Australians at War Film Archive

John McPherson (Mac or Macca) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 8th July 2004

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/2124

Tape 1

00:30 **John, let's start out today just by getting a quick summary of your life.**

I was born in Wyong in 1948. I grew up in a very loving household with two brothers and a sister and a mum and dad. Dad was the secretary-manager of the agricultural association. I went to Wyong Primary School. I left there at twelve and went to Wyong High School.

01:00 Did four years there. Was taken on a traineeship by a Wyong dairy company to do agricultural science at the Hawkesbury Agricultural College. Completed that after five years. Did another two years with those. Was conscripted into the army on the ninth of July 1969. Into Singleton. Was drafted into the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps. Of which … from there went to Healesville in Victoria for around about

01:30 four months. Back to Ingleburn, 1 Australia Hospital to do medicines and drugs. Then to 11th Field Ambulance, which was really a holding unit for Vietnam. Did the obligatory Canungra for two weeks. Then Eastern Command Personnel Depot. And then Vietnam on the thirtieth of May 1970. Twelve months in Vietnam.

02:00 Back home. Back to my normal job after six weeks which was very hard to go back to after that length of time. Was married in 1972. Had two children, a girl Leanne and another daughter, Sally. To which … lived in Wyongah. Moved to Wyongah in '72, to where I stayed for nineteen years.

02:30 I was divorced in … twelve years ago, and I moved to my current address in Blackford Avenue Avenue, Kanwal. I left the dairy in '86. Joined Wyong Shire Council as a laboratory technician, then I moved to the status of biological technical officer, having qualifications in biology;

03:00 but knowing the rural area and knowing the rural scene I was given the job of catchment management officer which looked after the water supply. It looked after the laboratory aspects of it all, plus the microbiology. Also did work on the Tuggerah Lakes system and the ocean and the ocean outfalls and the like. I retired from there in 1999 – Friday the thirteenth of August 1999,

03:30 and I done a little bit of work with Associate Professor Dominic Chang who was at that stage the Dean of Life Sciences at the University of Technology in Sydney. Just some part time casual work with him looking at the state of the lagoons and the Brisbane Water. That went for about eighteen months. Since then, I've retired, done some travelling, trialled my dogs, looked after my orchids, surfed, played a bit of touch football

04:00 and generally keep fit and happy.

Thanks John. That is a very, very fine summary. Well done. Thanks for that.

It's staggered a bit.

Ah mate.

Just going back, the dates, you know. I said twelve years ago. It's actually thirteen years ago I moved here, not twelve years ago. But yeah.

That's fine. Well now we can get into the nitty-gritty and go all the way back to the beginning. Now I believe you were born … it was 1948, and you were born in Gosford?

04:30 Gosford hospital. Wyong … I believe they delivered babies around that time, but they weren't in the months I was born, so I was born in Gosford.

But the family was in Wyong?

The family was in Wyong. My father moved down here with my mother in 1946 from the northern rivers of New South Wales. My mother was from Alstonville, my father was from Swan Bay. Between

Woodburn and Coraki.

05:00 **Do you know what brought them to Wyong?**

Yeah, Dad was a horticulturalist, an agriculturalist by profession; got a job down here in Wyong as the assistant general manager-secretary of the Wyong District Agricultural Association, of which he was in that position for about twelve years. Then, with the retirement of the secretary-manager he became the secretary-manager of the Wyong District Agricultural Association, which he was with them for thirty seven years. The Agricultural Association in those days

05:30 not only ran the agricultural shows, the pastoral competitions, but they ran the race horses, the trots, and the greyhound dogs.

So it was quite a big deal?

It was a big deal. He was a big deal. He formed the RSL [Returned and Services League] club, he was patron of the RSL club till his passing two years ago. He formed the golf club, he was a Mason [Freemason], and a very, very staunch RSL sub branch man.

