Australians at War Film Archive

William Rudd (Bill) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:38 **Thank you for allowing us to interview you today, Bill. I'd like to ask you where you were born?**

Here in Essendon. In Melbourne. It's actually now a girl's school, so I've often dined out on the fact that I was born in a girls' school. If the conversation gets a bit stuck.

01:02 **And which school did you attend?**

Melbourne Grammar.

And what did you father do?

He worked as a printer, running the printing division of my grandfather's business, which was a bookseller. My grandfather to an older generation was known as E.W. Cole, of Cole's Book Arcade, and they had a big

01:31 premises right in the middle of Bourke Street, ran through to Collins Street, so my father, when he came back from the Boer War and married my mother, worked with his father in law, virtually my grandfather. My paternal grandfather.

So when war was declared, did you join up straight away?

I wasn't in Australia. I have –

Where were you?

02:00 – to jump from point to point because, after I left school, I went to Melbourne University to study geology, a profession I wanted to take up, so while I was at Melbourne Uni my father died, that was about in 1937. And my sister

02:30 had finished her education and she had gone to what was then known as a finishing school in Switzerland, and she was in her last year at that school, near Lausanne, and my mother and I went overseas to see her, my sister, and I was planning to go to Bonn University, in Germany. Which is a very

03:00 well known university for geology, it had a very good geology faculty, so I went to Germany with my mother and my sister, who had finished, in Europe, and I was actually in Germany in 1939 –

When the war broke out?

No. We were in Germany,

03:30 living in a very nice flat we'd rented in the middle of Berlin, on the Kurfustendam . And we went on a cruise on a German boat, from Germany to South America. The object was for me was to improve my knowledge of German, so I could cope with the university in Bonn. When the three of us got down

04:00 to Buenos Aires, in Argentina, the British Consul came aboard the ship and said, "Look, I wouldn't go back to Germany if I were you, I think there's going to be a war. I'd get off, there's a British liner on the other side of Chile, at Bel Pariso." He said, "I'd go over there, pick that up and get home as quickly as you could." So

04:30 we did that, the three of us. We had quite an interesting trip across the Southern part of Argentina, across the Andes, to Chile, got on board the British boat. And by the time we'd got through the Panama Canal, war was declared. And so they stopped at Bermuda, tossed all the passengers off and began to camouflage the ship, for some purpose that the admiralty had taken over

05:00 the ship. So where was I when the war broke out is a very difficult question to answer, because I was actually on the ship, a British ship, when war broke out, and we had to leave that ship at Bermuda, and make our way, as best we could, home to Australia. And that took us a long while. From Bermuda we

managed to get to New York, and from New

05:30 York – I had an uncle in Detroit, and we crossed America to San Francisco, and in San Francisco we picked up – again I have to backtrack because it's not as simple as that either, because when we got to New York, the only ship that we could meaningfully get on the other side was a Danish ship, a freighter, and it went to Shanghai and all sorts of places before it dumps us

06:00 off, in its turn, I think, it was in Hong Kong. And in Hong Kong we got a Dutch ship and that brought us back to Australia, because at that time the Dutch had ships running up to Batavia.

I'm going to go back now, take you back to,

06:30 **starting with your childhood – so you were born in Essendon, what sort of a place was Essendon, in those early days?**

Well, as I say, the place where

07:00 I was born, Earlsbrae, was now a school. The old home, a very big home, has been extended – at that stage my grandfather, who was a very well known man in Melbourne, chose Essendon because it was really in the country, more or less. There was a rustic atmosphere, even though

07:30 it was still in Melbourne. And he used to go to the office in a horse carriage everyday, it wasn't too far away from his business, and Essendon in those days was pretty ritzy suburb, you know –

Where was your father born?

My father was born in New England, on a property in Deniliquin. His father was –

08:00 His father had a big pastoral estate there.

A rural boy.

I think so. I'm not quite certain where he was actually born. I think he was actually born in St Kilda, at a private hospital. Because in those days you had home births, you know, you didn't always go to hospital. He was brought up in Deniliquin. He was a country boy in a sense.

And I believe he was in the Boer War?

He was in the Boer War.

08:30 **Did he tell you much about his experiences?**

Nothing. Nothing. We knew he was in the Boer War, there were a few medals around. But this morning on the computer I printed out his thing from the Veterans' Roll. I knew nothing much about it, really. I went to school and you get your other interests and so forth.

09:00 As I say, I was at the university when Dad died.

So your father wasn't in the First World War?

No, he was only in the Boer War.

Was he too old for the First World War?

I don't think he was too old. The Boer War was 1901, and he married my mother – I was born in 1917,

09:30 so he wasn't all that old when he died in 1937. I just think he was probably – he'd been to a war, he might have decided he could contribute more by helping to run the business at home. I can't really answer that question. I don't know.

As a boy, did you know any World War I veterans?

Yes. Quite a few.

10:00 But not that many because my Dad wasn't in the First World War. I really can't remember meeting – certainly my Dad's friends were veterans of the First World War and I met them of course. He was a great Mason, so I think that affected his attitude to war, I don't know.

10:30 **Your father?**

Yes.

What do you mean a Mason?

I'm not a Freemason, but he was. He was very high in the Lodge, in the Freemasonry hierachy. He would often say, "Well, war's a terrible thing and it should be outlawed," and Freemasonry's something that's universal, where they teach all men to be brothers, they call them brothers, and if we could

11:00 only put our energy into creating movements like that it would help to eliminate war. You will never

eliminate war I don't think.

So would you say that father was a conscientious objector?

No, he was probably a bit of a pacifist. But there's a difference between a conscientious objector and a pacifist, I think. There's a lot of pacifists in the army, but I wouldn't have met many conscientious objectors in the army. But some

11:30 people, of course, chose in the army, or whatever service they were in, to have a non-combative role. I knew plenty of people who were stretcher bearers because they wouldn't carry arms, but they were right in the midst of the battle as a stretcher bearer. And they chose to be that.

So what was your father's attitude to you joining up?

Well he wasn't here when

12:00 I joined up. He died in 1937 when I was midway through my course in geology at Melbourne University, and that rather splintered the family because I was at university and my sister was at school in Switzerland, and my mother was just a recent widow and we lived in a huge house here in South Yarra and we didn't have a

12:30 father. We were inveterate travellers because my father as a printer took him to a lot of countries in the world, and he took us all with him.

Going back to Essendon, what school did you attend there?

13:00 I didn't. We moved from Essendon when I was only a very small child. There were four in our family. I had twin elder sisters, who died in infancy. They were about 18 months when they died. And then there was me, born in 1917, and then my sister two

13:30 years later. And we had moved from Essendon, from the old home to another one in South Yarra, and we'd lived in that house a long while when my father died.

You said you had twin sisters –

I had twin sisters, elder than I. And they died in infancy. Pneumonia or something like that. They didn't have the antibiotics there, so they couldn't be saved. So that

14:00 was a – sad.

That must have been very hard for your mother?

Very hard. On the other hand these things happen in life and you readjust your life, so that

14:30 those sad circumstances become part of the fabric but they don't bear down on you. And that was a lesson my father was pretty good at teaching us.

So it sounds like you were very close to your father when you were growing up?

Very close.

What other qualities about life did your father teach you?

There again, you see, it's

15:00 a simple question but the answer's not so simple, because when we moved to South Yarra – he built a holiday house for us in Frankston, and we're the third house on Long Island. There was nothing there except for the three houses built by people

15:30 as weekenders. But then for one reason or another the business was sold, and my father took a very early retirement from the business, but before he did that he used to commute from Frankston into town, there was a railhead at Frankston, the train went down there, so we had the advantage, my sister and I, of living

16:00 in a very pleasant area of Frankston, and also had a big place in Melbourne. Gradually we sort of spent more time down at Frankston than in Melbourne, because we switched houses back there in Melbourne, went to an even bigger house, with a tennis court and swimming pool –

When did you go to

16:30 **Melbourne Grammar?**

That's where I was educated. I went to Christchurch up here, a primary school, then straight to Melbourne Grammar. As my family had done. Sort of carried on the tradition.

Had your father gone there?

No. He was a country bloke, I don't know where he was educated. But he was a great reader and he

17:00 educated himself to a very great extent. He'd knocked around the bush a bit, became a gold miner at one stage. And after the Boer War he worked in South Africa for a while and came back here, and became a gold miner. Hence my interest in geology, small things influence you.

What division or

17:30 **unit of the Boer War was he in?**

It was the Fourth Contingent – the army. I think it was more or less a mounted horseman style of thing – pretty mobile sort of troops –

So you went to Melbourne

18:00 **Grammar. What was that like?**

I was a normal person. I didn't excel. I wasn't a prefect or a captain of the school. I just passed through school, and formed a lot of very good friends, as one does at school. And I always managed to a get prize or something like that, so enough to get by really. A pretty undistinguished

18:30 school career.

What were your favourite subjects?

Science was one of my favourite subjects, that was what I went on to do at the university. A science degree, majoring in geology, which I'd been strongly influenced by my father, I realise now, when he was a gold miner. I liked most of subjects, but like every schoolboy didn't like

19:00 mathematics much. But I could always get by, more just with work rather than brilliance, I think.

Were you sporty?

No, I did my job. I played cricket and Australian Rules football. And I joined the school cadets, which of course was interesting later on. But it was a very average

19:30 sort of a school career. But I enjoyed it.

Tell me about the cadets. What did that involve?

Well, in those days every public school had their own cadets, with their own uniform, and they were part of the militia structure in Melbourne here. And many well known names – one died

20:00 recently, Phil Roden for example. I had a very good foundation to a military career through the school cadets. Kennett was in the – school, Scotch, and that stayed with him most of his life, the military training. I had no problem when I eventually did join the army. I knew how to handle a

20:30 rifle. I knew how to get up early in the morning and peal spuds or whatever was doing for the day. So it was no strange environment for me to be in, put it that way.

Did you have weekends away?

Yes, we used to go out to Broadmeadows and have a camp each year, for a week or ten days, and get instructed in field craft and morse code and all that sort of stuff

21:00 It was quite a good military system actually to get children, or young boys of a certain age, and induct them into a military career.

Did learn about World War I, or do military studies?

I can't recall doing that specifically. We learned a bit about Helen of Troy, ancient

21:30 history. That still interests me. Some of those old Greeks and Romans. But no specific training there in that regard.

I'm interested to know a bit about how the Depression affected your family?

It didn't affect us as a family. We lived in a very large house, and my friends always used to say to

22:00 me, "How's the fifth parlour maid going, Billy?" So financially, and socially, we didn't get affected like a lot of my later colleagues did, particularly country boys. We used to get a constant stream of people coming in and my mother would have sandwiches made for them, and very often I'd go to school and see the sandwiches thrown away in the

22:30 garden. They weren't after food really, they were after a few shillings to go down to the pub. So, I certainly, unlike some people, wasn't affected by the battle of the Depression. It didn't affect our lifestyle. It didn't affect our particular circle of friends and it certainly didn't affect my education. I was at university. I don't remember too much

23:00 about the Depression, because that was the '30s and I was only 16 or 17 years of age and enjoying school and what I did. So I could almost say the Depression didn't affect me personally at all.

Around this time, were you aware of what was happening overseas, as far as Hitler and what was happening in Germany?

Oh, you couldn't avoid it, particularly if you were

23:30 in Europe as we were, in those later stages. You could see the signs coming. You had Neville Chamberlain saying there would be no war. But there was a dictator in Germany and he'd done a great job, as there was in Italy, where Mussolini did a good job, like Hitler in Germany, for the country, for their country. But there were

24:00 pretty obvious signs that it was going to end, sooner or later. And that was one reason why I think, harking back, when that British Consul came on board that boat, we made no hesitation at all. We left straight away. We left everything we had in our flat in Berlin, and never went back to it. Skis and clothing and all that sort of stuff we had there. And we were very lucky

24:30 to get out.

Still at school – was there a strong sense of respect for the Empire at Melbourne Grammar? Respect for England?

You were brought up that way. That was part of the English system of schools. You

25:00 followed that honorary English line. The British Empire was very important to us, being a member of it. You asked me about, at school, whether I studied history of war, but there was always that overtone of York's drift [UNCLEAR] in the Boer War, and the Black Hole of Calcutta, the typical colonial era.

25:37 **What did you think of the British Empire?**

Well I thought it was a pretty good place to be. We traveled extensively. Right throughout Java, Hong Kong particularly. We were part of the colonists. Life was marvelously easy for wealthy people. My wife, for example,

26:00 she was in Java, as it was then known, for a couple of years, in her early teens. And the Dutch there were the equivalent to the British in Hong Kong, or the French in Indo China, or the Portuguese in Brazil. It's a question of the background in which you were brought up, you know. And the background I was brought up, silver spoon, if you

26:30 like, stuck in my mouth. There was such heroes amongst the great army people, you know. You had to look up to those sort of people. And it was a culture rather than anything else.

What about the monarchy?

I'm a republican now. And I think the

27:00 Royal Family was an important factor in our lives there, and when the colonies got a bit restless, they sent the Queen out or the King, to keep the ties there, that bound the Empire together. It was disintegrating of course, because America was coming to the forefront of the world. Nevertheless it was part and parcel of the culture in which I grew up. To that extent I

27:30 wasn't an ardent patriot, nevertheless that was the way my friends felt, and I went along with it, I'm an easy going sort of bloke.

What about Anzac, the tradition of Anzac?

It was pretty strong there. It became much stronger in my personal view when I went back to Gallipoli myself to see it. I was very impressed by that visit, in Turkey. I love Turkey. We've been there many times. Several times.

28:00 **When did you first go there?**

Might have stopped there in Istanbul on the boat on the way to England. The Anzac tradition is very strong in my feeling now, as an adult, and was particularly reinforced by my visit to

28:30 Gallipoli and my visit to the Anzac area there. Because that was to me rather typical then of the imperial attitude, you know, with the old British general stuck out there in the comfort of the battleships, while the troops were toiling away up the cliffs of Gallipoli. And I could understand the feeling of the Australian who was at Gallipoli. My father was not at Gallipoli, of course, but I

29:00 could understand those friends of mine who did have relatives in Gallipoli. And of course Churchill was in command of that operation. It was his brainchild, so to speak. And looking at it through Turkish eyes later on – there's a fantastic epitaph by an Ataturk, it goes something like, "Here in this land where your sons have died – " It's addressed to mothers. Very

29:30 moving – even now, you can see, I'm emotional about it

So clearly the discussion of Anzac does move you –

It moves me because of the universal way in which a soldier

30:00 lives. Whether you were fighting a Turk or you're fighting a German, or a Frenchman, you're all soldiers, and this was the lesson my father would try to get over to me, you see. I realize, in retrospect, that all men are brothers, but it's never going to be that way. Unfortunately.

Do you have a sense of pride in being an ex-serviceman?

I've got

30:30 a sense of pride in being an Australian, for a start. And that's why I think I'm a republican, now, rather than a monarchist. I've got a tremendous sense of pride in the Australian soldier. At the same time, I respect all soldiers, no matter what uniform they wear. They're doing a job for their country, and that's patriotism pure and simple, which is good.

31:00 It's good for any country to have its patriots.

As a general question, which enemy soldiers that you fought during the war did you have respect for the most?

I think every Australian will tell you, who

31:30 served in North Africa, oh served in North Africa would tell you they had the highest regard for Rommel. Much more regard for him than many of the British generals who commanded us. Because he had the ability to fight with his soldiers. He didn't, like the British generals at Gallipoli, stay off out of the mud and dust and the

32:00 blood, in the naval ships. He was a soldier's general, in the sense, he was with his troops, he was very good. The British did a lot, I think, to stamp out his high esteem amongst the Australians because it wasn't good. You couldn't go around barracking for the enemy, it wasn't done –

Do you think the

32:30 **average German soldier, were they good military soldiers?**

Oh yes. But so were the professional British soldier – was a thoroughly trained, thoroughly efficient, very good professional soldier. We were with people like the 51st Holland Division and the Northumberland Fusillades, and they were tough, really good soldiers, I personally held in high respect. But I

33:00 couldn't get used to the social system of the British Army, you know. If a couple of privates were having a beer in a hotel, they'd leave if an officer came in. And all this 'officers' club' sort of thing. I hadn't been brought up for class distinctions like that, and I resented it. Even though I'd been brought up as one of them –

33:30 **Didn't you get a sense of class distinction at Melbourne Grammar, which is quite elitist?**

Well that's the point. You're brought up in that culture, and you ask me a question about the Depression, which didn't affect my particular family much at all. That's why I'm a little surprised this interview is going so deep into social things, but the answer to the question is I think you will find it later, because I'll go forward –

34:00 in time. I went to an officer's training school, to be an officer, because my background and my pedigree and my training feted me for that, but I never became an officer. And the reason I didn't do that was I didn't feel that unless I had battle experience, I could command troops. Now that is not how the British are brought up. And so, in a way, I suppose I've been a bit

34:30 of a bit of a radical because I was trained to be a radical. I was trained to think for myself, not to take orders which were stupid, but which had to have happened in a military situation. I wasn't quite a radical, but the army didn't quite know what to do with me. Plus, of course, the fact that I had been in Germany before the war. I could speak German.

35:00 **Tell me about the time you were in Germany. What led you there?**

Well, as I said the family had disintegrated a bit with the death of my father. And I was interested in studying geology, and naturally I suppose because of my education and my upbringing. My father used to say 'well, the best is good enough for me'.

35:30 The Geology Faculty at the University of Bonn was one of the best in the world. It had a certain cache about it, and I could handle the language reasonably well, enough to get along. That's why we were in Berlin, I had to do a special foreigners' discourse in Germany before you were allowed to enrol in a German university. So there was always that –

36:00 elitist faction that was raised which I despised. I don't go along with that –

So you were studying geology at Melbourne Uni. Your father had passed away, in 1937 – how did he die by the way?

He got pneumonia, much like

36:30 the disease that killed my elder sisters, and they didn't have the antibiotics like they do now – he died of a bout of pneumonia, like the twins did.

And that came as a shock to everyone?

Yes.

And at that point – were you at uni by this stage?

I had just

37:00 begun my second year at the Melbourne University when he died. And as I say that affected our family very much, particularly my mother. She had the job of bringing up the two children, who were still teenagers virtually, which she did very well. And my sister, who was very gifted linguistically – she went to the equivalent of Melbourne Girls' Grammar, Merton Hall. And she was

37:30 being finished off, as they used to say in Switzerland.

The reason for going to Germany was for you to study more geology –

That's right. I thought I might finish

38:00 my degree in Germany, which was a very noted place –

And hook up with your sister who was in Switzerland –

And mother was with her children, ready to help them and look after them.

