just as much fun at the RSL [Returned and Services League], I mean, well you, you know, you think of the blokes that never made it and things like that, but, sort of as each year goes by, the

28:30 memories get less type of thing.

Over those years in the army and in the prisoners camps, how had you changed, what changed in you?

How do you mean?

Like from the young man that went away to …?

Oh yes, coming, you leave as a boy and come home as a man, yeah. I think I handled

29:00 it alright, you know. Yeah, it was, just I, sort of that long ago, I don't remember much about how I changed and, you're a lot wiser and think what a bloody fool you was to get into it so early and …. See my army number was only four letters and now they're that bloody long, the blokes that followed me.

29:30 But I was in it too soon, that's the trouble, I was wanting to get away. As I said, you know, adventure and a trip overseas and had the rose coloured glasses on.

Well having experienced that, what does it make you think of war now, or when you think about wars going on?

Oh, I know how stupid that war we was in [was] because half the blokes you thought about,

30:00 fought against, are all out here and they're just as good a citizen as you are aren't they? I mean they've got just as much privileges and they're getting pensions and so what was the good of fighting them? What this Iraq business is about, I can't make up me mind. I think, he certainly had to be stopped but I think they went in on a false pretence, that's,

30:30 certainly like to see that Bin Laden's mob wiped out but he's going to be hard to get in those, in that Khyber Pass and that, you'll never get them out.

And looking back at your war service, what's your best memories?

Oh, I suppose the good time I had in the army, like when it's all boiled down, I think before we

31:00 struck the real fair dinkum war, the army life was some of the happiest days of me life, you know, because we trained here in Australia and we sort of got plenty of leave, we were overseas till we got into Greece and that, it was, you know, we had good leaves in Cairo and Jerusalem and they were happy days, yeah. But,

31:30 I don't say I'd like to go and do it again, but I wouldn't have liked to have missed it.

Well, on the other flipside of that, what's the worst memory for you, of your time?

Oh, being taken a prisoner, prison life. You know, you had that feeling that you,

32:00 you done nothing and that you was, you sort of let the side down and you couldn't do anything to help them and always that little bit of feeling of guilt with it, you know, and there's nothing we could have done about it.

Well, what's the most important qualities you needed to get through all those years in the prison camp?

Oh it's hard to say, just a,

32:30 I was pretty carefree in those days and, I used to get my nodders, but I don't think I done it all that hard, there's a lot harder than I did, because I was still pretty young, you know. So, well, this is where we finished up, and you make good mates and they become your family, you sort of live with them and you only remember the funny things that happened and ….

33:00 No it's a, it's the way it goes.

Is there anything kind of strange or even particular that you missed most when you were kind of locked up in these camps?

Yeah, bloody oath there was, like going to the pub and getting drunk, and going to the dances of a Saturday night. And going out with a sheila or something like that,

33:30 and the good times you had, it was all just cut off, you were, you were just there, and there you bloody stopped. Yeah, I felt that and, as I said, the fact that you was no longer helping your country type of thing. But, yeah, I missed the good times.

Well, coming close to the end of this interview,

34:00 **so I might just ask you, are there anything else you'd want to tell us or any final thoughts?**

No not really, I think you just about covered the lot. I mean there's probably hundreds of funny incidents that've just slipped me mind and I'll probably remember at midnight tonight or something that I should have told you , but you know, that's the way it goes.

34:30 No, the, something funny happens every day, you get the funny men of the show and …. Now what, have you, can you get a recording of this or a video of this?

35:00 **Yeah they're endeavouring to do it, yeah.**

Are they, yeah. I don't think I've incriminated anybody that's still alive.

No, I think you've done a really good job, so we'll close it there. We didn't clarify your role before,

35:30 **you know, you were in the army, what exactly were you?**

I was with the transport company for, oh I suppose about six months, and then I transferred to an infantry company in the battalion and I was with them till the finish of the war. You know, yeah, I was with a transport unit

36:00 for, oh, could have been six months, could have been, I just can't remember the exact time, you know. When the two or three chaps come over from my home town, they went to the rifle company, A Company, so I transferred over to them.

What kind of work were you doing with the transport company for that six months?

Oh, I tell you I was damn glad I was out of them in Greece

36:30 because they got shit hammered out of them you know. They were on those narrow roads and those Stukas would come over and they'd have to jump out and run like bloody hell away from the truck and it was, oh, carting ammunition, carting troops and carting everything that goes on in war.

Driving trucks?

Yeah, yeah, driving trucks, and we had, before they become properly mechanised, we had horses, we had horses here in

37:00 Puckapunyal in'39. Matter of fact, me and [a] mate, they've just done the same thing, just talking to him yesterday, we was just laughing about it, we got seven days' CB [Confined to Barracks]. We were on horse picket at night and the horses used to be a long line and you used to tie them up and you used to leg rope them to stop them kicking and they'd settle for the night alright. And we was

37:30 in Palestine, and Palestine gets shockingly cold at night, red hot through the day but, oh, freezing at night. And there's a big heap of spare horse rugs there, so when the horses had settled we said, "Oh, we'll get underneath these rugs and keep warm," but we made the fatal error of going to sleep. And the brigade officer from the 6th Battalion came around, and caught us and charged us. I think written on the thing is that we failed to obey an order and, oh God, they threw the book at us and

38:00 fined us so much and we got seven days chasing the bugle, but other than that was about the only trouble I ever got into. Yeah.

Alright close it there.