06:00 **So he'd be fairly legendary around these parts?**

Absolutely, absolutely. His funeral was one of the biggest they'd seen. He was the patron of so many clubs and his photos are still on some of the Walls of Remembrance. Also, the Wyong RSL is just naming the top auditorium of the Wyong RSL, 'the Pat McPherson Bar'. It's got a motto of saying, "Meet you back at Patties."

Can you tell us a bit about his war involvement?

06:30 My father was in the infantry. He served in the Middle East – Egypt and the like. Then he was brought back to New Guinea, and he served on the Kokoda Trail. He was … he had contracted malaria quite bad and he was shipped back shortly before the end of it; but he certainly … he served for six years in the Second World War, to the rank of sergeant.

Was that something he would talk to you about?

07:00 He didn't really talk to us about it then, but after I had my experience in Vietnam he opened up a lot more. And as we do too. We don't tend to talk to many people if they weren't there or if they don't know what we're talking about; but it was great then, because you felt like you got into the 'inner sanctum' of my father and his good friends from the Wyong RSL. and you felt like one of them.

07:30 Although for the first couple of years after we returned back we were fairly ostracized. But they grew older and more mellow they realized that without us the RSLs would diminish, so were their up and coming. So I was a director of the Wyong RSL sub-branch. I was one of the earlier Vietnam vets to do so.

What sort of a man was your father?

My father was about my stature. He was a very likeable man. He had a lot

08:00 of friends. Ran a fair business that incorporated quite a lot of money into the town. As I say, he ran the races, plus the agricultural shows and pasture competitions. He had a lot of friends. He moved in fairly big circles also, being in the sub-branch. He was a fairly good golfer, and

08:30 later on bowls. He was a fairly well known and well liked and well recognized. On his passing, the local paper did a beautiful obituary and article on Dad, which was an absolute pleasure to have seen.

Were you close to dad?

I was. I was very close to Dad. We were all very busy. Dad was busy. He worked six days a week. I worked five and a half, sometimes six days a

09:00 week. And having a young family. Dad had his sporting pursuits, we had our own sporting pursuits. I also have two other brothers and a sister, so he tried to divide his precious spare time amongst us all. It was hard for him but he accomplished that. But he was a bloody good Dad and a bloody nice bloke. Bloody good bloke to go and have a beer with.

09:30 **What was he like with discipline? Was he the member of the household that would look after that department?**

We knew where we stood with Dad. We were mostly taller than him. But he really wasn't a great disciplinarian. We weren't bad kids. We didn't give him too much trouble at all really. So discipline wasn't a thing that we had to face too often. But we got into our fair share of mischief that probably

10:00 he doesn't know about, but no harm done. Mum was sort of more the disciplinarian. Dad was … he was a bit soft on the boys.

What was mum like?

Dad was … Mum is eighty. She was ten years younger than my Dad.

What was she like in the early days?

Well she was a typical country women who ran a

10:30 house with four children. She did part time work as well. She was just a good Mum. See, Mum was just Mum. She was always there when we needed her. We weren't the most well-off folks in town, and we were middle class; but they had a lot of good friends and a lot of good support, and they were well known in town.

11:00 We had a lot of good friends. A lot of my parent's friends, we still call them auntie and uncle, although they were no relation. There was just the friendship and what we thought of these people.

What would have the population of Wyong been, back in those days?

Oh, about twenty five hundred. That was roundabout the shire – well, that was roundabout the Wyong area, not so much the shire, which incorporated Toukley and The Entrance and the like. Not like it is today.

And it was a closely knit community by the sound of things?

11:30 It was. You knew everyone at school and where they were from. When I went to high school, there were only two high schools in the shire virtually – Wyong and Gosford. Oh, and there was a Catholic school at Gosford as well, but they came down from as far as Wyee, Budgewoi, Toukley, The Entrance all went to Wyong High School. But it was nowhere near the size it is now. Nor is the central coast.

What are some of your early memories of Wyong?