And do you think she wanted a bit of break – from Melbourne –

I don't think so. I think she had lots of friends in Melbourne, but she thought she had to take Dad's place as head of the family, and I wasn't ready for it, of course, I was still at university. My sister was still

38:30 at school. We'd been to Europe several times before the war, with Dad on business trips. It was a nice, interesting place to be. I had been to Holland, where my wife came from. I had been skiing in Austria – Europe didn't frighten us.

39:00 **So, when did you go over to Germany, with your mother?**

It must have been in 1937 or 1938. I'd done two years at Melbourne University and I was going to do the third year, the last year, at Bonn. And that never happened, because of the war coming on.

39:30 **Can I ask you – so you started studying at Bonn?**

No, we were in Berlin. I was doing this special course of German. We thought it would be interesting to see South America, so we got on a German boat –

Sorry while we're still in Berlin, I believe you had some friends, who were interested in

40:00 **Hitler? The Hitler Youth?**

All the young people of my age, the university students, for example, they were adventurous young men, as I suppose I was I guess. Under the Treaty of Versailles, Germany couldn't have an air force, so a lot of young blokes took to gliding, and they learnt to become very good pilots, from a grounding in gliding.

40:30 And I might say my mother had a German friend, because in her youth, she had been to Papua New Guinea, which was a German mandate. And one of those German friends from the First World War time had a daughter, and I'd corresponded with her, we were pen friends. So we had friends in

41:00 Germany – they weren't close personal friends, they had been friends of my parents, and the younger generation became friends of mine. We drifted around the cafes as students do and talked a lot about the war that we thought was coming –

Tape 2

00:32 See that's what offended me in Berlin, which was a really lovely city to be in in lots of ways. You'd go to the park and you'd see these jolly seats, Nur Für Juden, 'Only For Jews'. And that offended me. I thought that was wrong. I was giving them mock

01:00 Hitler salutes when I'd had a few beers, and that was frowned on, very much. That was undiplomatic of me, in my host country, and I shouldn't have been poking fun at anybody. But there was a general air about Berlin at that time – it was a very sophisticated city, we lived in a beautiful apartment.

01:32 I had lots of good friends – in fact one of my good friends I met over there had been to Geelong College. He was over there in Germany on a primitive exchange system. He liked the orderliness that reigned in Berlin. The precision of everything, the trains that ran on time and all that sort of stuff. Amongst my friends I was

02:00 perhaps as not as enamoured of Germany as it did appeal to a lot of young people. In retrospect I would have been very unhappy had I gone on to Bonn I think – just as the same as when I went to South Africa I didn't like apartheid, it was against my principles. And unless you can be at ease with your principles, it's not a really basis to establish your

02:30 career

Can you tell me about the Hitler Youth movement you experienced there?

The Hitler Youth movement was pretty good. They had all these brown shirts and young people, gorgeous dolls with flaxen hair and blue eyes, and special ships that took them up into the Baltic Sea and up into

03:00 Scandinavia. If you were a member of Hitler Youth you had all these privileges and all these distractions displayed to you. You'd see a prang in the street and one of my Canadian friends at that time said, "Oh, the metal's pretty crook, I think all the good materials going to make tanks." There was always that undercurrent of a military

03:30 solution to Hitler's lebensraum, the living space, he'd lost his colonies. There was a very positive streak of trying to get that back. To get rid of the disgrace of losing the First World War and re-establishing itself as a country, that was again a world power. Mussolini had the same thing in Italy, it was very strong there. The whole of the fascist

04:00 movement was designed for that end in view, which ultimately would have resulted in a war. And did result in a war.

At this stage Germany was industrially very powerful too.

Yes, she'd got her act together, and was really doing wonderful things. A lot of things she had to do clandestinely. They built the famous VW as a scout car, for

04:30 Rommel, you could see that sticking out a mile too. So the signs were there. And in retrospect, looking about it, our family was very lucky to have got off that ship in Buenos Aires. Another saying of my father was "It's better to be born lucky than rich," and he was dead right I tell you.

What would have happened if you had gone to Bonn?

We would have been interned. So I mean

05:00 the loss of a few personal possessions was a tiny price to pay for personal liberty.

Approximately how long were you in Berlin?

Maybe three months.

With regards to the Jewish issue, did you any obvious signs –

Oh yes, not only the seats in the park, but also shops were

05:30 identified as being Jewish shops – the armband was beginning to come into existence. They pushed those sort of things away from the tourists, because to the Germans we were still tourists – we still had British passports, we were looking at all the tourist sights and travelling around. So the German government and authorities took a fair

06:00 bit of effort to hide those things. They did it very efficiently.

You weren't aware of camps at that stage?

No, I can't say I was deeply concerned, because I was more, at that time, concerned at that time with my German girlfriend. The daughter of the family that my mother had known. She was a very vivacious lady. We had a lot of fun,

06:30 seeing various places of interest. I was interested in photography at that time. I brought myself the supreme Leica camera, I was doing some quite interesting snaps. There again you'd be taking a photograph and you'd see a couple of burly looking blokes looking at you, making certain you weren't having any military things in the lenses,

07:00 like in your lens here. So there was always – and the more you became conscious the more, in hindsight, I realize that the climate was leading to a war. And I think had we got back, we would have moved out. I would certainly not have gone on to the University of Bonn. That was a dream that would never be realized as far as I'm concerned. I think even if there had been no

07:30 overt war at that stage.

It sounds like you had a niggling feeling, even then, with all the patriotism you were observing. Did you see any parades?

Oh, yes. They were always having them in Berlin, particularly, and in Nuremberg, of course, which was the great Nazi rallying point. And I think that's what happened when we eventually made our way back to Australia, and I tried to

08:00 join the army. And all that pre-school cadet stuff and the monarchy and so forth, aroused my patriotism, to that degree, and of course the army wouldn't have me. So I had to go back to the university to finish my college degree, which I did in 1940, and then I joined the army.

So your experience in Germany possibly made you even more

08:30 **patriotic to your own country?**

Yes, I think it did. And of course all my friends were joining up, and so on. And I think you get carried on the euphoric wave of patriotism. In my case, my best mate went to Geelong Grammar. We were very close friends, he was my best friend, despite going to different schools. We always spent our holidays

09:00 together, skiing here in Australia, or playing golf, the things that our sort of class did. He joined the air force and he was shot down in New Guinea and beheaded. So, that made me think a lot. I arrived in the Middle East late, because I was reinforcement. And.

09:30 that was in 1941 – My unit to which I had assigned myself just, was pulled out of Tobruk. I joined up with them, not in the Western Desert but in Palestine. And

10:00 it was in 1941,on my birthday, when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbour, and brought America into the war. And that of course was a tremendous event, really, when you look back on it.

When war was declared, did you immediately think, 'I'm going to be involved in this'?

Yes, I did. And I think it

10:30 was – again, all my mates were joining up. I suppose I thought it was the right thing to do.

Did you ever think about your father and what he would have thought?

Yes, the feeling was still there. But it was perhaps – it was directed a little bit in my case, because my

11:00 army career wasn't a stellar performance by any means. I didn't want it to be in a sense. I felt patriotism, okay, that's a good feeling, but I was against certain other things that patriotism brings with it. I evidenced that when I told you about the class structure in the British Army, which I found

11:30 very difficult. In fact, I rebelled against it at certain times. In Palestine there were certain clubs that were for officers only, and I didn't like that. And I'd made friends, as I do easily, with some people living in Tel Aviv. A German Jewish family, who'd seen the light too and had got into Tel Aviv. And

12:00 because I spoke German I was able to mix with them on a social thing, and so one night we went to a nightclub, the young fellow that belonged to the family and myself, in civilian clothes. He'd loaned me some civilian clothes. I went to a nightclub and I was nearly picked up by the military police, which wouldn't have been too good, but we managed to get out of it. Which is sort of the thing I did

12:30 and it didn't really improve my army career. Because the army never really knew what to do with me. A graduate from university with a good education who refused to be an officer.

Why did you refuse to be an officer?

When I did get into the army I joined a Survey Corps, because I had done my survey subject in my

13:00 geological career. We went up with the artillery, a special division called a 1st Survey Group, and we were training in locating enemy artillery by the flashes of the guns, or by the sound wave which went at a different pace from the speed of light and all those sort of things –

13:30 – and I found that interesting. I was scientifically trained. I thought that was a good unit to be with. I became a sergeant in that unit, and then they plucked me out from that to go to this officers' training camp. I didn't feel happy about that.

At Warwick Farm?

Yes, in New South Wales. I didn't feel happy about it. I believe I

14:00 graduated all right. You walked around with your name sewn on your hat, and if you had your hands in your pockets, the discipline would put a bad mark put against your name, or if your blankets weren't folded properly. It was very good training for me. But I didn't feel that I should go in and command men, as an officer. It might have been an inferiority complex, it probably was. But I

14:30 wanted to be in action myself first, then I might feel a bit more comfortable in command.

Can I just ask you a bit more about the officer training?

Again, my military training, I could handle a rifle. I could stand to attention. I could present arms.

15:00 All the necessary stuff. I was pretty good at map reading, because I was a surveyor. As part of my geological training in the bush, had been to go out by myself and find my way back with a map. The training at Warwick Farm was pretty good because that was also a heavy bias on there for people like myself who had the necessary technical

15:30 skills, but didn't know how to have the human skills of handling men, in mass. Giving orders. Being able to both give orders and then to take orders from officers in the military caste system. And that was why the no hands in the pockets, and the boots thoroughly polished and gleaming. You would let yourself down, or let yourself go because that

16:00 would reflect on discipline. The emphasis on discipline was fairly high. We had long route marches to toughen us up, so we could march with the troops and so forth. We didn't do any specialized training that I can recall on particular equipment, like machine guns, because other people did that. You were an officer, you gave the orders, they carried it out. So the emphasis was more on this order-giving. And that's what a school system does to you, with prefects and school

16:30 captains and prefects and things like that. You, it reflects that – reinforcing military culture is what it boils down to.

Did you form any strong friendships there?

Oh, quite a few. None alive. I had four mates. But not like the friendship I had with Tom Brown from Geelong Grammar. He was a real mate of mine anyway. And the fact that

17:00 we'd been to different schools didn't bother us. The fact that he joined the air force and I joined the army didn't bother us. I used to write to him from the Middle East and so on. I think that that strong friendship, that mateship, is a very marked Australian characteristic.

You didn't have that with any of the other officers?

Yes I did, but as a man, not as an officer. It's very difficult to do

17:30 it. For example, when I did join my unit, the Second 7th Field Company. I was a sapper. When I saw the ad go up in the mess, for a surveyor, I was pretty competent as a surveyor, I thought, "Here's my chance, I've had all the military training in the world, now's my chance to get into action, go

18:00 over and join the crowd in Tobruk," because they were in Tobruk when the notice went up, and get the practical field work that I felt I needed –

Were you allowed to apply for a position like that? It wasn't an officer's position?

I had finished the course, but you weren't an officer, you'd only attended an officer's training

18:30 course.

When you enlist they see what education you've had and they pick you out?

It doesn't quite work like that. They've seen you're education, so they know you're 'officer material'. And so they watch you. And I think that's why I rapidly became a

19:00 sergeant in the survey group. Then having got to that status, when you're a sergeant you've got a section of men you can boss around, and you've already got the rank authority instilled into you. So they picked out these bright fellows, like myself, I suppose, with university degree, who was a sergeant –

Where was that first experience?

19:30 Wood End. In a camp at Wood End. When I joined the army – I joined the army but not the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. I actually transferred from that officers' camp,

20:00 in the AIF, I think that's how it came about, and my army record would confirm that. I went as a reinforcement to the Middle East, on the Queen Mary, and when I got to Palestine, I realized that my friends there, one was a sergeant – really

20:30 what a hero he was. He was my hero, if you like. I was very impressed by him and we struck up a very firm friendship. He came down to see my mother when I was posted missing. We were mates, just like my friend in the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]. And that is a very strong influence in my life, and I

21:00 think it's a very strong influence in most Australian males lives. And women, too.

I'm interested in the training that you did. Woodend, how long were you there and what did you do there?

I can't recall exactly. I started

21:30 peeling spuds. They asked me what could I do, and I said I could do anything. I started off peeling spuds, which is a pretty good start I thought, and worked my way up to sergeant. We carried out surveying procedures, making maps, looking at maps, interpreting maps. The artillery drill that I mentioned briefly. We did the normal route marches. And military turnouts if a

22:00 general came about, or some VIP [very important person], we'd put on a bit of a parade for him. Bonegilla, another camp, there we did field manoeuvres, and so on.

Basic training. Did you handle any guns or equipment?

You did your rifle fire at the

22:30 pits. You did your weapon training, cleaning, keeping your rifle in good order, and having the NCO [Non Commissioned Officer] inspect it.

What were your trainers like?

I can't recall. I had already become a sergeant. And I had to give orders and make certain that if there was guard duty to be done that the blokes rolled up. And any parade ground that

23:00 had to be cleaned, that they were cleaned. And when I went on to the op [operation] 2, it was the same sort of phase again. And then when I joined my unit, eventually, I could see that the major in charge, Major Murn, he kept giving me little tests. We'd be out doing

23:30 something or other and he'd say "Look, I've lost my penknife where we had lunch. Grab a driver and see if you can get it for me." And he didn't want the penknife at all, he was just testing out my skills at being able to go out to where we had been, reposition myself and find his knife and bring it back to him. Lots of little tests. People coming up to me

24:00 knowing you're a geologist with a lump of cement and a stone and something else and they'd say, "Tell me the names of these stones?" And I'd say, "I can't, that's a piece of cement," and immediately they'd drop the cement. They were testing you out all the time. And that's the way the army has to work. If it's going to pick good men, it has to know the qualities of the man, of the individual.

What is the job of a surveyor in the military?

Well, basically,

24:30 it was to locate minefields, plot them on maps, which was pretty important because those maps had to be distributed to troops. In my case, that was the major thing, making maps of mine fields. Looking for water supplies. I was a geologist, so if there was a wadi that looked like it might have a spring, I would

25:00 see if I could locate the local water in the area where we were. The major, again, he tried me out, when we did get back out into the desert. They'd shot down a plane, a brand new British plane, and our outfit was ordered to destroy it. So he took me out with him to locate the plane and to show me how he went about demolitioning

25:30 you know. Putting the explosives in to blow up the plane. So there were always those sort of things happening. You'd go out on patrol at night, and you became a real fighting soldier. But this was later when we went back into the desert from Syria –

So while you're at officer training, you saw this notice for a surveyor –

Yes, volunteered for the job.

In Tobruk. Then you left two weeks later.

26:01 **I'm pretty hazy, army record will – I got the job fairly easily, you might say. They wanted this bloke with these particular qualifications, I had these qualifications. I was quite happy to be a sapper, away I went. A sapper, a private, an ordinary soldier.**

Where was your mother and sister at this stage?

Back here in

26:30 in Australia.

What was it like saying goodbye to them? Disembarking?

Well, we didn't have any histrionics. We weren't trained and brought up to be that way. It was just well, "Goodbye Mum, I'm off, now the times come and that's that," and off you went. My sister was already working for intelligence. She could speak several languages, including Russian, which she'd learnt in

27:00 Europe. Very good at French and German, far better than me. So she was working in intelligence, here in Melbourne, I think.

Was she enlisted in the Women's Services?

No, she was just working using her linguistics skills, as a clerk or something like that. My mother joined the Red Cross, and they moved up to Queensland for some reason,

27:30 to Brisbane. And there my sister and an American major fell madly in love, after a seven day – very short period, they got married in Brisbane Cathedral, seven days leave for him, he was promoted to colonel and he went off [UNCLEAR] to Colonel MacArthur, back into the Islands. He was a geologist too, curiously enough, we never knew

28:00 that. And his speciality was constructing airfields out of coral, crushed coral. But he was an oil geologist, he'd been working in Java. He speaks fluent Dutch. A mighty man.

Did your sister end up moving there, to live with him.

Yes, she became an American citizen. But he didn't go back to America, after the

28:30 war. He went back to Indonesia, where they had very big oil fields, which he'd discovered as a geologist. He was in the service of Caltex, the big oil company. He could speak Dutch, he could speak all the Indonesian languages. His wife, my sister, could

29:00 do the same. They were thirteen years there, then they had three years in the Hague. Then finally he went back to America as vice-president of the Standard Oil Company of California, because he was a Californian. He was a beaut fellow, very well read fellow, expert in maps. He could play me on a break – he had a huge collection of antique

29:30 maps.

What did you mean by that, 'he could play me on a break'?

I was pretty good at map-reading, but I hadn't had the experience he had making maps of jungles and things like that. My map experience was in desert sort of country type. Much more difficult to map in a jungle environment as a geologist than it is in desert country.

To map in a desert environment, would you need an aerial view?

30:00 No, no, because – well, later on with aerial photographs, you constructed the maps from aerial photographs.

Did you get support from the air force?

Oh yes. But that wasn't my role there. Later became my role when I got to Switzerland.

So you're in Melbourne, and you left on the Queen Mary. Did you embark from Melbourne?

Sydney. And went straight

30:30 to Trincomalee.

Trincomalee. How long did you stay there?

Only a port of call for the ships to be refuelled and replenished with provisions and so forth. There were only the two ships in the convoy, the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, and then the naval cruisers and escort destroyers, because those two boats were so fast, their speed was their best defence, and instead of being

31:00 slowed down in a big convoy, with lots of slower ships, I think it was naval strategy to transfer a lot of men quickly in those two boats.

Did you encounter any attacks?

No. I didn't see much of the voyage because, again, they took a look at my military history and I was made acting orderly sergeant and buried somewhere in the bowels of the ship. It suited

31:30 me. I could put a notice on the door 'Back in Five Minutes', but they didn't know when the five minutes began and ended, so I was quite happy. I always made myself comfortable in the army wherever I was.

You were on duty then on the boat?

Yes.

How many men were on that boat?

Lord, that was a military secret. Maybe ten thousand, I don't know. Big boats.

A luxury

32:00 **liner.**

They were converted as troop ships, and the conversion was going on all the time. The earlier boys that went there might have been eight to a cabin. When I was there I was sleeping in a kind of a big mess deck that wasn't being used for messing purposes, although you had your meals around the clock. There were a lot of men.

So you didn't have your own rooms?

Oh God no. The officers did.

32:30 Or officers shared a cabin.

So in Trincomalee you didn't actually get to leave the boat?

Yes, we were allowed leave parties. You had to do that to keep the troops under control. Because if you cooped them up, you were already cooped up, I think it took us ten or twelve days to get to Trincomalee the sight of a beer and a good figure walking down the street, you had a riot on your

33:00 **hands. And they did, sometimes, coming back through the Panama Canal, for prisoners who had been POWs [prisoners of war] for five years, some of them –**

They went berko [crazy] –

All the time.

What was the trip from Sydney to Trincomalee. Did you encounter any treacherous seas?

I was down in the bowels, down below. It was –

33:30 **The food was all right?**

It was army food. Adequate and enough. You learned to appreciate when you were a POW later on, I can tell you.

You had a bit of shore leave in Trincomalee. What did you do?

I think I hired a cab and went up

34:00 to – and a group of us went up to the mountains, to a cooler part of Trincomalee. Kandy? My problem, Sue [interviewer], is after the war finished I put it out of my mind completely, and it's only recently I began researches that it's coming back to me, and I haven't got a good memory anyway.

I think you've

34:30 **got a great memory.**

It's been reinforced by my research.

Do you think you consciously did that, put it out of your mind? Why did you do that?

Because I didn't want to fight the war again. I was the only VX [Victorian Army Registration No.] in a QX [Queensland registration number prefix] Company. The 2/7th was recruited in Queensland. They were all Queenslanders. They were terrific blokes because

35:00 most of them were bushmen, from Longreach and way out back of Bourke, all over the place. They were good bushmen. Now I'm a geologist, I'm at home in the bush. But they were real bushmen, and that's the difference. And they had the nonchalance of a bushmen. They had really good essential Australian characteristics. You could trust them on their own. If they were a good mate of yours, you

35:30 trusted them implicitly, otherwise you just trusted them. They were really terrific people.

You must have been quite different from the men in your company.

I was the only VX in that unit. Now, they had all their Anzac reunions in Queensland, Rockhampton, Toowoomba, places like that. I couldn't really get to them. I had a young family. I didn't want to

36:00 really fight the war again, and it was very easy for me to drift away. I wasn't part of the original unit, which was very important. And I was also a Mexican from 'South of the Border' [long laugh]. They're terrific blokes

36:30 I tell you.

I believe you went to Colombo, too?

I'm thinking now, we were definitely in Trincomalee, and I think the army might have arranged to shore leave to Colombo, and it may have been in Colombo I picked up

37:00 a cab and went up to the mountains to see something or other.

Did you come across any of the local women in Colombo?

I'd been in Colombo before, of course, several times on my way to England, it was a port of call, on the old P&O [Pacific & Orient] ships, so I knew Colombo vaguely. It was mainly centered around the Galle Face Hotel, but that was reserved for officers, so I wasn't

37:30 able to go in there and have a drink, which is why I wanted to go in there. So I think I went up into the mountains instead. So, you asked me if I saw any of the women there? Yes. I suppose you're first of all a man, you're secondly of all a soldier, it gives you a certain amount of licence, to get drunk for example –

38:02 Your feelings towards women are [UNCLEAR]. They're different depending on who the woman is. For example, in the army you swear very easily, but you never use that language in a letter home, and never ever in front of a woman. Particularly me, brought up with a spoon hanging out of my mouth –

38:32 I still get up for women – it's part of the system now.

Speaking of women, did you have a sweetheart you were writing to in Melbourne?

Not a girlfriend as such. We were very good mates. We used to go down the Palais of a Friday night and the dances. I was very fond of her. Her father was an army

39:00 major – I don't like to talk personalities, Sue. We were good mates, and I'd write her letters, constantly, telling her about things and so on. But no girlfriend of a serious nature. It was probably more serious, perhaps, for her than it was for me –

So you ended up in

39:30 **in Palestine. At the end of your voyage you got to Palestine?**

End of our voyage we got up the Red Sea, into the entrance of the Suez Canal. The boats were too big to go through it, I think.

I'm sorry, I'm skipping [Sue makes correction, gets William to backtrack a little].

I was going to join my unit as a surveyor, in Tobruk, but by the time

40:00 I got there they'd been pulled out of Tobruk. They were relieved, they'd gone through the siege, the 2/7th Field Company, and they were pulled back. They'd been in Tobruk for nine months or so. They came back to Palestine, which was the base camp for the New Zealanders and everybody like that. That's

40:30 why I remember that Quastina was the name of the camp. I hadn't used that word in sixty years –

Tape 3

00:35 **So, in Palestine, there was a lot of use of the brothels?**

The British Army were professional

01:00 men. The Northumberland Fusillades, they put on a bit of a barny in the Caribbean and the whole regiment was, no leave for a year. That's the British discipline. And that's the way it works. And so they have a system of official army brothels, and that's very good

01:30 because you can keep better control of a man if he's feeling fairly happy. He can have his beer and his visit to a brothel and so on. So it's part and parcel of the morale of keeping up a military presence. So the official brothels are part and parcel of army life. You've heard of Blue Light outfits – primitive contraceptives –

02:02 So it's part of your army life, there's no problem with that.

So the Australian soldiers were involved, took advantage of that?

Oh yes, very heavily. But there was also, like there is in most other areas of endeavour, the official and the unofficial. And so in Lebanon for example, when we were up in the mountains and so on, your access to an

02:30 official brothel wasn't as easy, so the young ladies of the neighbourhood, and Palestine too, would freelance –

Did you take part in any of the brothels?

In brothels, no. But I had my outlets with female company in other areas.

03:00 Particularly – even in Lebanon, for example, I used to leave the camp and go up to a village and I used to go to the muktah, the head man, and he had three daughters, and they were all good cooks. And I used to get sick of the camp

03:30 grub and I'd go up there and they'd cook me great things and we'd have coffee with them and have a great time. Eventually, long after the war had finished and we had our farm in Sunbury, my next door neighbour was Lebanese. And I was talking to him one day and he said, "You were over in Lebanon, weren't you?" And I said, "Yes." They used to go back to

04:00 Lebanon, every year. And I said, "Yes, I used to go there was I in camp near Tripoli and speak to the muktah, I've got a photograph of the old muktah with his three daughters, I'll show it to you." I took it up to him and he said, "Would you believe those three girls are now living in Northcote, they're my aunts?"

04:30 How's that for – the army was pretty good you know, they organised trips to crusader castles, in Lebanon. A lot of the troops weren't

05:00 interested in that. They preferred to go down to the sea front, and have beers, a lot of unofficial brothels down there. But it interested me to go up to these places. I could always get there because when they said the trips on for thirty people, a) I never attended the two up games so I always had money in my pocket, and b) the average soldier's not interested in the things that I

05:30 was interested in, these old crusader castles and things like that, so I could always get to an interesting spot on an official army leave. I took a lot of leave like that.

Do you remember the first time you actually met up with your company, your unit?

Yes. We went to this Camp Quastina, and I was waiting there. They'd just been pulled out of

06:00 **Tobruk and they went to Quastina Camp, in Palestine. I'd arrived in Palestine and I was probably being held in a transit camp, and then they moved me up to join my unit in Palestine. And that was around Pearl Harbour day, because I remember discussing the Pearl Harbour invasion with the sergeant there, we were having a**

06:30 **shower. And we struck up a bit of a friendship there. He became my sergeant, he got me into his section, and he and I became very good friends, and again, he taught me a lot about things.**

And did you meet the other privates?

Oh yes. I met my section. The people that were there always looked down their nose a bit at the reinforcements,

07:00 quite right, particularly one of my rather haphazard background.

Were they aware of your background?

They weren't aware of my background, but you betray your background in your personal habits. I was detached from my unit because they formed a ski unit, in

07:30 Lebanon, and of course being the opportunist I thought that'll do me, better than digging anti-tank traps and things like that. So I joined the ski corps.

As a surveyor?

No, as a skier. I'd had a lot of skiing experience. And they combed the AIF for experienced skiers and we had Olympic skiers and all sorts of things. One bloke had been two years in

08:00 Antarctica, and so on. And they brought us together to form a ski patrol for the border of Turkey, because the high brass expected the Germans to come down through Turkey. But they didn't. And of course Rommel broke through in Africa, so we had to go hell for leather back to Africa.

So how long were you actually posted to Turkey?

I was detached from the unit to the

08:30 ski unit, and because events never came the way that it was planned, I was simply returned to my own unit. Had the ski company been formed, I probably would have been detached from my unit to stay with them, as the fighting troops –

So you didn't actually get there?

No, we never got

09:00 there. It was disbanded, we were all sent back to our original units. It's much the same in field work. If you're the local intelligence office in the 2/7th Field Company and you're promoted, you go into brigade intelligence or headquarters intelligence, you leave your unit and you begin a different

09:30 sort of career within the army structure. Particularly officers, because it means promotion for them. Instead of being a company commander in their own unit, they become a battalion commander with several companies under their command.

You said in your research interview, the army didn't know

10:00 **how to handle you.**

They knew how to handle me all right, but they didn't know into which pigeonhole to put me.

I believe your sergeant said to you, "Why aren't you an officer?" Or, "You should be an officer."

I was officer material, but I wasn't an officer. There's a big distinction between having two pips on your shoulder and three stripes on your arm then nothing at all. Your capacity, for example

10:30 in an engineering unit, you've been building bridges in outback Queensland, as some of our blokes had been, you were pretty proficient at building a bridge in a hurry across a wadi or something like that, so people who were tradesmen or skilled in any sort of manner, they had various jobs to do which they did better than a normal

11:00 soldier would do. Even though he might be trained for it in an army. So you picked your men to be good. If you were a miner at Mount Isa, you knew a lot about explosives, so they were the blokes that primed the mines, and put them in the minefields and so on like that –

It's all very skilled based.

Yes, but not like an infantry. In the infantry you grab everybody, you mould them, from jails or whatever, it doesn't matter. But in a

11:30 specialist like the artillery or engineering or something like that, you've got skills that have to be deployed in the various jobs that your unit is called upon to do. Blow up a plane, build a bridge, get water. So it's a different sort of a concept than from being an infantry.

So the ski troop didn't eventuate?

No, we

12:00 disbanded, we all came back to our unit, we loaded up our trucks, we drove down from Lebanon, to go back home to Australia, which was what the intelligence boys said. But everybody knew we were going back to the desert. You could tell from the boots. You hid every identification on your trucks, all the Lebanese knew exactly what was on. The muktah, at the village, knew more

12:30 about it than I did. I wasn't able to go back and say goodbye to him, I've always regretted that. He knew we were going out. I can't remember his name. That's what annoys me sometimes. I remember the circumstances very well, but I can't for the life of me remember names, I never captioned

13:00 the photograph I took of him – In later life you become sorry you didn't do these things, but I never expected to be here quite so soon [laughs].

I believe you went to El Alamein after that?

Yes. When we came back from Lebanon, we came straight back to the battle area and to El Alamein. And

13:30 that was very early after Rommel's breakthrough of El Alamein, and the Australian 9th Division was really called upon to stop it. Now, that sounds grand, but they were the best and most experienced troops, particularly those blokes who had been in Tobruk, like my Company, or most of the others too. And

14:00 therefore, the Australia 9th Division were very experienced troops, and they were flung into the hole that Rommel had made in the breakthrough at El Alamein with orders that Rommel had to be stopped at all costs. Now there were other first class units, and I mentioned, two of them were the Northumberland Fusillades and the 51st Scottish Division, and they were professional

14:30 soldiers, ad they were bloody good. And the Poles were there, being in Tobruk, and they were good, too. But the Australians were very good at lots of things that came natural to them. And Montgomery later said the 9th Australian Division were the best troops he'd ever had under his command. That's a pretty good compliment. I didn't know that then. I know it now because of –

15:00 my research.

Do you think Australians were good at multi-skilling?

They were multi-skilled and they also had more initiative than most other professional British soldiers. They had a much better type of discipline that suited the ability to use your own instincts and your own knowledge, in the way you went about doing it

15:30 if you didn't have to do it order number one, order number two, order number three. You used your bush skills to repair broken down trucks and things like that. The average Australian is very inventive and very good at that sort of thing. The Australian troops were very useful troops to have under one's command.

Were there any Aboriginal men in your

16:00 **Company?**

Oh yes. When we were POW, they wanted to separate an Aboriginal from us and we wouldn't have it. And we said, "No, he's as white as us, he comes with us, he doesn't go with all the people from Ethiopia," and so on. The French had a lot of black troops, too, We had black troops too, Indians, all sorts of

16:30 people.

Were you mates with any of them?

There were none in my particular company, but it wouldn't have mattered. They would have been just like myself.

Do you think they ever encountered negativity from other soldiers?

Well obviously they did in the example I've just given you, but not in the AIF.

17:00 No. I think generally in sport, for example, look at the number of native Aboriginals playing Aussie Rules today. Every teams got them. Because they've got certain skills that suit that game, and they develop very well. And they're a little unpredictable, just like the average Australian sometimes is too.

So you were in El Alamein and you

17:30 **were doing your mapping and geological work there. What sort of other work were you doing there?**

Well, mainly going out patrolling, to reconnoitre, to find out where they were, to find out who the enemy were against you. Were they Italians, were they

18:00 Germans, were they a well known outfit or not, to assess the strength against you. There were certain strategic targets that needed to be looked at, airfields for example.

Were you guys in a defensive position at this stage?

No it wasn't a

18:30 defensive position. No. Tobruk was the quintessence of what a defensive position was. And the siege of Tobruk is a class example. But we were more mobile, first of all to stop the Rommel from getting through the lines, secondly to disrupt his supply, because he was way out ahead of a lot of his supplies. And we were probing to allow the generals, so they could

19:00 have the best information they could have from the field to devise the counter strategy to Rommel.

So gathering information.

Gathering information and things of that sort. But there were always trucks to be mended, bridges to be built, roads to be bulldozed out of things.

So it was a real complexity of operations?

It was a variety of tasks, whereas the

19:30 infantry bloke, he goes ahead with hand to hand fighting. We were attached to an infantry battalion, on the night the whole battalion was taken POW. But with that battalion were anti-tank people, engineers, signals experts, all the, what is loosely regarded as, core troops.

20:00 And – our company was made up of sections. The night we went in with the Second 28th Infantry Battalion, we were attached to them for that operation only. We had a Lieutenant, Ken Bradshaw, he's still alive, and fifteen sappers, an NCO, a corporal, and a

20:30 sergeant. And we went into that action attached to an infantry battalion, but we weren't part of that battalion. We were there to do special jobs. Our job that night was to lift the mines in the minefield, to make a gap in them so the infantry could advance through the mines and their support vehicles could

21:00 follow, and we did that. We made the gap. My job was to measure the distance between the gap in that minefield and where the infantry had to dig in, because the previous battle at Ruin Ridge they'd gone too far and they were cut off. That,

21:30 like a lot of battles, went completely wrong. The third and last battle for Ruin Ridge was the Second 28th. We were to be relieved in the morning by British tanks. There had been a big tank battle that night, apparently, and when the tanks came in the morning, they had

22:00 big red crosses on them. That was the end of the whole battalion. Eight hundred men, with a colonel, lieutenant colonel. He'd just been promoted as a major from the 2/32nd to take command of the 2/28th

Battalion. And he had the unhappy job of surrendering. The whole battalion, with their ancillary troops, like sappers, engineers. It was the biggest loss I think of any

22:30 Australian unit in El Alamein.

Can I ask you what date you're looking at here.

29th July, 1942. The really big battle of El Alamein. When

23:00 Montgomery broke through Rommel, was in October. We were part of that stop gap that had to stop him, while Montgomery collected the rest of the 8th Army to counter attack, and it was a series of big skirmishes. We were prior to the real big battles of El Alamein, where Britain was victorious. Where Rommel was

23:30 thrust back and finally thrown out.

So in some ways you guys played a pretty integral part in halting his progress?

Oh yes. But the Australians were only part of it. The Poles were there and the Free French and the New Zealanders, who were vastly underestimated, they did a terrific job. British professional troops, too. Anybody

24:00 who could fire a gun, I think, was pushed into those first battles.

Those eight hundred men, they were all Australian men from that battalion?

Yes, an entire Australian battalion.

Were there any other nationalities fighting with you at that time?

New Zealanders. There were Free French. Poles, a lot of Indians,

24:30 Nepalese, Ghurkhas.

They were all taken prisoner?

No. Where we were at Ruin Ridge was the vital place. That was where Rommel was stopped thoroughly, and where he was begun to be pushed back. It was vital to Rommel to get through there. And when he couldn't get through, the threat to

25:00 taking Cairo and encircling the whole Suez Canal disappeared. It was the most definitive battle, El Alamein, the big one that followed.

And you were promoted at this stage, to Lance Corporal?

Oh look, I've been promoted and down-promoted so often I really couldn't tell you. Maybe five or six times, and I was used to that, it didn't matter. Depending

25:30 on the responsibilities, I was a sapper. I certainly wasn't wearing stripes when I went into battle, it might have come later. It didn't matter anyway.

Leading up to the point of capture, how long was the battle, that night?

That particular night? We started at midnight and

26:00 we dug in when we reached our objective, with the colonel at headquarters. The radio wasn't working. Something went wrong and the reinforcements couldn't get up through the minefield, and the Germans managed to close the minefield. That meant that no supplies got through to us. We didn't have any shells for the few anti-tank guns that had

26:30 got through. And he had no alternative but to surrender. When the tanks came up, they weren't ours. So it was a disaster, it was a complete disaster. But there were plenty of other disasters that were worse than that one, but for that battalion it was an utter disaster. There were many Italians in Crete, for example, which disappeared completely, too. But for the 9th Division, as distinct from the 6th Division, that was the

27:00 worst casualties they ever had.

Did anyone get the blame for it?

You don't get blamed like that in war-time. It was just something that wasn't a success. The blame comes later and is apportioned amongst people. Very difficult to know who was – who was the fault in the [UNCLEAR] where we started off in Gallipoli. That was a disaster. But who's fault was that? Not the

27:30 soldiers. It was the fault of the high command.

Who was commanding this action?

There were three battalions to a brigade. And the brigade had another battalion, the 2/43rd, in reserve,

if were needed. But the commander of the

28:00 2/43rd was told not to go in, at any cost, they were not to relieve their cobbers in the 2/28th, and that was strategically the right decision to make, because if they had gone in, we would have lost a lot of other men. I was a sapper, I wasn't in the high command, so I can't answer those questions.

You guys were still under British Command?

28:30 **Overall.**

Overall we were under the command of General Montgomery of the Eighth Army. And Montgomery was the man who eventually defeated Rommel. So you can't really blame anyone. It's just the fortunes of war.

So what time of day did the Germans roll in?

Dawn, first light.

So where were you physically dug in there?

Dug in there,

29:00 battalion headquarters. When my job was finished, because I couldn't do any more about it, I could speak German, and I could hear the German being spoken on either side of us. I reported to my Lieutenant, Ken Bradshaw. I said, "Look, Ken, there are Germans there," because the Germans had a

29:30 very potent gun, an 80mm gun and that played havoc. They were picking off all the supply trucks and so on, and normally you would have to silence that gun somehow, but they managed to close the minefield behind us, with that 80mm gun in command of that gap. It was a big field cannon.