12:00 Just a great place to grow up. We had great friends. We had a lovely river going through it. We swam in the river. There was no swimming pools. We went to the surf. The lake was close. We had tin canoes. It was nice and it was safe and it was just a nice play to grow up. It virtually just a country town, not far from the ocean.

So the beach was a bit of a focus?

12:30 It was a focus for me a little bit later in life when I could make my own way out there. But we belonged to surf clubs. I got my bronze medallion in 1966 from the Soldiers Beach surf club. I spent a lot of time there surfing. The old surfboard I had was that heavy. It was hard to carry down the steps. It was nine foot three. But I graduated from there to wave skis. But I still surf now on a nine foot six

13:00 three stringer McCoy. And different wave skis, and if I'm going and I don't have the room for it in the truck, I always have a body board there as well. A pair of fins. Catching a wave's catching a wave no matter what you catch it on.

When you were a younger bloke, were there plenty of kids around the place for you to play with?

There was. We had good friends. We lived on top of the hill, in Wyong. It was a bit

13:30 of a walk – less than a kilometre into town, but it was down hill. We had this big reserve – Chapman's Hill – behind us, which is still there today. You know, there were rocks and caves and things and we were always up there. In the summer we were always down the river. There was always somewhere and plenty to do. We weren't bored. It was a nice place to grow up in.

14:00 **Did you do any particular games or regular sporting activities that spring to mind?**

Well we all played cricket. They had a really great junior cricket competition. We played football in the winter. That was about the two main sports we played. There was a bit of netball, and that's for the girls, and it wasn't as big as it is now. And vigoro was the game the girls used to play back in those days. But it was mainly cricket and a bit of football. If you didn't football then you certainly followed the local an Sundays

14:30 and things.

That was rugby league?

Rugby league. It was definitely a rugby league area. Soccer wasn't big back in those days. But they were the main two sports. And of course we had the bush. We were always running here and running there. And you know, we sort of got bush skills from that. We could always find our way home, and we had our cubby houses in the bush, and you know, we had a nice, nice upbringing.

15:00 **Was fishing a thing to do as a young boy?**

Fishing was. You used to get the winter bream. But a lot of people … our parents used to go. A lot of people used to wander down to Wyong River and wait for the winter bream to come in. Mainly if the weather was warm we were in the river. Then the big pool was built in the mid to late sixties. And there were … a few people had boats and we had tin canoes,

15:30 and different things. We made rafts and we'd get old forty four gallon drums and rope them together. Not very environmentally sound when you look back on it, but those were the sorts of things we did to amuse ourselves.

Would there be other situations that would bring the community together? Any local events or regular occasions?

Well back then there were a lot of Second World War diggers back in Wyong then. The RSL used to bring a lot together. They'd have their dances and their balls and things. One of the biggest shows

16:00 back in those days were the agricultural shows, which my father being the secretary general-manager … they would have the parade of the horse and cattle that would b e absolutely down the straight of Wyong race course. It was a beautiful showground race course. The pavilions, they'd have the farmers and there'd be five or six different junior farmer groups

16:30 in the shire, and they would have display that were just mind blowing. That was probably one of the biggest things in town. But most of the country towns all had their agricultural shows, and that's where everyone met and they'd show their stock or their horses. And the gymkhanas. A lot of the country kids, they all learned to ride, and they'd all be in the gymkhanas. No, it was a big show

17:00 and that was probably the biggest thing. And the flower shows.

An annual?

That was an annual event, yes. It was on in February, because I remember a few times it was washed out. They'd always say, when it was in a drought, "Pat McPherson, put on the show! Put on the show in the middle of the year. We need rain!" That was always around the thirteenth and fourteenth of February.

And how many days would it go for?

It would start on the Friday and go for three days – Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

So there'd be a lot of showing of products and produce?

17:30 Cattle, and judging. Oh yes, they'd import judges from all over New South Wales, and sometimes from outside New South Wales. In the early days it was a fair hike for them to get there. They were renowned for their cattle here. When I started here in 1965 there were a hundred and forty-eight dairy farms in the shire. The last one went out in 1992 or 1993

18:00 or 1994. They all became hobby farms. But as I say, the grand parade would wend its way down the main straight of Wyong race course, and for people who know that, it's a fairly big, long straight.

What about the shows apart from the grand parade would capture your imagination as a young boy?

18:30 They used to have the pasture competitions too. But that was mainly run by the citrus group and the agricultural group and Dad's race course group – with was the agricultural association. They used to have some nice balls through the winter months and late winter months, and there'd by five or six balls in Wyong which was always a treat. I can remember being asked by my Dad if I wanted to bring my girlfriend

19:00 when I was about sixteen or seventeen, to the ball. My girlfriend was about fifteen at the time, and I got dressed up into one of my Dad's dinner suits. He was a Mason. He had a couple of dinner suits. Carol in a long dress. We thought we were so good, going to our first ball. Brilliant.

Just going back to the agricultural shows, would you go and attend the ones in the districts around the place, as well?

19:30 Well, Dad used to help out when Gosford used to run their own show. Dad used to help out there, as would Gosford come and help Wyong. But I used to work over there. I'd be assisting the judges, mainly out in the ring, helping present the ribbons, or writing things down, or running between the judges and centre. There was no two-way radios. Everything would have to be written down. And the prize winners, and the first, second, thirds

20:00 and someone would have to courier them up to the PA [public address] system. And of course the announcer would broadcast them. I remember do that for two or three days. But my brothers, they all worked 'for Dad' – for the agricultural association, helping out at the shows.

Did the rural shows feature any sort of amusement park aspect? I mean I'm just thinking of the Easter Show in Sydney …

20:30 They did. They did. There was the Showman's Guild. They had the boxing tents and they had the … I remember, I thought it was very risqué – they had Vanessa the Undresser!

Tell me more about Vanessa!

Well, I snuck in the back way. Dad used to get a few tickets for these sorts of things. Poked my head around the corner at the age of about fifteen, to see this lass with … now, it wouldn't

21:00 rate if she walked on Bondi or Soldiers Beach, but she was covered in balloons and a two piece type swimming costume that was rather bizarre. But in those days, just to show a little bit of flesh and a little bit of navel was, to a sixteen year old boy, rather exciting. But the boxing tents, and the dodgem cars and you know, Shetland pony rides. And there'd be assorted merry-go-rounds and ferris wheels and fairy floss and fat ladies,

21:30 and yeah, yeah, it was just a scaled down version of the Royal Easter, I suppose.

Would there be the occasional showbag as well?

There were showbags, there were showbags. Nothing like what you have now, but there was probably a choice of two. But they had pavilions full of chickens, and you'd go in there of a morning and the cacophony of sounds

22:00 and the caged birds – the caged bird club would have canaries and parrots and budgerigars, and every parrot and caged bird known to man. And sometimes some that weren't, they were there for presentation. And in the produce department there would be a prize for the biggest watermelon. And my Dad used to buy that watermelon … we assume he bought that watermelon, or it was given to him every year. And we'd take great delight on the day after the show

22:30 to cut this watermelon up. And some of those were huge. Also, my Dad, being a horticulturalist grew beautiful dahlias and flowers. And he also used to enter flowers into the show, which apparently he was allowed to do. He was in competition with quite a few fellows. It was a very long and hard and arduous competition for quite a few years with their cut flowers. And those fellows were ex Second World War men.

23:00 **Did the horticulture side of things take your fancy as a young boy?**

Yes, it certainly did. I knew I was going to go into the agricultural type science business, and I liked biology : why does this grow? Why can't you grow watermelons in the middle of winter? Why do they only come out in February? So Dad was pretty pleased about that. So I wanted to get into the agricultural research biological side of things. I kept lizards and all sorts of

23:30 things, and all sorts of things my mother didn't know I kept under the bed. But yeah, that really got me into that sort of field I think. Not so much the administration like Dad was in, but I really wanted to be in the field. Which I was lucky to be.