30:00 The German machine guns were very effective, and they had us in a trap. They closed the trap around us. There was nothing you could do. Not a thing. When dawn came, you could hear the rumbling of the tanks, and they came up through the dust and the shit and the muck, with the armoured cars first, preceding the tanks

30:30 and when I saw the Iron Cross, I said, "Jesus, where do we go from here?" Just at that time, the radio got going and we were able to report our co-ordinates, where we were, the position, as being the right position that we'd been told to attack and to get, and he

31:00 called up the artillery to shell that position, which was the only thing, militarily, I think he could have done. But it didn't frighten the tanks, they didn't take any notice of it. And finally he gave the yell to surrender.

So a few shells were sent?

Our own shells were landing amongst us.

So you ducked for cover obviously?

I can only speak about my own personal experience.

31:30 You're so dumfounded to think that the people who were come up to relieve you were the enemy, and you were a prisoner of war, that you just really couldn't believe it. You didn't take much notice of the shells at all. The fact that you were a POW, that was the thing that struck home. Of course, they got us out very quickly. The Germans were very efficient,

32:00 [UNCLEAR] the trenches you had dug through the night, that's the meaning of the word 'digging in'.

Did you have to get out with your hands on your head?

Yes, you had to get out with your hands on your head and if you didn't put them up quickly enough you got a burst of machine-gun fire at your feet, so you put them up pretty quickly.

Did you have to disarm?

I never carried arms. That wasn't the role of the sapper. That's the infantry, to

32:30 do that. Ken Bradshaw would have had his revolver, he was an officer. Other men might have picked up a machine-gun or something on the way. But normally we didn't carry arms. There was nothing you could do about it. There was nothing you could do about it.

Do you remember the looks on your mates' faces? Did you look around?

I watched the colonel, on his

33:00 first command of a battalion, and he realized that to offer any resistance was just suicidal. And I think a lot of sweethearts and Mums back home would have thanked him. I'm getting emotional again – if we can stop.

33:30 You're just completely helpless. You can't do a thing. You've got no arms, and if you did it wouldn't make any difference to you. You've got no support from anybody because they're all in the same – they can't rally around to help you. The poor colonel, he must have felt terrible. And as I say, he did the only thing possible under the circumstances, and a lot of people would be

34:00 grateful, including me, my mother, my sister. Can we leave that particular subject? We'll take it from prisoners – you're rounded up, you're completely helpless, you don't know what to do. They sort out the officers

34:30 straight away, they take them away, both for intelligence purposes and also to break down the morale of the men, because there's nobody there to give them orders. Although the sergeants in the Australian Army can do that very easily, and get that going. Anyhow they put you in a barbed wire cage, and they take you back, in our case, they took us back as quickly as they

35:00 could. During the next day at day break, without any warning, without anything, to Benghazi, in a port, and we were handed over there to a huge transit camp as Italian prisoners. I think that was the worst part of it. The Germans had taken us prisoners, which was not so much of a disgrace, but to be Italian prisoners, that was the end of all things. I've revised my mind about

35:30 that later in Italy.

You didn't have as much regard for the Italians?

Later on I did. In the initial period, no. They were poor troops, they were conscripts, they were pretty poor people. Briefly in Italy, the Fascists were bastards. In the big main camp that I first went to, he was a superbastard. But later

36:00 on, which we'll probably cover tomorrow, when we had the group escape, then the Italians turned out to be fantastic. Completely different breed, the Northern Italian from the Southern Italian. I'll say it to any Italian that I meet. That's generally shared by most Australians. You'll probably get this confirmed by other

36:30 people when you come to deal with European interviews.

So how were you feeling at this point, when you were being transported, going to this camp at Benghazi.

It was very difficult. You were impotent, you can't do anything about your situation, which is a bad blow. You can't understand the orders that you're given. I could translate when they were German orders, but I was hopeless when

37:00 they were Italian orders, I couldn't speak Italian. I learned to speak it later. You can't go to the toilet when you want to. You're deprived of everything. A lot of people go into battle with very light clothing. We'd gone into battle with light clothing, and a great coat, it gets cold in the desert, at night, and you needed it anyhow for a

37:30 midnight attack. Maybe you'd lost that in the course of the battle. Sometimes I remember later when we had sheep at the farm, I'd always look at the sheep being shorn in the sheering shed, and I thought, "You poor bastards, I know what you're feeling like."

So were the conditions cold?

Oh yes. It gets very cold in the desert at night. Freezing.

And did they supply you with –

38:00 Nothing.

So you were freezing that night?

Oh yes.

What clothing were you wearing?

Khaki shorts. We all had a great coat, and that disappeared one or another, and it certainly wasn't replaced. The sanitation which you took for granted in your own unit, just didn't

38:30 exist. That means that dysentery breaks out. And if you've had dysentery you don't want it anymore. And I've had it, as most POWs have had. It's just a complete negation of everything that you've been trained to do in the army. And what you can't do from a patriotic point of view. That's where your patriotic pride can support you a bit, but not

39:00 when you're POW.

So you felt helpless?

Impotent was the word I used, helpless is a good word. But you had been defeated in battle, and that's not always good, to be on the losing side. You can't do the things you normally take for granted, like go to the toilet. You've not medication if you've been wounded in the battle. I hadn't been wounded, so I

was lucky there. But you're just a

39:30 complete – not a waif, but you're a prisoner. The word describes itself. You're a prisoner not only of your body, but also of your mind.

No contact with home?

Well, that comes later. This is, I think, in my view, a very important thing about a POW. You've got to make up your mind down

40:00 the track and call on your own abilities to organise yourself as a person, to organise yourself as a serving soldier, to create self-discipline whereas before you accepted the discipline the army gave you. You've got to call on your skills at foraging, like my dog does, he'll pick up a crust of bread from across the road. The Australians were pretty good at that. You

40:30 swapped what you did have for a loaf of bread. You get down to a pretty lower common denominator, I can tell you.

Can I ask you, as you were traveling to Benghazi, and you were placed in that camp, who were you with at the time?

With members of the 2/28th, some of the people – Davy Payne, from my own unit, who was with me. There were maybe some anti-tank gunners

41:00 there.

Any close mates, that you've become mates with?

I was mates with all the fifteen who were under Ken Bradshaw that night. But my best mate wasn't there, with us that night. But another one was,

41:31 but he wasn't in the same truck that I was. They were in the same convoy of trucks but not in the same truck as me. They weren't all AIF people.

Did you all go to that camp? All eight hundred men?

Yes, everybody that was taken prisoner at Benghazi, no matter which battle he was in

Tape 4

00:30 [sounds of affixing microphones]

So your first deployment was – you stopped in Trincomalee on the way to the Middle East, on

01:00 **the way to the front line.**

To join the unit.

You did no training in Trincomalee?

No. It was only a port of call for the ships to be replenished with fuel oil and provisions and to evacuate a few sick people and so on. It was not a major deal at all.

What year was this?

This was 1941.

So the Japanese hadn't attacked

01:30 **Trincomalee yet. Then you went from there to Point Said?**

That's right. The ships were too big to go through the Canal.

What was the name of the ship you were on?

I think I was on the Queen Mary.

You affiliated with the 2/7th Battalion. No, I was going to

02:00 **join the 2/7th Field Company. And the 2/7th Field Company is an Engineering – belongs to the RAE, the Royal Australian Engineers, of the 9th Division.**

You got off at Point Said, and what happened thereafter?

I don't think we got off at Port Said, I think we got off at Suez, at the bottom of the Canal. Then

02:30 we went into the main camp complex, in Palestine, on the Western side of the Red Sea, which was a

gigantic staging camp for all the Allied Forces in the Middle East. The particular camp that my unit went to was Quastina and

03:00 that was in the Winter of 1941. You remember I said yesterday I was there on my birthday, December 7, which was Pearl Harbour, the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour. December was almost mid-winter in Palestine. Pretty

03:30 cold. Rain, terrible lot of rain, and very cold. The nights get very cold in the desert areas. The days are warm, but the nights get very cold. The accommodation was all in tents, and a few

04:00 permanent buildings, the mess buildings for example, but it was a gigantic hive of activity, behind the lines supporting the front line troops.

Was there any German air-raids?

Not that I can remember. I don't think they could get that far in. You see they would have had to fly from Romania, or bases in Italy, and it was a long way.

By this stage Syria had fallen?

04:30 Yes. There were three divisions. The 6th, 7th and 8th, in the Middle East. The 6th were originally in North Africa, then they were pulled back to go to Greece and Crete. The 9th Division took over Tobruk, and the 7th Division had been fighting against the Free French in Syria.

The Vichy

05:00 **French?**

Yes, sorry. The Vichy French. They pulled out the 7th Division to come home and be re-organised, leaving only the two, the 6th and the 9th , in the Middle East. I think of all the POWs in the Middle East, only one was taken in Syria, because when the Allies virtually wiped out the

05:30 Vichy French, any prisoners were exchanged straight away. There was some very fierce fighting in Syria, around a place called the Dog's Rocks, but I was never involved with that because I was the 9th Division and that was the 7th Division operational area.

What did you bear about the fighting around Dog's Rocks?

I think that was the battle in which

06:00 the Governor General of NSW, with one leg, remember Cutley VC [Victoria Cross]? I think that's where he won his VC. I think it was at Dog's Rocks. There was quite some severe fighting around there.

So you were told by other friends about the Syrian campaign?

Yes. That's right.

06:30 When we left Palestine, we went up into Syria replacing the 7th , which was being pulled out, and it was really a strategic move to give the troops a bit of a rest, after the siege of Tobruk. And secondly, to prepare the defenses if the Germans did in fact come down through Syria and that side of the Mediterranean, into Turkey.

07:00 So, that was the reason that the ski troops were formed, to patrol the border between Syria and Turkey.

Did you actually do any patrolling?

No. We never got to that stage. We were formed up with that in view. But it never actually got to a patrolling situation, because by that time

07:30 Rommel had broken through and it looked like Turkey would remain neutral, so there was no need to patrol the border of Turkey. So we were pulled out and then helter-skelter back into the Western Desert.

How big was this ski unit?

About three hundred men. We were headquartered at a place called the Cedars in Lebanon, which was a skiing resort before the war.

08:00 Lebanon is a fantastic country, because you can go water-skiing in the morning and snow-skiing in the afternoon. It's quite incredible. The distances are not that great. It's pretty stony and rocky, and high, to have snow.

Lebanon was a Vichy French colony as well, wasn't it?

Yes, it was part of Syria. Lebanon and Syria were the two places under the control the French.

08:30 **What do you remember about Lebanon?**

There was no campaign in Lebanon, as far as we were concerned, because the 7th Division had cleaned

it up.

Did you hear anything about what the 7th Division went through there?

Not much. They pulled out. The country was firmly controlled by the Allies at that time. My particular unit employed a lot of civilians,

09:00 digging traps for tanks, tank ditches. Making roads, building bridges over rivers.

Was there any tension between the Allies and the Turks?

No, I don't think so. See, Turkey was a neutral country, like Portugal, Spain and Switzerland were. They're under the control of The

09:30 Hague conventions. Which is the rules of war governing neutral countries. Fighting armies with soldiers, were under the Geneva Conventions. Two different sets of conventions. And the conventions, under The Hague conventions are that any prisoner of war, or any troops, are free men in

10:00 that country. They can be repatriated, as soon as they can be got rid of. Unless for one reason or another the neutral power intern them under that law. It was a very big differentiating point in Switzerland, but I don't know too much about Turkey, because I was never there during the war. I only went post-war.

10:30 **Did you ever spend any time in Tobruk?**

No. Only passing through, as a POW.

You said you did some patrolling around the Alamein area? Was that front line patrols?

That was front line patrols. As I tried to explain yesterday, the first priority was to stop Rommel, then the second thing after

11:00 that was to defeat Rommel. So in the process of trying to stop Rommel from getting through to Cairo, we were right in the front line from the word go. When we drove down from Lebanon, we went straight into action, once we got into Libya. El Alamein is in Libya, in North Africa. My unit was pretty experienced because of the nine months fighting in Tobruk.

11:30 They knew all the local tricks of the trade.

What did you learn from their experiences? What did they tell you?

You're still a member of a fighting unit, despite how long you've been there. You simply join the work that they did, patrolling for example, lifting minefields, sewing

12:00 minefields. Anything that had a strategic advantage to the British 8th Army, whose job was to stop Rommel and later to defeat Rommel.

How did you find the experienced troops would treat you? The younger recruits?

Well, you soon adapted to their experience and learnt from them. You

12:30 soon fell in as a member of the team, whatever your function was.

We left off before about the operation aspect. So you said

13:00 **the new recruits came to reinforce the unit. The more senior troops who had experience, what did they pass on the new recruits? Regardless of the age?**

It's like going to the beach. You might have a whole lot of experienced lifesavers, and they patrol the beach and look

13:30 after everything, so when a new recruit comes to any unit, it doesn't have to be an engineering unit like my own, or a specialist unit, every unit had to be continually fed with reinforcements to take the place of those that had been killed, or wounded, or who had fallen sick and taken away. You had to keep up the strength of the unit to maintain the optimum operating effectiveness of that unit. So you just merged in like

14:00 an emergency on a footie team, for example, somebody is injured or hurt and taken to the sidelines or the bench, and a new bloke comes in and he is immediately part of the team. Whether he's the best man for the job or not, he's there.

What did they pass on to you, as far as knowledge and experience is concerned. For instance, you go on patrol, did they tell you the Germans operate this way, or the Italians operate this way. What would they pass on to you as very

14:30 **practical field information?**

My wife always goes crook on me because everytime I park the car, I reverse into the place. She said, "Why do you do that?" And I said, "Well, I learnt to do that whenever we went on patrol, we always

parked our car or the truck, so we could always get away instantaneously." You didn't have to reverse, then turn around and take off. You

15:00 had it ready, primed, so it went straight off like a bullet. Little tricks of the trade like simply parking the truck in the right position. If you were trying to capture a few of the enemy, sentries, to take back for questioning by intelligence officers, you always tried to isolate them and grab them and get them away

15:30 before they were able to disturb the rest of the camp. It depended on the purpose of the patrol, what the patrol had to do. Sometimes you go out to pick up a few mines, so the infantry could come in and attack that particular position. It's a very fluid situation, always, and you had to be ready

16:00 for whatever occurred.

Can you provide me with any interesting examples of the patrols involving the Italians or Germans on the front line?

I gave you one yesterday, when I mentioned I was picked out by Major Burn, the company commander, to go and destroy that brand new British fighter plane that had crashed in no

16:30 man's land. It had crashed halfway between the German Front and the Australian Front. It had to be destroyed, that was the command given to the major. So he picked me to go along with him to demonstrate, to show me, how to destroy, with gelignite, the plane. Now it's important if you're going to destroy a

17:00 bridge that's in the way, or if you're going to blow up a minefield that's in the way. You have to learn how to handle explosives. And he was very good at that. Part of my learning from him was how to set off explosives, under practical conditions. I had learned about it in training, but that's a different thing in training from being actually there. To give you an example too, we were crawling over the

17:30 the battlefield, towards this airplane, and there was this heat haze over the desert. The major said, "Look, I think we're silly crawling on our stomachs out towards this plane. We can't see the Germans lines because of the heat haze, and if we can't see them, they probably can't see us." So he just stood up quite casually, and walked

18:00 towards the plane. I thought, "Crikey, you're taking a chance," but his reasoning was right. We got there in half the time walking, as it would have taken us to crawl out there.

What was front line like in El Alamein? How far was the German line?

You never knew. There were certain defending points, but it was a very fluid sort of desert action. It was more like a naval action. And this was the strength of Rommel. He was the first to realise that with

18:30 his tanks and armoured cars and things, operating in a featureless environment, that if he took over the naval techniques of going anywhere at any time, because the sea is there, you could pop up in the most unexpected places. Behind the lines, even. And that's what happened to us when the 2/28th was caught. He was shrewd enough to

19:00 close the gap in the minefield that we had opened for the infantry. He got in behind us, and that's why he was able to seal off all the supplies to the people who had obtained the objective that we were after, but had no support.

What unit was supposed to have reinforced you to keep the line open? Was there another unit behind you?

That's what the generals

19:30 do. They call up this brigade or that company, they've got the overall strategic plan. As far as the people who were involved are concerned, for them it's only a matter of tactics. Whether to try and wipe out a machine gun nest that was buried in the flank, or whether to silence that gun that was doing so much damage in that particular battle. It's the difference between tactics on the one hand, for the men who are actually on the ground and the

20:00 strategy of the generals and the people who are directing the operations back at headquarters.

Did you have any harrowing experiences at the front? Any close shaves with death?

I don't know how to describe it. You're in the front line and might just be having a meal break, and a Stuka would come over, a German dive bomber. And they.

20:30 would go into a mighty roar and zoom down on you and everybody has to scatter. It was always being alert and prepared. You never knew what they were going to do, we were hopeful in turn that they never knew what we were going to do. That's what tactics were all about.

So this was in El Alamein when the dive bombers were attacking you?

21:00 **Oh yes. But they were liable to attack you anywhere. Just to be a nuisance, to keep you on the jump and so on. You didn't actually have to be fighting. They might deliberately come over**

while you were having lunch, well behind the front line. It's very difficult to be objective when you're in the

21:30 **front line. You never know exactly what's up. You obey orders. The orders come down from headquarters, and the officers and the commanders in the field obey them.**

You said there was a sound the Stukas made?

It's got a sort of a scream. The Stuka was a very potent weapon for the German

22:00 air force because it goes into a very steep dive. It sort of shrieks down at you, and machine guns you or drops a few bombs and then its off before you know what's happened. It happens in just a matter of a few seconds. First of all there's nothing there, then you hear the sound, then boom! away it goes and there's silence again. All over in a matter of a minute.

Were they a deadly plane?

22:30 **Oh yeah. They were very frightening. It was sort of a wailing, swishing sound, it was very upsetting. Just the sound of the attack. Psychologically it was very upsetting.**

So the difference between an Me-109 [Messerschmitt] strafing and a Stuka attacking would be very different.

Oh yes. From the

23:00 point of – The Stuka wasn't capable of doing that much damage. But it was a very irritating sort of thing. You never knew when it was coming. And it made the troops unsettled after a Stuka attack.

How did the troops react after a Stuka attack?

It depends on your experience. If you've had

23:30 it done to you twenty times, it upsets your meal routine, you think, "That bastard's come again!" And you get angry a bit, rather than frightened. There's quite a difference between anger and fright and the Stuka managed to do both things.

With the Ruin Ridge battle, you were talking

24:00 **about – basically you were pioneers in a way?**

No, a pioneer is a cross between an infantryman and an engineer. They've got a lot of engineering capacities, but in many cases, a pioneer battalion as well as doing earthworks and stuff like that, are fighting troops. They're trained in the same way that an infantryman is trained. So they're

24:30 capable of doing both roles, engineering roles and fighting roles. It was based on the German technischer, that was one of the types of troops they had, very mobile. In Greece and Crete, for example, pioneers were used entirely as infantry people. So a pioneer is quite a recent

25:00 type of troop, terms of history. Whereas infantry you can date that back to the Crimean War, or even before. And engineers have always been around. Artillery's always been around, even in the days of catapults, throwing stones over castle walls.

Were pioneers considered basically better then infantry in certain ways?

25:32 **Is artillery better than engineers? Is engineers better than signals? Each has their role to play. The pioneer was specially trained to do either technical work like the engineers were specialists at, or to do straight out infantry work. Pioneers were only a recent addition to the type of**

26:00 **troop that was trained. Before that you had your standard engineers, artillery, signals and infantry.**

So your experience in the field company – you were purely an engineer role?

Basically, the role of the engineer was to repair damage, to

26:30 create damage, by that I mean you could either build a bridge or put explosives under a bridge and destroy it. To repair vehicles and things like that, to keep the mobility up. You had workshop groups, specialist workshop groups attached to engineers. You had to either clear minefields

27:00 or create minefields. You were responsible, often, for water supplies. Keeping pumps going to fill up the water tankers that came in to be filled from a water point, to be taken out to the infantry on the front line. You were a more technical troop, and that's why most engineering troops had a skilled background. Plumbers, bridge builders,

27:30 mining people, for example, who were pretty clued up with explosives and so on.

You went through the scenario of how you were captured,, and you mentioned that your unit

had called in an artillery strike on your own position?

The only

28:00 way the colonel could have got out of the situation that we were in, was to create a counter force to the Germans that were surrounding us. Now the only counter force available to him was the artillery, and when he called on them to bomb our position, he told them exactly where to aim their

28:30 shells it was as much to knock out the German tanks, which was the prime purpose of doing that, and in the confusion maybe give to us a chance to escape. But the Germans were pretty good, and they just said 'Well, we're not going to let a few artillery shells worry us, our job is to capture this unit.'

Was it a heavy barrage?

Oh, it was a dinkum barrage. It

29:00 often happened. When that particular battle was on, at midnight, there was a very heavy barrage beforehand. Now the infantry come in behind the barrage. The barrage moves forward, and the infantry march in behind it. And it's to soften up the defences facing the infantry. It's employed to

29:30 aid them, just the same as the engineers and the signals and the ambulance people aid them. It was copy book tactics if you were in trouble to try and get the artillery, who'd be some miles away sometimes, to help you out.

So how far did your unit actually march from your front line position into the position where you were encircled?

From memory I think it might have been about

30:00 two thousand yards.

That's not that far, is it?

Don't forget it's pretty far when you're advancing under very heavy fire. And the main thing is if you've got an objective to capture. And in a featureless landscape, an objective is very hard to find. It's not like you're attacking a cathedral, or if you were attacking

30:30 Monte Casino, which is a huge monastery in Italy. You knew exactly where the enemy were, and how potent the firepower against you was. In the desert, as Rommel had found out, it's a very fluid area. There were no houses to be destroyed, and no churches to act as observation posts, as you had in Europe in the First World War. You had to be very certain you knew exactly where you were. And

31:00 that was what had happened before. People had gone to capture a particular feature and they'd mistaken the feature in the confusion of the fighting and they'd gone too far. And if you go too far, you have the very real possibility that you'll be outflanked and they'll close in behind you. And that's what they did to us.

And that happened quite frequently in Africa?

Quite frequently. That was the name of the game. And both sides of the

31:30 warfare, the Germans and the Italians, were pretty good at doing that sort of thing, which is why you had to be quite mobile. And that's why the Germans were so good. Their infantry was very often on the side of tanks, and special motorised and armoured vehicles. They moved very quickly. They could be here one moment, then down the track, well out of the way, the next moment. And that was the secret of war in the desert. Because the New Zealanders did that. Have you ever heard of the

32:00 Long Range Desert Troops. They went right in from the sea, in a very inhospitable desert country, but they were able to get round behind the Germans because there was nobody out there in that country to stop them. They were miles and miles away from their base camp, completely on their own. Something like the SAS [Special Air Service] boys in this last Iraqi fight. They were in Baghdad long before any of the other

32:30 troops were there. And they could do that because they were so mobile. And that's what the Long Range Desert Group did. They were very, very mobile. But they were completely cut off. They couldn't call for reinforcements if they got into trouble.

What happened to that unit?

There was a very big battle at a place called Sidi Rezegh, and they lost a lot of their people there. The New Zealanders were very underestimated. They were thoroughly.

33:00 experienced soldiers, just like the Australians were. You see, the New Zealanders fought on in the Middle East. When they pulled out the 6th and the 9th Divisions to bring them back here, to fight the Japs in the Pacific, one New Zealand Division, there was only one single Division, it stayed on in the Mediterranean right throughout the war. They fought from El Alamein right over North Africa to Tripoli, then they landed in

33:30 Sicily, and they fought themselves right up from the bottom of Italy and they were almost into German territory in Austria when the war finished. They fought on all the time, the New Zealanders, in the Middle East. They didn't have any land troops like we did in the Pacific area.

You went over before that you said the Italian troops were considered to be poor troops, because they conscripts –

Yes.

34:00 **But you also mentioned just before also that Italian troops were involved in outflanking manoeuvres, so they must have been able to hold their own?**

No, not really, because they had division after division, but the quality of the troops wasn't up to scratch really, compared to the Australians or the Germans. Their generals hadn't got the

34:30 idea of mobility in a desert environment. They sort of fought from fixed posts, like Tobruk, with perimeter wire all around the town of Tobruk. They really weren't of the same fighting calibre as Rommel's troops. And that in fact was the reason why the Germans weren't

35:00 in the Libya or Cyrenaica in the early days, because they had hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Italian troops. But the Italians, I don't think, understood desert warfare as well as the Germans or the Australian or the British did.

What about the ground troops, they weren't effective generally?

Well, yes, some were good. They had some professional groups

35:30 like the Bersaglieri, I think they were called, and they were well trained, the mountain troops. I'm only talking by and large –

Did you encounter the Bersaglieri?

No, not personally. They had the Littorio Division, the Lightning Division, they did some good things. But sometimes the sheer weight of numbers, you really couldn't – if you – I

36:00 remember one bloke, a sergeant in our thing, I think he got the MM [Military Medal] for it, he went out and rounded up about a thousand Italians. Alone. This was one bloke. Simply because they wanted to surrender, they didn't want to fight on in the war. Incredible –

These were the conscripts?

Well, most of them were conscripts. But there were regular professional groups of Italian soldiers who were pretty

36:30 good. But by and large they didn't have the evenness of fighting quality that the Germans had.

Before we move on to your POW experiences, are there any other stories that could illustrate your front-line activities that you experienced?

There are a lot of better people to give you those stories than I am. Particularly

37:00 those fellows who were in Tobruk. Because supply is always a problem, when you're under siege, or when you've got long extended lines of communication. It wasn't as if you could get everything you wanted. You had to make do with what you had. And a lot of the artillery, for example, in Tobruk, was captured Italian artillery. The Poles, particularly

37:30 were very good at improvising and getting that artillery working. They made very effective moves using captured enemy equipment. I think there was a bit of an art in that, of being able to take material that you captured from the enemy and turn it to your own advantage.

38:00 The perfect example of that was the terrorist attack on New York. They used commercial airlines as their weapons of destruction.

With the battle of Ruin Ridge, what do you recall of moving with the infantry units right up the front?

It was pretty obvious to me, that there were Germans very close on our flanks. They were

38:30 causing a great deal of damage to us. Their objective was definitely to isolate us, and that's what they managed to do. They stopped all the support vehicles coming through the gap in the minefields, and having done that, then we were isolated in a sea of German troops.

Do you think they allowed your unit to move back?

39:00 No, no. They couldn't prevent the infantry taking their objective, which was Ruin Ridge. The infantry did everything that they were ordered to do with complete efficiency. But they weren't being supplied. They couldn't get up through the gap in the minefield. There were blazing vehicles all over the place where this gun was knocking them out.

39:30 And you could tell there were German troops, very close, behind you. Now when you are on an attack and you can hear German voices behind you, you begin to wonder a bit just what they are up to. And, of course, what they're up to is they're closing in behind you. That's when I reported to Ken Bradshaw, my lieutenant, I said, "Look Ken, I can hear German being spoken behind us." It was

40:00 a trap. We expected, though, that the trap would be released when the British Army, with their tanks, came up to relieve us at dawn. But of course, the Germans had time, by closing the gap behind us, to organise their tanks, which fought a battle with the British tanks and knocked them out, and they were German tanks that arrived. And you had no show.

How wide was this actual front that you were moving forward on?

Do you mean the front or the gap in the minefield?

Well,

40:30 **I mean the actual front where your battalion was moving in on. How actually wide was the area they were pushing forward on. Just your battalion –**

It wouldn't have been all that wide. There was a minefield that protected Ruin Ridge. And when the sappers cleared the mines and marked and staked

41:00 the gap in the minefield, through which the vehicles could advance the support vehicles with ammunition and supplies, when that gap was made, I think there was some misunderstanding about how the vehicles should enter that gap. Ken Bradshaw, who had the orders, he's very bitter about this, because he thinks the orders from

41:30 brigade were wrong. But I don't know. I was a simple soldier, doing the job I had to do that night. And you can argue till the cows come home. Where do you apportion the blame?

Tape 5

00:33 **So you were talking about the operational experience, you got captured. I'd like to get an illustration of your initial POW experience. You said you were packed up into trucks and sent to Benghazi. How long did that process take from actually being captured to being sent to**

01:00 **Benghazi?**

Day.

One day?

It was very rapid. Rapid action was the secret of the war in the desert. In out quickly, punching away. So when we were all caught, the remainder of the

01:30 battalion, they whipped the officers away very quickly. Wouldn't leave them with the men. And when they began rounding up the men and taking us all away as quickly as they could behind the front lines, that was to get us away from the fighting, because you were always hoping there will be a counter attack by our own

02:00 people and they will rescue you again, but the further behind the lines you get, the more remote that possibility becomes. So it's tactics, good tactics, to get people, prisoners, as far as they can away from the possibility of them being recaptured. That's why you go hell for leather towards Benghazi, and once we were loaded into the trucks, we weren't allowed to do anything about it. The trucks

02:30 didn't stop. They just went straight into Benghazi. I don't know how long it was away, maybe eighty kilometres or something, you can look it up on the map. But looking at the map doesn't give you any idea of the difficulties of driving around sand dunes, or wadis, or anything like that. They got us into the holding camp at Benghazi as soon as they could. It took about.

03:00 a day. If I remember correctly.

Just before your battalion surrendered, was there an actual firefight with the Germans? Skirmishes?

Yes the fighting was going on all the time. We dug in. We got our objective. The infantry had got to where they wanted to be and we dug in there. And

03:30 the next day we were supposed to be relieved by the tanks, but the fighting went on all night, when the Germans were consolidating their position.

So you guys were still fighting against them?

Oh yes. We left at midnight and it was less than six hours to dawn. There was fighting all the time. But you can't fight if you

04:00 haven't got any ammunition. The supply trucks couldn't get up. Not only out of ammunition, but out of dressings and food and water, and all the things that support a fighting person.

What were you doing throughout the battle that night? What was your role?

My job was to make certain the infantry had reached the limit of the advance, from the map.

04:30 Just say for example it was two thousand yards, it might have been three thousand. My job was to measure the distance that we had gone from the start line, in the compass direction, of the objective. That was a good idea in theory, but it didn't work out in practice, because I had measured out, with a fishing line or some thin type of rope, what the

05:00 distance would be, and I had it in a big coil, and as I advanced through the mine fields with the infantry, behind the infantry, I was unrolling my line and theoretically when I got to the end of it, we had measured that we were exactly on the feature we had been trying to capture. But you only needed one track vehicle to cut that

05:30 line or a shell landing on it, exploded it, and it was useless, and it didn't operate like it was meant to operate. So, when I realised that I couldn't accurately determine the count where they were – the colonel was pretty certain he had got the objective, he had other means of measuring, and when I reported to them I could

06:00 have had the option, for example, of returning through the minefields. But my orders were to stay there and dig in with infantry, to remain with the infantry. So I remained with the infantry and therefore I became a POW like they become POW.

Were you armed with any weapons?

No, I never carried weapons.

You didn't carry weapons. Why is that?

Well, say I had been lifting the mines instead of

06:30 measuring the distance from the starting line. You can't carry weapons when you're removing mines.

But what about your own safety?

Your own safety is there to be protected by the infantry. You are attached to infantry for your technical skills and time, which they haven't got. And they also haven't got light ack ack support, or anti-tank support, or anything

07:00 like that. They are supplied by skilled, specialist units in the army. The infantry is armed for man to man combat. We would certainly do that too, but our methods of doing that were different. Whether it was with grenades or other items of more use than a gun or a rifle. We could handle a rifle, no worries. Most of our blokes were pretty good machine

07:30 gunners too. But that's not our function.

So during the night, how can you describe the battle, was it chaotic?

It was completely chaotic. You could hear the noise. We'd reached the objective, with the infantry, with the colonel. We got the orders to dig in there, that's how I personally happened to be only thirty yards from him, maybe only thirty feet. So you have to

08:00 carry out orders even in the heights of battle. You have to do what you're told to do. To carry out your particular job for that night, whether it's blowing up a mine field or whether it's laying new mines. It's easy to ask the question of how long is a piece of string, but it's very difficult to answer that question. So I really

08:30 can't help you in that particular area. But I can help you more now when you enter the phase of what it is like to be a POW, and the conditions of having a war, your war, terminated.

I understand that when you went to Benghazi, you boarded an Italian ship to be transported?

When we all went to Benghazi, there were hundreds of thousands of men in Benghazi

09:00 from everywhere. Ghurkhas, Free French, Indians, South Africans, an enormous number of South Africans who had been taken at Tobruk, before, which was very disheartening to the Australian people who had fought so hard to keep Tobruk free. We were fairly quickly moved from Benghazi, and when I say fairly quickly, maybe it was five or six

09:30 weeks, and there were two Italian boats in the harbour. One was called the Sestriere [?] and one was called the Nino Bixio, and that was a brand new boat, it was her maiden voyage. They were both freighters. And they loaded I think about eight thousand prisoners –

10:04 between the two boats. And the Italians in charge of the operation split the people who were going to

embark on those boats into two groups. A to L went on the Sestriere, and M to Z went on the Nino Bixio. Now my name was Rudd,

10:30 so I was with the M to Z and I was loaded onto the Nino Bixio. Now there were I think about two or three thousand totally went on to the Nino Bixio, and I think a slightly lesser amount went on to the Sestriere, so there would have been about five thousand troops, say, involved. Now

11:00 specifically on the Nino Bixio, the Australians and New Zealander and a few South Africans, white POW, were placed in the number one hold. There were about five hundred of us in the number one hold on the new Nino Bixio. Then they had three other holds, with Indians in the middle hold, South Africans and a mixed group of Frenchmen

11:30 distributed over the ship, I don't know exactly how they were distributed, but I think there would have been about two and half thousand prisoners of war on the Nino Bixio. Five hundred, all the Australians and New Zealanders, and a few South Africans and oddbods, in number one hold. We'd been aboard heading for Italy for

12:00 about five hours, five or six hours, and you were pretty low and it was pretty hot. You were battened down in the hold. And we were hoping that the British navy would come up and intercept the convoy of the two ships and free us. We were off the coast of Greece, so there was every likelihood of that happening

12:30 but instead of that happening, about three o' clock in the afternoon, there was an enormous explosion, and we were hit by two torpedoes fired from a British submarine and one of those two torpedoes had come right into number one hold, exploded within the hold, and the second torpedo had gone

13:00 into the engine room, the mid-ship of the boat, and the third torpedo, and this is very debatable but I'm convinced of it, just hit the rudder and glanced off and didn't explode. Most people will tell you, who were on board, will tell you there were two torpedoes, but I think there were three. That was confirmed later on when the salvo from the British submarine was proved to be three

13:30 torpedoes. Anyway, it's very difficult to describe – there were at least, of the five hundred men, I would say there were at least two hundred killed, straight up. Because when the torpedo came in through the side of the ship, it penetrated the steel of the ship and

14:00 blew up inside the hold. So it blew up all the timbers and things and the gun crews and the Italians on the deck, up into the rigging, and that of course, all those heavy balks of timber descended again and killed a lot of people on the way down. Now the sea rushed in and drowned a lot of the people who were on the very lower part of the hold. I was on the mezzanine deck sort of thing surrounding the hold and I

14:30 could look down and see this mess happening below me. I was one of the ones that got out, but there were a lot of others, and that's why I say of the five hundred, I think about two hundred were killed immediately, including 177 New Zealanders, 33 Australians, mainly

15:00 from the 2/28th. Except for five they were all from the 2/28th, and there was complete disorder. The captain of the ship was running around trying to retain control. The guards had panicked. A lot of the Indians were jumping overboard. I got up onto the deck

15:30 and the escorting destroyers were circling the ship, dropping depth charges amongst all the people that were jumping off, so jumping off was no answer. You could see the coastline of Greece in the distance

The escorting Italian destroyers were dropping the depth charges?

They were Italian destroyers and German motor torpedo

16:00 boats

They were dropping the depth charges?

They were dropping depth charges. There was air support that came out, there were planes above us, mainly Italian planes. And the ship had stopped, because of the torpedo in the engine room and we didn't know if it was going to sink or not

16:31 It didn't appear to me that she was sinking. We were trying to help the poor buggers down in the hold, pulling them up on ropes and so on. Late that evening, one of the destroyers took us in tow and towed us back in to a port called Nova

17:00 Reno. And I think they beached the Nino Bixio there. She didn't sink anyway. And then of course out came the people to remove the wounded, from Germans and Italian boats. We spent that first night aboard the Nino Bixio, cleaning up and trying to do

17:30 what we could do to help our mates. The next day a lot more activity was carried out. The Germans took control of the ship. The Germans, I think, managed to get one of the engines working in the engine room. There were Germans there, I can remember them very well. But mainly Italians. The Italians

18:00 had an equivalent dislike of the Australians as the Australians had for them. There was no respect for them, as I covered before, whereas you had respect for the average German. On the other side.

The Italians didn't like the Australians? Why is that?

I think they were afraid of them for a start, as fighters. I think they were

18:30 just – I don't know why they didn't like them, but there was always a bit of hostility. As I said to you yesterday, we had no regard for the Italians, as fighters, and they resented that of course. So they kept a few of us that weren't wounded, cleaning up the mess on the boat for about three days. I know I was amongst the last to be evacuated from the boat onto land.