So let's go back to the beginning of your education. Your first school was?

First school was Wyong Primary School, which was incorporating the infants. I remember that being born in June, you virtually had to start school in the next school year. But I kicked up that big a stink the day

24:00 I turned five that I wanted to go to school, that my parents, knowing the headmaster, asked that I could go, and I started school on my fifth birthday. Whether that be good or bad, or whether that means I missed out on … when people say it's not very easy unless you're very bright, well, I say I only did half a year in kindergarten.

24:30 **How did you find school?**

Loved it. Absolutely loved it. In my full school career I did not wag one day. I rarely had a sick day, and on the report cards from high school, I think I only about two days off in four years. And the only reason I didn't go on to do Leaving was that I got this traineeship

25:00 with the dairy company and they said I didn't need to have a Leaving to go to Hawkesbury Agricultural College. And if I had stayed another year that position wouldn't have become available. So that was the reason I left when I did.

What are your fondest memories of primary school?

Oh, playing cricket and the kids and the noise and just being around people. It was a great little school and great teachers and I got away with a fair bit because Dad knew all the teachers. And a lot of those teachers were Second [World] War men.

25:30 And a couple of them – the Walker-Smiths – they were both in the air force, but they, you know, if I did anything wrong at school it'd go straight back to Dad, and Dad would just laugh and say, "I know what's going on, and be a bit wary. I know more than you think I know about what's going on." Of course those school teachers were all members of the sub-branch – the RSL – and those that weren't were Masons, and what

26:00 weren't, played golf. But it was great. Good school. It's still there now, but not as a school. It's a recreation centre. And the Wyong Town Square is now situated in the old primary school. And that's where the War Memorial is now. They moved it from down by the railway, to there. And it is just great. And there's seats, and often I go up there and sit and think back about those days. Great view over town from there too.

Did you take a shining to any particular subject or subjects at school?

26:30 Geography, I did. They didn't do a lot agriculture but it was part of geography. I wasn't too bad at English, and maths I just got by in – but don't we all? But I got by. But no, mainly geography and sport.

27:00 **In those early years, I mean, we should talk about the fact that your lineage goes back to your grandpa being in Gallipoli, as far as war involvement is concerned …**

Now, just to clarify, he wasn't in the first wave on the first day. He went in on the second day. But he landed at Gallipoli on the second day and after about four months he was quite badly injured and he was shipped back to England where he recuperated for nearly a year.

27:30 **Did you know much about what your grandad had done in the war at that stage?**

I did. He moved down from the north coast in about 1956, to Gosford. Got away from the farm and I used to get away and go down and see him. He taught me to fish – especially Blackfish – which were a bit of an art. And he talked to me a little bit about it, but unfortunately he had passed away before I had seen my service in Vietnam.

28:00 But he spoke to me a little bit about it, and he had a couple of good friends … one was a senior police officer in Gosford, who was also in the First World War. And just sitting around with them … they'd get together a couple if times a week over a bottle of beer or fishing, and they used to speak about it. So I learnt a little bit about it off the cuff there

28:30 about what it was like. Amazing.

When you were at that stage with your grandpa, did that sort of stuff capture your imagination?

I … not so much … my imagination, I thought about how it was, but I'm not a war monger and it's quite tasteful for me. I find it amazing how these people survived. And I thought more about how

29:00 if they didn't survive then I wouldn't be. And if I hadn't have been born, then no-one one would. My brothers wouldn't be, my parents would be, I wouldn't be who I am. I more thought about that aspect of it than being intrigued by the war aspect of it. The war aspect of it frightened me more than anything else; and you know, how lucky am I to have a grandad and

29:30 then a father who went through that. Because the chance of them both surviving under circumstances like that were bloody rare indeed.

In primary school and in going into high school, were you given any history on the Great War and the Second World War?

No, none. You mainly picked it up, again, from listening to Dad and his

30:00 mates. Very little. Although three of my main teachers in high school were Second War men. But it was very, very fleetingly passed over.