19:00 And it was a pretty harrowing sort of a job. Which the Italians probably thought was a bit of a payback to the Australians and New Zealanders. Anyway, from Nova Reno we went to a port called Piraeus, and there we were sorted

19:30 out. I was with a group of French Foreign Legionnaires from Bir Hakeim, which was a battle in the desert, which was a battle concerning the French Foreign Legion and there were a lot of prisoners taken at Bir Hakeim.

Where was Bir Hakeim?

Bir Hakeim is an inland fort in Cyreneica. I don't know exactly

20:00 where. I can look it up on the map.

They were the Free French?

The Free French. The French Legionnaires. They were later wiped out at the Dien Bien Phu, in Vietnam. They were very professional soldiers. I could get along reasonably well with schoolboy French for them.

20:30 But eventually I was separated from them. I had all my hair cut off, my hair, all my pubic hair, for lice or something like that. And loaded on to another ship and I wasn't feeling too chipper. I had dysentery, like most people had in POW camps, and we were taken in another boat over to Bari, in

21:00 Italy. The wounded went on an Italian hospital boat, but the rest of us were packed into exactly the same number in the hold of this boat. We might have been on it for about 36 hours. When we got to Bari, they let go of the anchor and of course the rattle of the chain and the anchor, and the steel

21:30 locket. I thought, "Gee, we've been torpedoed again." But when we got up on deck that time it wasn't a repeat, it was just the anchor going into the water. And then we were in the port of Bari. So they took us all to a transit camp in Bari, and loaded us in a train and that took us up to a camp in the North of Italy. We went from the South to the North in about two or three days, locked up in this

22:00 train. That wasn't too hot. We arrived at Campo 57, Gruppignano, in the North East of Italy, and that was at that time the main camp for Australians and New Zealand other ranks. Officers were sent to Sulmona, near Rome, a camp for officers. But all the other ranks were concentrated in

22:30 Campo 57, in Gruppignano. Campo 57 held about four thousand Australian and New Zealand POWs at that time, a few Cypriots and one or two Yugoslavs. But mainly it was the Campo De Centocette for Australian and New Zealand other ranks. And it was controlled by a

23:00 colonel of the Calabrinari, a police outfit in Italian, and it was very closely guarded and his boast was that nobody would ever escape from that camp. That was proved wrong. Nineteen Australian and New Zealanders dug a tunnel, they all escaped

23:30 but they were all recaptured. Calchitari, the Calabrinari colonel, happened to be on leave at that time so he didn't take the blame. But he was absolutely furious, because his escape proof camp had allowed nineteen men to escape. Even though they were all recaptured, the effect on the morale of the other Australians and New Zealanders in the camp was absolutely fantastic.

24:01 You can imagine, you see. So Campo 57 is a story of its own. But it eventually held, in September 1943, there would have been four thousand men in that camp, maybe five. When all the prisoners from El Alamein,

24:30 fighters from the 9th Division began to arrive, they built new compounds in the camp, three compounds, then they built a fourth. Those POW there had been captured in the early days of the fighting, which we were talking about, Sidi Barrani, Matruh, Derna. They'd been prisoners all ready for about two years. But it held

25:00 every Australian and New Zealand other rank. It was deliberate policy for some reason on behalf of the Italians to do that. I think it was probably a good move for the Australians and New Zealanders to be together on their own, without any Indians, or South Africans or Cypriots and so on.

25:31 So the morale of that camp, particularly after that escape attempt, was sky high.

The camp itself, how long did you actually stay there for?

There again, we had Italian POWs out here in Australia, who had been caught in the desert and shipped over here.

26:00 And in our autumn, they were sent to bring in the fruit harvest, at Shepparton, because we had no manpower left to pick it. And the moment the Italian POW were put to work, in Australia, the Italians immediately counter-attacked by sending out Australian prisoners from 57 to a series of

26:30 work camps at 106. 57 was a Campo de Concentro, a concentration camp. Those that were sent out to work, went into 106, a complex of 29 farms, virtually, where Australian and New Zealand POW were sent out to bring in the harvest, which in that

27:00 case was rice. Campo 106 was in the middle of the rice growing area, in fact there was an article about it in the Age yesterday, which I haven't really had time to read completely. We were allocated to farms. I was split up from my mate in Campo 57, who looked after me when I was very ill there, from the 2/24th. He'd been there for a couple of years so he knew the ropes

27:30 And we were split up. He went to one working camp farm, I went to another one. In the particular one that I went to, there were 40 New Zealand POW and 40 Australian POW. We worked on the rice fields and we were quartered in this big farm, in a fenced off portion of the farm, which had

28:00 about a hundred seasonal workers in the rice, mainly women. Ondini, they called them. So I went to that camp, Camp 106 19 Selasola Variconi. I'm writing about it now, because this Englishman who came out to see me, he lives in Turin, he has a lot of friends in Vercelli, and he's going to do some

28:30 research work for me, to find out from Italian sources exactly where the camps were located and what the names were and whether they had New Zealand prisoners only or Australian prisoners as well. A lot of the New Zealanders from Camp 57 were sent not to 106 Vercelli, but to 107, which was on the other

29:00 side, on the Adriatic side, because it was nearer the 57 than the 106 was. And I have a lot of information about the camps the New Zealanders went to, and I'm working on that now.

Did you have much interaction with the Italian guards?

At the 57 no, but in the 106 yes.

Why didn't you have much interaction at 57?

29:30 Because the guards, which were pretty poor types, they were in sentry boxes and there was a huge perimeter wire between them. You could only go within four paces of the wires or they'd shoot you. It was very, very tightly controlled. On a working camp, the guards were very poor types too, but they were just

30:00 in ordinary quarters. There were no sentry boxes as such, no searchlights at night. None of the usual trimmings of the big camp. So we used to get quite friendly with the guards. We had items from our Red Cross parcels which were important to them, and were used as trading items. You could swap cigarettes. I don't smoke cigarettes

30:30 so I always had a bit of the local camp currency to swap for an orange or something like that. There was much more interaction. And of course because there were a hundred civilians working on the property, and you worked alongside them, digging channels for the rice water and so on. If you could understand them, you could converse with them, and they'd tell you about the war and so on. They were a pretty happy go lucky lot, like any itinerant worker is.

31:00 And so I set myself out to learn Italian, and I finally managed to speak it pretty fluently. I was doing the interpreting for the camp, because none of the Kiwis could speak, or none of the Australians could really, speak Italian as well as I could. So I became the general sort of camp leader for the Australians because the

31:30 New Zealanders had three excellent corporals, but we had no, not even a lance corporal in amongst the Australian lot. I was a sapper of course, private soldier. So the conditions in a working camp – a lot of people didn't want to be drafted out to a working camp, they thought it would help the enemy and I appreciate that attitude. A lot of people deliberately wanted to get out to a

32:00 working camp because the discipline was a lot more lax, the guards were a much more co-operative and friendly, so they were an ideal point to escape from. That's why the Italians never let anybody beyond the rank of corporal, sergeant or warrant officers get out of 57. The crème-de-la-crème of the other ranks, the senior sergeants and warrant officers were strictly kept back at 57, both New Zealanders and

32:30 Australians. In fact in other working camps in Yugoslavia and so on and Germany and Austria in particular, sergeants deliberately tried to get into work camps, so they could escape more easily, and many of them did.

They successfully escaped?

They managed to escape several times, in some cases, from work camps because they knew it was easier to do it, and in many cases they

33:00 enlisted civilian aid. For an escape to be successful you have to know the local language or the local customs, to blend in with the local people, otherwise you'll just be picked up by German patrols, or Axis patrols. Being drafted to a work camp was a very good method of escape. It was, also the conditions were by and large much better. You could barter for

33:30 goods and trade. You could pinch vegetables and things working in the vegetable gardens and so on. So it was really an important thing to be in a work camp, rather than a concentration camp. And there, when the Italian armistice occurred, was promulgated in September 1943, and the

34:00 official fighting between the Italians and the British ceased, the people in the work camps were released, before the Germans could get to them. But immediately the big camps like 57, the Germans knew all about the conditions of the Armistice, they took no notice of its conditions. They

34:30 planned through their intelligence networks, they knew all about it, they knew what the arrangements were, and they had planned to fight on, in Italy. So they rounded up all the prisoners in the big working camps. The officers, as far as from an Australian point of view, the officers from Sulmona had been transferred up

35:00 to Bologna. They got all them rounded up. They got the big camps at 57 and rounded them up. Those poor buggers became German prisoners. In the work camps, there were 20,000 released, roaming around, not knowing what to do, because the orders from London were to stay put until the Allies relieved us, well that was poppycock. They had no hope

35:30 of doing that. But by the time they rescinded that order, it was too late, for many people. In the work camps we were already free, we didn't know what to do. I knew what to do, I didn't muck around. But most of them were sort of disorientated. They had no orders from anybody and that's the second manuscript I've written

36:00 there; the story of the escape into Switzerland of 420 Australian POWs. Practically all from those work camps at Vercelli. Some even reached the Gustav line, on the Po, by going south. My mate in the work camp he went south, I went north, we both succeeded. Other people went south were caught, other people who went south were recaptured. One way or another, quite a saga.

Who recaptured them, the Germans or the Italians?

36:32 Axis. You see the fascists were already with the Germans, all the time. They were the worst. You knew what to expect from a German, but you never knew what to expect from a fascist. It was like I knew what to expect from a German professional army, but you never knew what the SS would do. The fascists were a bastard bunch, really. It's twenty past ten, do you want to have a break or do you want to go on?

Yes, we can stop.

Tape 6

00:30 **[reading from text] Well, in September 1943 there was an armistice signed between Italy and the Allies in which the Italians sought an end to the war as far as they were concerned. There were two versions of the Armistice, a short and a long one. The short one was signed on September 3rd, and it laid down the conditions under which**

01:00 **which the Italian armies would surrender to the Allied armies, controlled by Eisenhower, and the war between Italy and the Allies would finish. One of the conditions of that Armistice was that the Allied POW that were held in Italy were to be freed and they were to stay where they were, in whatever camp they were, until relieved and the**

01:30 **arrangements were actually that the American 101st Airborne Division would be available to drop paratroops around camps and things like that, and the British would be free. So the British POW, Allied POW, but I think the British really only, were under instruction from the War Office in London to stay put when the Armistice was administrated –**

02:01 **and they would be collected and dealt with by the Allies. Now the Germans knew about the signing of that short Armistice on September 3rd, and it gave them time, because they decided to fight on in Italy, without the help of the Italians, it gave them time to organise the capture of the**

02:30 **POW in the bigger camps. As far as Australians were concerned, all those that were still with the New Zealanders in the Campo 57, and the officers who had been transferred from Sulmona up to Bologna, and who were being entrained to be taken into Germany. Now 11 Australian officers from that train escaped and got into Switzerland. And they were the**

03:00 **only AIF or RAAF officers to do so. Those who were in the working camp stayed put, but that was a mistake, and the British woke up to the fact that the Germans were rounding them up, and then issued an order that those prisoners were to fend for themselves. But it was too late. By that time the Germans had rounded up most of them, but there was one prison camp**

03:30 **in Italy under the command of Lieutenant [Colonel] de Burgh, and he had six hundred British officers under his command and he marched them all out of the camp, in military order with provisions and things like that, and he dissipated them into the hills around the camp, risking court martial by doing that. He said, "Look, the orders are not appropriate to my**

04:00 **camp," and that was his escape clause. So by mid-September 1943, there were 20,000 Allied POW roaming around the mountains of North Italy not quite knowing what to do. They were helped by the Italian farming communities in the vicinity where they were and there's been an**

04:30 **extraordinary book written about them by a British historian whose name is Roger Absalom, and I think he is the Professor of History at Sheffield University. But he has written up this story about how the Italian farmers in North Italy helped these men who were roaming around at the risk of confiscation of their farms, risk**

05:00 **of them being shot, as a lot of them were, or there farms burnt to the ground for helping Allied soldiers, and that's where my attitude towards Italians changed. I hadn't regarded them with much other than contempt on the battlefield, and so on, but when you're roaming around in hostile enemy occupied territory, in civilian clothes, as a lot of them were, you can be shot on the spot. Because how**

05:30 **does the enemy know whether you're a spy or not a spy. So you run a lot of risks. Now in my particular work camp there were 40 Australians and 40 New Zealanders. When the gates were thrown open and we were free men, I knew what I was going to do. I said to my mate "Look, I'm going to head for Switzerland, it's only ninety miles to the north of us, we're close there, it's about two hundred miles down to**

06:00 **the River Po, where the Germans were digging in, and you've got to go through enemy occupied territories, I think that's the way to go. That's where I'm going." My sister was at school there in Switzerland. I know Switzerland, and I know that would be the direction for me. He said, "No, Will, I don't agree with you. It's all right for you. You understand Italian, you can speak German and so on." But he said, "I'm going towards my friends. I'm going down to**

06:30 **the south, to catch up with the Allied front lines." And he did. Now both of us were successful. He got down to join the Allied lines, I got into Switzerland. Having done that I know a little bit about the 420 members of the AIF and RAAF people, amongst them 16 RAAF who were in Switzerland. And I have**

07:00 **researched the story of the AIF in Switzerland. Now it's very important, I think, to know that Switzerland who was a neutral country, was governed by the Hague Convention which controlled the conduct of neutral countries in times of war. With the Geneva Conventions which controlled the treatment of POW during the war, and particularly POW who**

07:30 **go – manage to reach a pre-neutral country. And as far as the Swiss were concerned, anybody who came into Switzerland in civilian clothes, without arms, was considered an escapee. The Swiss term is the French word evadee. Whereas if people come into a neutral country armed, as a lot of aviators did, particularly**

08:00 **American Flying Fortress crews, they arrived in uniform, armed, because their airplane was an arm, they were interned. So those who got to Switzerland fell into two groups. There were those that were evadees, who reached there in civilian clothes without arms, and most of the Australians and New Zealanders were classified as such, but those that got in with arms, and there were a**

08:30 **few air force types that crash-landed in Switzerland, were internees, and they were interned. The difference between an evadee and an internee is that the internee must remain till the cessation of hostilities, whereas the evadee can be repatriated as soon as the neutral country can get rid of them. But Switzerland couldn't get rid of them, because Switzerland was surrounded by the**

09:00 **Axis powers. And it was only when the American 5th Army fought their way up from the Mediterranean and reached the border between Switzerland and France, free unoccupied France at Geneva, that the Swiss were able to get rid of all their uninvited guests. The Australians**

09:30 **included. Now one of the things that you're supposed if you're caught as a POW is to try and escape. The reason is you can bring intelligence back to your own people, as to where the enemy are that caught you and it's virtually under the Geneva Conventions that it's your duty to escape if you've got the ability to do so. But under The Hague Conventions, where Switzerland –**

10:01 **was a signatory, she wasn't a signatory to the Geneva Conventions, curiously enough, but a lot of the airmen, particularly, who were interned and had to stay there until the end of the war, the moment there was a free border, they hopped it. They jumped across, which broke Swiss laws. Now certain Australians who did that were caught by the Swiss federal police and they thrown into a**

10:30 **Swiss federal jail, because they had contradicted the conditions of their stay in Switzerland, and they had committed a Swiss federal felony. And some of those people had a very rough time. Particularly airmen that went to a camp at Val D'Illiez, in Switzerland, where the commandant of the camp was a Nazi sympathiser. And so**

11:00 **he treated them very, very badly. I don't want to go into that side of things because what I'm interested is the POW who were in Switzerland, and who they were and what they did. And I've got a considerable amount of research on that subject which I'm hoping to allow to be published over the internet to any other researcher that's interested in the same field as**

11:30 **I'm doing. So if you want to ask me now anything about the Allied POW escape to Switzerland, there were roughly five thousand of them, most of whom were evadees, and of that five thousand 420 were Australians and 108 were New Zealanders. And it's a story that hasn't been recorded as far as I know. And I'm trying to**

12:00 **put it down so it is available to anybody that's interested in that tiny aspect of being a POW in Europe. I've also extended my research to other POW who didn't reach a neutral country, but who weren't recaptured while they were on enemy occupied territory. There were a lot in Yugoslavia, for example, there were a lot in Greece, there were**

12:30 **a lot in Crete. And these blokes were free men, just the same as those Australians and New Zealanders who got into the neutral country of Switzerland. They were also free men. And that is also the subject of my research. Although I've got a complete roll of those that went into Switzerland, I don't think I will ever get a complete roll of those free men who were in enemy occupied territory in**

13:00 **those other countries.**

What I want to focus on is the POW experience before you get to Switzerland. I understand there was a unit called the British Free Corps, which did recruit Australian and New Zealanders and other nationalities that were under

13:30 **the Crown.**

But they recruited those people who were their prisoners mainly in Germany.

You had indicated you had some prior knowledge about the BFC [British Free Corps], also know as the British Legion of St George, beforehand. What was the purpose behind this unit, as far as you aware at the time?

Well, it's like a lot of things, you have to get back to

14:00 the Nazi philosophy. And the Nazi philosophy was a blueprint for a world controlled according to that philosophy by the Germans. There were a lot of countries who sympathised with that philosophy. In Switzerland, which I know a lot about, I mentioned that the camp at Val D'Illiez, the camp was run by a Nazi

14:30 sympathiser. There were a lot of Nazis in Switzerland. A lot of Swiss Nazis. Swiss citizens who followed the Nazi principles. And that happened in other countries. If you think of 'Quisling' you immediately think of Norway. If you think of 'Mussert' you'd immediately think of Holland. If you think of 'Mosley' you immediately think of Britain. Now citizens of

15:00 those countries like the philosophy that was laid down by the Nazis, they were sympathetic towards it, and they thought that was a good thing to happen to the world. And some of the British Free Corps also believed in that philosophy, too. The Scandinavians is a better way of putting it. They had recruited quite a

15:30 few Scandinavian people into the German system, and they had a group of Scandinavian volunteers who sympathized with the Nazi doctrine and they fought to the death round Hitler in Berlin, in the bunkers. So they were fighting for their beliefs, and while to us, we may

16:00 regard them as traitors, guilty of treason, to them they were fighting for their beliefs, as they did in Spain, in the war that preceded the World War II.

You had Australian soldiers who had German backgrounds. In fact there were quite a few that had German backgrounds. Is it quite possible that some of the Australian soldiers who were recruited into the BFC had German backgrounds?

No, I don't think so. There were a lot of

16:30 German names carried by Australian soldiers, New Zealand soldiers. Think of General Freiburg for example, that's a German name. You had Gus Gehrmann, he was a colonel in the engineers, that's a German name. Mann is a German name, we had plenty of those. There were lots of them. I don't think that's the reason. I think the main reason why people joined, say, the British Free Corps, is that they were

17:00 opportunists. They thought that they might be treated a bit better. There were some who maintained that by joining such an organisation, they had a better chance of escape. They could speak German perhaps, they were in German uniforms, or they could pass as Germans in a country that

17:30 would facilitate their escape. No, I don't think it was anything to do with heritage, I think it was just due to the personal belief of a person. You've got lots of people like that. Look at that British writer who wrote denying the Holocaust, and was prevented from coming out to Australia.

David Irving.

So he's a man who firmly believes

18:00 in his belief. Now you can't really deny him the democratic right to believe in that. That's the point.

Now this unit was no more than thirty to forty people. Now you knew of some people who were actually involved? There were a few Australians from the 9th Division?

It's been written about.

18:30 There were both Australians and New Zealanders were members of the British Free Corps. They were guilty of treason. Several of them were court-martialled. One from New Zealand and one or two from the Australians. But I don't think it has any real bearing on the history of the

19:00 POW. The Australian and New Zealand POW in Europe. It's a side element which I don't think is significant in terms of the total picture of the 8000 Australian POW in Europe and the 8000 odd New Zealand POW in Europe.

What about POWs collaborating with the Germans in an unofficial way? The BFC is a very official way of collaborating. What about

19:30 **unofficial collaboration in the camps?**

I think you've always got people in a prison camp who try and improve their own particular status. And if that means they can do that by acting as informers within the camps, they'll get privileged treatment. If they think that their own welfare is going to be advanced by advancing

20:00 themselves to the detriment of their colleagues, they do that. But once you find out that type of person, he gets very much summary justice by his peer group within the camp.

Can you give me an example of that?

I'll give you a practical case of a fellow caught stealing food in a prison camp. Now stealing food when food is

20:30 very scarce is probably the lowest thing you can do in a prison camp. So when that bloke was identified and caught he was dealt with pretty violently by his own people. He was bashed up, and ostracised, sent to Coventry [ignored] in a sense. He was very quickly removed from the camp by the people who controlled the camp, because –

21:00 First of all his links as an informer had been exposed. If he was not favoured by the control of the camp, he would only be a source of trouble. So he was got rid of by one way or another, fairly quickly.

This happened frequently?

It happened. I wouldn't say frequently. But sometimes when you suspected something of that and you became more and

21:30 more attentive to it, that in itself was enough to make the person stop. And you never know what a personal temptation is like, and how people accept that temptation to the detriment of the people that they're with. So it happened, but I don't think it's significant in the totality of being a POW.

22:02 **What about escaping? You talked about people escaping successfully. What about executions? Were POWs shot?**

Yes, POW were shot. POW were shot in the Camp 57, which was closely guarded. They were provoked, or they went

22:30 nuts, you know. The physical confinement affected their mind. Some committed suicide. They couldn't cope with their situations. In working camps, there was one case, very well documented, of an Australian prisoner who formed a liaison with an Italian lady, in the Italian community outside of the camp.

23:00 And he was shot in very suspicious circumstances, because the husband of the lady was an ardent fascist. That's a particular case. It happened.

You would have also experienced air-raids? Can you walk us through that, the experience of that?

I personally wasn't affected by

23:30 air-raids in Italian territory. But there were cases in the North of Italy where, particularly in marshalling yards where trains were being assembled to take POW from Italy into Germany, and those train marshalling yards were bombed, and Allied POW including New Zealanders and Australians were killed in those

24:00 bombing raids. As far as Switzerland was concerned, there were bombing raids by American bombers, on Schaffhausen, for example, 32 Swiss were killed there. Switzerland was a neutral country, remember. Schaffhausen was bombed by American Flying Fortresses. A town. Very near the Rhine. And the

24:30 Germans –

So they mistook it for a German position?

And the official explanation is that the flight of Americans thought they were bombing the German side of the Rhine, where in actual fact they bombed the Swiss side. That's liable to happen, things of navigation, particularly when the plane is under very heavy ack ack fire. So there are civilian

25:00 casualties, for various reasons, one way or another. Just as at El Alamein the Colonel of the 2/28th called down the Australian artillery to shell his actual position, so in the railway yards or something the Allied aircraft didn't know there were POW

25:30 on the trains. Now I told you the story of the Nino Bixio, where I happened to be on. The English submarine that fired on us, knew that there were POW aboard, but the Nino Bixio wasn't marked as carrying POW, but everybody in the Mediterranean and certainly the British navy knew about it. It had to be, when it

26:00 appeared within the periscope of the British submarine, he had to sink it, because his orders were to sink all enemy shipping in the Mediterranean. It didn't matter what they carried. The fact that part of the cargo that they carried happened to be human beings was immaterial to them, their orders were to sink ships, that's what they were ordered to do, so they did it.

Did you think it was fair that they did that? You experienced pretty horrific scenes in that ship?

26:30 Yes, I know. But it wasn't marked as a hospital ship. Now had it been marked as a hospital ship, it wouldn't have been sunk, perhaps. But the Japanese sank hospital ships, too. They didn't take any notice, because they didn't belong to the Geneva or the Hague Conventions. So, these are the things that happened in warfare. Read a book like The Cruel Sea. It gives you an example of that, how a ship was sunk and the survivors were swimming

27:00 around in the water and the submarine came up, but simply had to leave them there to drown because it wasn't its mission nor its capacity to rescue those soldiers, it was to sink the ships. So it had to sink the enemy ship despite the Allies that were in the water. War can be a very cruel thing at times, you know, and you can't always put rigid classifications as to do and what

27:30 not to do. It's not black and white. So to answer your question more directly, there were Australian and New Zealand POW casualties, like the poor buggers on the Nino Bixio, in the bottom of the hold, who were killed in action, virtually. It was part of the ironies of war. Even though you were a POW, you were

28:00 still liable to be killed. The fact that you became a POW it didn't guarantee a certain life, by any means.

Now in the camps, for instance, was there any interaction – you mentioned a chap being executed for having an affair with the wife of an Italian fascist?

I don't think it was his wife. I think it was his daughter, actually.

But he wasn't an Italian soldier, this other guy?

28:30 No, well he was a fascist.

Now, in the work camps you would have had access to the Italian population, so there would have been room for affairs between the Italian women there and the POWs. Surely that would have taken place?

Well, look, in my particular

29:00 camp, 106 19 Baricone, when the gates were flung open and the Italian guards deserted, there were 80

men in the camp. 40 Australians, 40 New Zealanders. There were a hundred mondeni working on the rice fields, mostly women. Well, all women if they were mondeni. But there were Italian civilian workers there, too. And the

29:30 moment peace came, well, there was the biggest celebration of all time. They rolled out gallon – huge drums of vino, everybody had a big party, and it was reminiscent of a Roman orgy at one stage there, but that didn't interest me personally. I was free. I'd made up my mind to get into Switzerland. I did a deal with the sergeant major that controlled our camp. I swapped

30:00 my battle dress, and my army equipment and some Red Cross stuff for civilian uniform, which he provided for me. I did a deal with him. I even swapped my boots, which were a very valuable item for an escapee, but also a dead giveaway. And I got a fairly good pair of alpine boots from him, as part of my deal with him. He took me to

30:30 Biella, by the train –

Sorry, who was this guy?

He was the Italian sergeant major of the guards in our camp. He had fought with the British in the First World War, on the British side. As a lot of Italians had done. And he was pro-British, he certainly wasn't a fascist. He was a carabinieri, part of the police force. And a very

31:00 good type of fellow, really. We got along very well, because I could speak to him in Italian.

So this was when the Armistice was signed? There was a strange sort of lull period?

Yes. The inmates didn't know what to do. And they hadn't got instructions and you had to do your own thing as it were. By the time you got instructions that you must do your own thing, it was too late for a lot. But I'd already made my plans. I'd got into a

31:30 school in the little village where I was. There was a map of North Italy on the wall. I made a copy of the map, and I had a pretty good idea of how to go. And he took me to Biella, which was a textile town north of the camp where we were, about thirty miles away by train.

So you didn't go with any other POWs?

No, they did their own thing. My mate went south, as I told you earlier.

32:01 **I'm very interested why you were so determined to take your own path? You seemed to have a very clear cut understanding of what you wanted to do, and you seemed very determined to do so. Can I ask why?**

Well, like everybody else I had to make up my own mind. And it didn't take me long to make up my own mind, because I was only ninety miles from Switzerland. But I was a hundred and twenty miles or more from the front

32:30 line, And I was free. I could do my own thing. And my own thing was to get to Switzerland. So when I got to Biella, the sergeant major handed me over to a mate of his, he said he'll look after you and guide you up to Switzerland. But that wasn't a very happy thing. I didn't trust him. And remember I hated Italians, at that stage. They were

33:00 the ones under whose captivity I was kept. I didn't trust any of the Italian people, they were still the enemy as far as I was concerned.

So you didn't see any divisions between – that sergeant major, who fought for the British during the First World War. You didn't see any divisions, while you were in the POW experience, between fascists and non-fascists?

33:30 We did a deal. I made up my mind to head for Switzerland. I needed civilian clothes. I had to swap my battle dress and my British prison clothes and things for civilian clothes. That was the first thing, because I wouldn't have much of a chance, I thought, of escaping in uniform. I was proved wrong, because a lot of people did escape in uniform. I thought my chances were better of passing off as an Italian civilian. I could speak Italian, but it wasn't good Italian. And so

34:00 my cover story was that I was a deserter from the Yugoslav navy, and that accounted for my poor Italian, and I was heading back to Yugoslavia, to the North, to rejoin my family. But in actual fact, of course, I was heading for Switzerland. When I broke away and went on entirely on my own – I'm used to operating in the bush. I was a geologist, in Australia. I

34:30 traveled alone and I could travel much faster. I wasn't as conspicuous as a lot of other POWs who gave themselves away by traveling in groups of three or four or five. A German or a fascist spy could immediately identify them as escaped POW. I tried to look like an Italian. I made certain I only spoke to young children and to very old people who had no reason to betray me, to give me away, to report me to the fascists, for the

35:00 reward, because the Germans had offered any Italian catching a POW, or reporting a POW, a certain amount of lire for doing that. I had my Red Cross parcels. I fortunately had an old thermos. I could

always cadge a drink of hot water. It didn't cost the farmer anything to give you some boiling water, make a cup of

35:30 Ovaltine, the stuff that came from the Red Cross parcels. I was on my own. I was a free man. I could do what I liked. I couldn't do those things while I was a POW. You were under constant supervision. You were under constant control. Here I was, it was autumn, I could pinch tomatoes. I could bandicoot for potatoes and things like that. I knew that getting over the Alps wasn't going to be

36:00 a pretty easy thing. The higher and higher I got, the more difficult it was, with getting colder, and more difficult to live off the land. So to be successful, you had to get there pretty quickly. I was lucky because when I did get to the border of the mountains, between Switzerland and Italy, I fell in with a group of smugglers who were coming out of Switzerland, back into Italy.

36:30 Italian smugglers. There was a regular trade going on between mountain people. You'd get bicycle tires from Italy going into Switzerland, and chocolate and cognac and things coming back from Switzerland. You could trust the smugglers, because they themselves were criminals in a sense that they were breaking the Italian and Swiss laws. And fortunately one of the smugglers said, "No, you don't go to the Monte Rosa," which is where I was

37:00 heading, "You go to the Monte Mora, it's much slower and easier to get there." He said, "We just came from Switzerland." He gave me directions and I was able to follow those directions and be picked up by what I thought was a German guard at the thing, but was actually a Swiss guard. The helmet and the uniform were very similar. I was very lucky, I thought he was a German. I thought, "I've come all this

37:30 way only to be caught on the border," as a lot of people were. I picked up a stone, it was the only weapon I had, I thought I might be able to fling it at him, or do something about it. But he was behaving strangely, this soldier. He had his rifle right on me there, there was nothing much I could. He kept tapping his chest, and I was wondering why he was tapping his chest. The closer I got to him, he was trying to indicate he was Swiss, because the

38:00 buttons on the Swiss Army have got the Swiss Cross, which is the emblem of the international Red Cross too. He was trying to indicate he wasn't German, he was a Swiss. When I got up to him I realized he was a Swiss I could have kissed the bloke. He said, "English, are you?" I said, "Yes." I didn't tell him I was Australian. He said, "You better come down and have a cup of tea." [laughs] He spoke

38:30 English. I could have spoken to him in German. It turned out he was a Swiss-German. I went down and had more than a cup of tea. It was great. Terrific.

There was no tension after that, you just sat down?

The Swiss were pretty well organized and there were people streaming into them from all across the border, after that. Italians, deserters, the lot. They had to be a bit careful of who you were, but the moment I was

39:00 able to identify myself as an escaped prisoner from a prison camp, and as an Australian, because I still had the dog tags, they were pretty efficient, they fed us and took us down the valley from their camp, their headquarters from up on the border, into the valley. There was an English major there who was sorting out the English and the South Africans and so on. They

39:30 interviewed him. I gave them a packet I had been asked by the sergeant major to deliver to the authorities in Switzerland. I think he was trying to ingratiate himself for post-war deals with the occupying Allies. I think it was a map of all the prison camps in that area. But it was sewn up with some cloth. I didn't know what the package was. It was part

40:00 of my deal with him that when I got to Switzerland I would hand to the British military in Switzerland this little package. I think it contained a map of all the camps in Italy. But I promised to deliver the parcel to the British authorities and that's what I did. That was part of the deal. So I was in Switzerland and that was the end of my war, and unlike most of my colleagues who were

40:30 in Switzerland, I got a job up at Val de Bagnes as a ski instructor because I was a pretty good skier. Again, the notice went up on the board saying anybody with skiing experience would come up to Val de Bagnes, which was a very famous Swiss mountain skiing resort. So I said, "that'll do me." With my experience in the Ski Corps in Lebanon, I got a job as

41:00 a skiing instructor, promoted to a sergeant, so I spent a very pleasant few months up there teaching boys how to ski, and skiing myself, which I loved to do, it was one of my favourite sports. And then I was befriended by a Swiss family and later on, I stayed with them for a while, and of all

41:30 things, of all things, the family that befriended me, he was a Swiss corporal in the Swiss Army, but he was managing director of one of the biggest cement factories in Switzerland, and he lived there. Another notice went on the board that anybody who was a university graduate could go and do a course at the polytechnic in Zurich, which was a very good university. And it happened that the professor of geology at the university was a –

Tape 7

00:37 So, I was at Val de Bagnes as a ski instructor, and I was a pretty good skier by that time. I had the Swiss Silver Medal, and there was a family that had a chalet up at Val de Bagnes, the Reichner family, and he was, as I said, a Corporal in the Swiss Army, but he was also managing director of a

01:00 very large cement factory. And a notice had gone out that anybody who had a university degree could study at the university in Zurich. But I didn't have the money. I was only a sergeant, I had to live as a civilian in Zurich and that was beyond the pay given to a

01:30 sergeant. It wasn't beyond the pay given to officers, but it was beyond the pay given to a sergeant. And this bloke Oscar Reichner said, "Look, you're capable and qualified to go the university in Zurich. If money's the only thing holding you up, come and live with us, we live at Vieldek, where I control the cement works. That's not far from Zurich. It's only about

02:00 fifteen minutes, twenty minutes in the local train." He said, "You live with us and you can go everyday from Vieldek to the university." And I said, "That'll suit me." So I joined him as a sort of a second son. They had one son and one daughter. I joined him as a second son, and I went to the university in Zurich, the polytechnic there, sort of an RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology] type of thing. And the

02:30 lecturer in geology there was a very famous geologist called Professor Niggli. And I did almost a term with him. I didn't get too much out of it. He was French and my French wasn't half as good as my German., but I did attend the university. Then I got a call-up from the British Offices in Bern,

03:02 saying that you're going to be sent to the Consulate in Geneva, we're seconding you, because you've got special skills in aerial photograph interpretation and a few other things, because of my surveying, and we need somebody like that to be attached to the British Consul in Geneva. So I had to leave the Reichners, much to my regret, but I'm in the army, I take orders, and I

03:30 went down to Geneva and I found myself a room there in a boarding house, and I became attached to the British Consul in Geneva, on work there in the consulate. It was quite interesting. When they pulled out the rest of the AIF to come back, when the border

04:00 was released in Geneva, I and Fred Eggleston who was a RAAF flight lieutenant, was working in the embassy in Bern. We were held back for certain reasons. We stayed on with a few other people. In my case, I was the last man, but

04:30 one, from the AIF to leave Switzerland. Because I'd married. I met Katie in Geneva and we fell in love and we were married in Geneva, after overcoming a lot of obstacles, because under Dutch law a woman under 30 has got to get permission from her father to marry. And of course we couldn't get permission from her father because he was still in Holland, which was still

05:00 occupied by the Germans. The part of it where he was. Anyway, we got married in Geneva and I didn't leave Geneva until February, 1945, and I went straight back to London, to the AIF Reception Camp in London. My rank as a sergeant was confirmed

05:31 but Geneva had sort of put the levers into action for me to be discharged in London from the AIF, to join UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration], and to go back to Europe working with the refugees coming in from Europe, back from Germany. Because in May, you might remember, VE [Victory in Europe] Day came May 8thand I was in

06:00 London on May 8th. Katie, my wife, had come from Geneva and she had got a job in the Dutch Embassy in London, so I was very happy about that. I was discharged in London just before the order was given that no Australian soldier would be allowed to join UNRRA. But I had already got my discharge from the

06:30 AIF, so that order didn't apply to me. I was given an officer's uniform, sand-brown belt and hat and the great coat and all the deal, with the UNRRA crest on the shoulders. The official rank of director, as they called them in UNRRA. But it was a was a lieutenant rank as far as the army was concerned, who still controlled the

07:00 occupation of Europe after D Day, the landing. So I went back to work for UNRRA in Europe, and I was scheduled to go from Normandy, where I had been working, around Cherbourg in Normandy, right back into Berlin, curiously enough, because I spoke German, you see.

07:35 It wasn't Berlin they were going to send me, it was Dusseldorf, some other town near there. And an opportunity came, again I always read the notice boards you see, that there was a chance for anybody who was speaking Dutch to work with the returning Dutch people from their forced labour in

08:00 Germany. So I applied for that position within UNRRA, and I finished up running a reception camp for Dutch people in the south of Holland. That gave me an opportunity to meet my father in law, for example. I stayed in Holland quite a while. Then the war was virtually over, the settlement process was

08:30 over. The people were coming back home, and UNRRA wanted to move me to China. But I'd had enough. I'd been away for five years, overseas. My mother hadn't seen me during that time. I was

married. It was time for me to leave. So I resigned from UNRRA, but I had to do that in Washington, because UNRRA was controlled from Washington, in those days. So UNRRA

09:00 arranged for Katie and I to get on a liberty ship which had been discharging cargo in Antwerp and was going back to New York. And we went across the Atlantic to Washington, which is another whole saga which I won't go into now because I think we're coming to the end of our session. So I got discharged in Washington from UNRRA this time, not from the Australian

09:30 army. We eventually made our way right across America, and you're not going to believe this really, but when Katie came to Geneva she was with her mother, who was divorced from her father, and they were going there for a skiing holiday, and they'd booked a flat for six months. But while they were there, Holland was invaded by the Germans and they couldn't go back. So they spent the entire war in

10:00 Switzerland. Five years. They had driven down from Holland into Switzerland in Katie's car. Her mother, who was left behind in Switzerland when she went to London, had a friend drive the car back to Holland, with her, my mother in law, returned to Holland. Katie still had that

10:30 car in Holland but there was no petrol to run it. We took that car in the Liberty ship, which was empty, as luggage, to America and because it was an American Chevrolet, they had to let the car in, there was no customs duty. It was an American car returning to America. When we left the liberty ship we drove in her car down to Washington, where I got discharged from UNRRA, and then we drove right across America to San Francisco. Flogged the

11:00 car in San Francisco and got on the Mera Posa, which was an American boat there, and came back to Australia. So that was the end of the war as far as I was concerned.

What an adventure

It was, really. I forgot the war when I came back. I didn't remember it. I successfully put it away in my mind. I got a job here. I went back to the university, got another degree. Then we bought a farm, we

11:30 brought up our four children, in this house. We built it fifty years ago. I forgot about the war. It was part of me. I didn't have anything to do with my unit because I was the only Victorian, in a Queensland unit. All the Armistice reunions were up in Queensland. I didn't want to go. It was not appropriate in my circumstances. Then I bought a farm,

12:00 developed a farm. I forgot all about it, until finally I had to revisit the war because a friend of mine in the 2/24th, to whom I was best man at his wedding, died very suddenly in 1971 and I had to look after his widow under the Legacy scheme, and their children and so on. He befriended me in Campo 57, under very extreme conditions. I was very sick. I had

12:30 beri beri and dysentery and I had influenza, it didn't develop it pneumonia fortunately. But he looked after me very well. And that's the mateship that makes one fellow from Melbourne, I didn't know him until I met him in the prison camp, and he looked after me. He gave me part of his parcel and he really nursed me back to health. And those things are very important in the mateship situation for Australians.

So what did you find your concept of

13:00 **mateship was before the war?**

Well, you still had your social bonds. Like he went to the same school. He was a product of Melbourne Grammar, I was a product of Melbourne Grammar. You had your friends from school, there was always a network in a society situation like that. In a social situation like that. You tend to persevere with the friends that you know, with whom you bonded. Then you have another

13:30 complete group of friends you bonded with in the army. They didn't have the same social background, or the same general living conditions. It didn't matter whether you were a rich man or a poor man. That didn't stop the bullets that came your way. There was a great egalitarian attitude I found in the army, and that suited me. That's part of my nature, too.

14:01 I don't readily conform to discipline. I think my army career confirms that. But I like to think that I got a great deal of benefit from my experience with the AIF. I was one of the lucky ones. I returned. I'm still here. I'm still now able to talk about it. I'm breaking down now. I did it yesterday, and I'm bloody well going to do it again.

14:30 [general talking as William recovers]

15:04 **Just briefly you mentioned your friend who fought with the partisans in Italy. Who was this friend of yours?**

He was a member of the 2/24th. He went to Scotch College. I never met him until I arrived in Camp 57, after the torpedoing of the Nino

15:30 Bixio and I was in a pretty sorry state. Physically and mentally, I was buggered. As we marched into that campo concentremento, I heard a voice calling out, "Is there anybody amongst you guys from

Melbourne?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm from Melbourne." He said

16:00 "Where do you live in Melbourne?" I said, "In South Yarra." I said, "Where do you live?" He said, "Brighton." And from that moment, we were in the same social class. You recognized it immediately. You asked me these questions which I thought were not appropriate in this interview, but I can see now where they became appropriate. He went to Scotch College, like my mate went to Geelong Grammar, who was beheaded by the Japanese as I told you yesterday. We were the same

16:30 age, we had led the same sort of social life. We had a lot of friends we found in common. He took me under his wing because he was a hardened craggy. He knew all the ropes within the camp, there's always a social sub-structure in the camp, too, with his mates. He had good clothing which had been sent to him through the Red Cross through his family, which he shared, gave me.

17:00 And he shared his Red Cross parcels with me and generally nursed me back to health, although I was in a different compound from him.

Was this the chap who was involved in the Partisan movement?

He was the chap that fought with the Partisans. He had met a girl in England. She came out, they fell in love. She came out to Australia, and they were married, here in Melbourne. I was best man at the wedding. And so

17:30 our two families were fairly close. They also had four children, like I did. But he died of a massive heart attack, in '71, and I was obligated, I felt, to look after his family. They're all grown up now, they don't need me anymore, but I still do look after – I'm sort of a counselor to the children and to the widow. His widow asked me to research his time

18:02 as a Partisan in North Italy, when I was basking in the freedom of Switzerland, that I began to revisit the war. I had my farm operating then. I had my farm operating then. I bought that in 1970. That kept me pretty busy. But I was able to resume contact with the 2/24th,

18:30 some of whom I knew personally. They were personal friends of mine. I was doing research purely on the 2/24th point of view, for my friend. Then another fellow who was with the 2/32nd, where those three guys from the British Free Corps came from, wrote a book called Australian Partisan. His name was Ian

19:00 Sproule, the book is in general circulation. He was also fighting with the Partisans. He described in that book what it was like to be a POW in North Italy, who by the chances of war had finished up with the Italian Partisans. He hadn't reached the Allies in the South and the Po. Or

19:30 hadn't gotten into Switzerland, like me. And when that book came out, I rang up Ian Sproule, he lived at Yarrawonga, and congratulated him on writing a book about it, his experiences in North Italy. And I handed the book to Joan Dare, the widow of my friend, and I said

20:00 "This book describes what it was like to be a Partisan in North Italy. An AIF POW Partisan in North Italy." I said, "I wasn't with the Partisans. I got into Switzerland, my stories a different one. This from my own personal knowledge describes pretty accurately what it was like when you chose that particular path." As I was determined to stay in Switzerland, Gordon was determined to carry on the war. I said

20:30 "If you read that book, it will tell you far better than any research that I'm doing on Gordon, because you'll get the atmosphere." I think she might have been motivated by the girlfriend she knew and found out that Gordon had in Italy. There's a difference between the feminine attitude to

21:00 those things than there is to the stoic British sort of male chauvinistic approach. So, Joan Dare was quite happy. She said, "Thanks, Bill, I've been interested about Gordon because you and he were very close as POWs. You never spoke about it." I said, "No, you'll find that common occasion amongst POWs, they don't talk much about the war. There's lots of

21:30 reasons, psychologically, why they won't do it. They're a bit forgotten, you know. The POW just becomes a forgotten man." So you don't talk about it. Some do, at Anzac Day reunions. Some of the stories that I now get fed back to me, I know are incorrect. But they've been polished beautifully over sixty years of reunions on Anzac Day or Armistice Day. But my job was to

22:00 report it. And although I'd satisfied Joan Dare with Ian Sproule's book about her husband's time in North Italy as a Partisan, it hadn't satisfied me. Because the army knew nothing about the AIF in Switzerland, and yet there were 420 of them. Half a battalion. And I thought 'Well, I was there. I was one of the people who were in Switzerland. I'll record

22:30 the story of the AIF in Switzerland.' And there it is.

Nobody else did a project on this at all?

Yes. One fellow wrote a book about his experiences. But it's fictionalised. It wasn't the facts, as I saw the facts. And I perhaps was in a better

23:00 position to write about it, because I was amongst the last to leave Switzerland. Most of the others left after exactly a year in Switzerland. They all left when Naples was a free port again. And they were

evacuated in two big waves, through Naples, back to Australia. They rejoined their units because as evadees they were allowed to. They were allowed to go back into

23:30 active combat. None of them did, or very few of them did. But they were allowed to. But if you were an internee, under the Hague Conventions, you weren't allowed to go back to combat again. So even the air force pilots who were heavily in demand, weren't allowed to go back to front line duty. They could ferry planes, or they could act as instructors, as a lot of them did, but you weren't allowed to physically rejoin front line forces. That's one of

24:00 the clauses of the Hague Conventions.

But they weren't sent back until the war was over anyway.

No, they came back in September, 1944. When Switzerland was able to open that border at Geneva, which had been freed by the American 5th Army coming up from the Mediterranean. So, the Italian Armistice was in September, 1943. By

24:30 September, 1944, all the 420 people in Switzerland were evacuated from Switzerland and made their way back to Australia.

So even though there was an official surrender by the Italians in 1943, the German presence in Italy and renegade battalion elements were still hovering around there?

Still fighting on. See, the war in Europe didn't finish until

25:00 1945. May, 1945.

When you were walking through to Switzerland, did you ever encounter any German soldiers?

No. My job was whenever I saw one from a distance, was to disappear. Just scarper.

You did see them?

Oh yeah. They patrolled all the villages. When I was up in the mountains, I could look down – you know the mountain looks down on this particular town, Macinana, and I was up trying to get across the Swiss border. I could

25:30 look down on this town, and it was a toy town, from another two thousand feet above it, and you could see the German military armored cars patrolling the town. The border guards getting ready to go up. They couldn't go up in cars, you see, that was the safety. The safety factor is in the mountains was you could avoid people. But in the valleys, the Germans were in control because

26:00 they were mechanized. They could take their armored cars. They could bring their light armor up to rout out people in mountain villages and things like that. But in the mountains, the Swiss and the Italians, mountaineering people, they're a different breed. They're mountain people. Living in the mountains is pretty hard. A lot of these farms were piss-poor farms. Really, the

26:30 standard of living of the average Alpine farmer was pretty tough. He battles very tough conditions. He's snowed in for months at a time of the year. So in reality – I didn't trust the Italians either. In retrospect, I could have. And I could have made my escape much easier had I known that. But I didn't know that, and I didn't trust

27:00 anybody except myself.

So you were walking through snowed out mountains? Were they forest covered mountains?

Oh yes. That's what gave you cover.

Did you have any weapons?

No.

How did you forage for food?

I did what I call bandicooting. Living off the land. If I came across tomato plants, and the grapes were ripening. I got a great love of the grape, and I still love it in the bottled form.

27:30 Grapes. You could live off the land. I was a geologist. The American colonel who married my sister was a geologist. It's a strange sort of a thing that runs in the family. You learned to be very self-sufficient. All my mates in the army were people from outback Queensland. They could live off the land. Shoot rabbits. Get a lizard or something if you had to.

28:01 I had no problem living off the land at all. I had been used to prison grub and that's pretty poor, I can tell you. And you don't get much of it. Your stomach literally shrinks. I couldn't cope with food, after I got free. I couldn't cope with a big meal. I still can't. I still live on the virtual smell of an oil rag, because my body is geared to that.

28:30 So – chestnuts, for example, are wild in North Italy. Now, you can get chestnuts and pulverize them into

flour, make little tiny omelets and things. Olive oil's very good. You could cook. I didn't want to cook. That's why I left the Italians I was with. They shot a hare, for God's sake, and then they roasted the hare over an open fire with the bloody Germans in the valley

29:00 below. They could see that fire, and they'd go up and investigate. Now, your army training doesn't let you do that, make silly mistakes like that. So, I was better on my own. And fortunately, I was pretty well prepared to be on my own. And fortunately, and lucky again, when I was own my own and my last straps right up there at eight thousand feet, night coming in

29:31 it was very a pleasant sort of a future to face up again. I would have, if I had to spend a night up there at that altitude, I had newspapers, and you can make yourself very warm under a rock with newspapers wrapped around you. You see the bums in the park do that. But at high altitude it gets very cold. And look at the poor bugger, the policeman. He got altitude sickness. Now he died, his mate survived.

30:00 Why is that? He wasn't one of the lucky ones. I was always one of the lucky ones. Fortunately, I didn't have to take that extreme action that night. It would have put me in even worse physical shape if there was any climbing to be done the next day. But I would have done it. Because the drive was there. The drive in my case was to get into Switzerland. That was my objective. And I finally made my objective. And I think if you've got

30:30 that motivation. If your motivation is high enough you can do things which normally you would never do. And that was the last barrier, those bloody mountains up in Monte Maro. Others came into Switzerland by train, helped by friendly Italians. Others were organized into parties, and some parties were captured by the Germans, because a party would attract

31:00 attraction. On your own, you can blend into the landscape and if I had my time all over again, I'd still do it that way. Although to be with a mate and know that if you fall down and broke a leg or something you've got someone to look after you, pretty powerful a motivation too. But my mate decided to go south, and he was successful. I decided to go north, I was successful, so that was the answer.

So how does

31:30 **your view of mateship during the war?**

No, my mateships don't change. Now, I mentioned the case of Gordon Dare, who was my best mate in prison camp number 57. I was best man at his wedding. I'm still looking after his family to an extent.

Did your experience intensify mateship, in a way?

I think that's right. I think that's dead certain. People who've gone through peril together have a bond forced

32:00 on them that isn't the normal thing. Now look, if you were at Gallipoli, and that's where we started off. There was a mateship formed in Gallipoli amongst the people there that is now virtually the spirit of Australia. When you begin to think about it, the Gallipoli legend is something that binds a lot of Australians together, even now. If you go to Turkey, like Katie and I have been there because we like Turkey and

32:30 I feel very much at home there. But when I went to Gallipoli, I could feel it in the air. I think every young Australian should go to Gallipoli. There's an atmosphere that is quite tangible. Now normally this mateship as we call it in Australia isn't as tangible as a feeling that you get in Gallipoli, which has impregnated the whole of

33:00 the Australian psyche, when you think about it. I made mates at the university when I went up there. I made mates when I was skiing in Australia before the war. You make mates wherever you go. The concept in Australia of mateship is a very important factor in

33:30 our national psyche, I would say. It is enhanced by common experience in a time of war. That's why the people who were actually there – the soldiers that were in Crete and Greece, and who bonded there and became POW in Germany. The soldiers who were taken in El Alamein, or before that, like Gordon Dare in Derna, or in Tobruk,

34:00 Sidi Barani, they had shared a common experience which is like a minor form of marriage. And that form of mateship stays with you forever. If someone had rung the doorbell – and he was an Aborigine fellow called Harry Davis, he's dead now, who was a friend of mine in the army, I would

34:30 have – he was a mate. He would have had free entrance to this house. Aborigine or not. Didn't make any difference. He had been through experiences whether he's black, white, brindle, Roman Catholic, Protestant, you name it. That was something that had happened and it was a bond that had formed, and it was a bond that you would never ever break. Now that's why I'm so mad at the moment

35:00 about these people from Iran and from Iraq, and they're putting them in detention camps in Woomera, kids, women, children, locked in. Okay, like any prison they've got radio and regular meals and they're looked after health-wise, and they're given blankets so they're not cold at night, but they've lost their freedom. And you have to lose your freedom, as I did, as a POW, to recognise

35:30 what a valuable thing it is, to have. Personal liberty.

Do many POWs feel this way, about the detention centres?

Most. I would say most.

I wasn't aware.

I think it's wrong. Dead wrong. Just as the same as I told you I'm a republican, I'm not a monarchist. I think it's dead wrong to lock up children and women in the isolated harsh condition like

36:00 Woomera, and deprive them of their freedom. Now I was locked up behind wire, like those people, so I know. Every POW knows. That's why a lot of them are so dead against it. Even though you get these personal comforts, they're not the same as having your own personal freedom. Now the worst thing that can happen to a

36:30 POW is that your loss of freedom descends to such a base level, you can't even go and have a piss or anything like that. You're deprived of your privilege as a human being. And that's what we're doing to these poor kids. There were blokes that were

37:00 killed, executed, shot, without provocation. There were AIF POW like Gordon who were serving with the Partisans who were killed, fighting for freedom. Their form of freedom –

How many soldiers from the Australian Armed Forces actually fought with Partisans in Italy?

As an estimate? 50. Quite a

37:30 lot. They're not recorded in official history, but they're there. I know that there were 420 AFI members and RAAF members in Switzerland, because I've done the research. I've been to the Swiss sources, I've got the figures. I've checked them out. That hasn't been done for the POW who were in Greece and Crete and Yugoslavia –

38:01 but who remained free men. And they were equally free, as Gordon was, in Italy, fighting with the Partisans. They were fighting with the Partisans in Crete and Greece and especially in Yugoslavia, and there it made a big difference which form of Partisan you were fighting with. Whether you were fighting with the Chetniks or Tito's mob, because they were at war amongst themselves.

38:30 But I reckon there were at least 400 Australian POW, like myself, who remained free in Greece and Crete and Yugoslavia and the Balkan countries, as there were 420 who got into Switzerland. So that means out of 8000 AIF POW, there were 800 who

39:00 were free POW. Nobody knows anything about that. Or they don't recognize it even if they do know about it. We talked about the British Free Corps, and the Australians that joined that, who were traitors, who donned a German uniform to get some sort of freedom. But the story of these guys has not been told. There were 225 Australian AIF POW

39:30 who died in captivity. Now their names are registered because of the War Graves Commission. However they died. They died of dysentery, some died in accidents, some died of disease, some died by bullet, some were executed, some were murdered, some committed suicide. But they died in captivity. They didn't die as a free man. Now I think those guys are just

40:00 as important as the people who escaped from captivity, and did remain a free man. Whether it was me in the luxury of Switzerland. Whether it was Gordon Dare fighting with the Partisans, or whether it was just people living, waiting for the day of liberation. And that did come, eventually, for the people in Germany. When the POW from Italy were rounded up by the Germans, I reckon about two and a half

40:30 thousand were carted out to further terms of imprisonment as German POW. So in Germany, at the end of the war, I think there were roughly about seven thousand AIF POW in Germany. Some escaped, some became free men.

Seven thousand Australians in Germany? That's a lot –

They were all brought to a camp in Eastbourne, in England. They were processed.

41:00 there. They were given a month's leave, a railway warrant to travel anywhere through the greater British Isles, free of charge. They were given a Red Cross parcel, which was gold, even to the Brits in those day, and they were given a certain proportion of their back pay. And away they went. And eventually they all came back to Australia, but very few of them ever joined

41:30 up in active combat. One bloke did that was in Switzerland. He was a lieutenant, Barney Grogan, and he came from the 2/23rd, the sister battalion to the 2/24th, and he was an officer, you see, and it was a little bit different for him. But he was the only one that I know of, that rejoined his unit after being in Switzerland. They rejoined it, but you were a POW. You'd lost three years of your life. When you went back to the unit you –

INTERVIEW ENDS