Was your family religious?

… Christians … yes … Mum … all christened,

30:30 yes. Being Scottish descent, all Presbyterian. There was no Presbyterian church in Wyong for a while, so then later the Presbyterians and Methodists got together to form the Uniting Church. But we were all christened and my children were christened, and we would go occasionally. But we weren't really practicing Christians much. Although we went to Sunday School. My brothers and sister and I went

31:00 to Sunday School until I was ten or eleven. But … I was a little bit philosophical about it all. I got into science, and I needed a little bit more proof about it all. But my Mum, I suppose more than my Dad. Dad was a Christian but no a totally practicing Christian. It wasn't preached to us at home.

31:30 We would say Grace at major meals if there were people around, but I think that as just to make everyone feel good and to be thankful, for whoever. So we'd thank our Mum for being alive to do it, rather than perhaps God for providing it all.

What sort of values do you think you got from your parents?

Oh, honesty, trusting people, a good nature,

32:00 and just, we've been a kind family. My brothers and my sister, we've all got a lot of friends. None of us have ever been in trouble. We've all worked. We've all had fairly good jobs. It's just that ethic: Mum ran a house back and kids then and still worked, Dad worked six days a week

32:30 and a lot of after hours meetings, and that ran into a lot of hours, and I think that ran into our family as well. That would be the main things. And enjoy life, I think. Dad used to enjoy getting with his mates and having a couple of beers when he could, and their social aspect of it, as they used to call it. They liked going to their socials and their dances, and they liked to dance

33:00 and you know, just enjoy life. And in Wyong you could enjoy life.

Were you close to your siblings? And if you could just give us an idea of the age difference between you?

Yeah, well I'm the eldest. I'm the eldest. My brother Don is three years younger than I. My brother Peter is four years younger than I. And sister Dianne is coming up to 46.

33:30 But yeah, we were pretty close. Being the ten year difference I think, between Dianne and I, when I went off at twenty one to Vietnam, she was only eleven and she that much younger. My brother Don was already in the air force and Peter was away, working out of town. We've lost a little bit there. But we've become … you still call us

34:00 pretty close. We mightn't see each other for a while, especially having a brother overseas and the other brother is only in Newcastle, but there's only got to be some small problem and we're together in hours. With the passing of our Dad, and when Mum was a bit off-colour, or when one of the nephews or nieces … or one of us had a car accident quite some time back … we'll gather around for that type of thing.

34:30 **Was the family a patriotic family? Was the Australian flag an important thing?**

Well, having a father in the army … he was quite patriotic to the cause. The flag has become a lot more significant to us now. But we didn't sort of fly the flag. We were certainly aware of the flag. Patriotic to Australia so much.

35:00 I was never in favour of 'God Save the Queen' being our national anthem back then, but that's just the era. But, no, we were Australians and we were proud to be Australians and even back at a young age I thought how lucky I was to live in Australia, and where I am, worthy.

Did Sydney, the big smoke, seem like it was a long, long way away in those days?

35:30 It was a long way away. It was a steam train and back in my era. You'd go down and back and it could be easy three and a bit hours. And that's just the train. It didn't stop for any length of time to Sydney. I had aunties and uncles and the like in Sydney, and myself, I had to do some training there at times, and it was a long way away. Not like the hour it is in the car. But yeah, it was good. I used to go down there with Dad

36:00 to see Dad's brother and a sisters down there, and it was a big thing to go down to Sydney for today. Big thing. But no-one much in those days drove down. We only had small cars and the like and it was easy to go on the train; because it took nearly as long on the old Pacific Highway.

Did that seem like another world down there?

It was an absolute other world! But we also had Newcastle, which was only thirty odd miles to the north, and you know, that was only an hour

36:30 and a half in the train to go up there. And we had another uncle up there, so, two comparisons. But yes, I remember the first time I flew over it. I thought, "My God, how big is this place?" And compared to other cities in the world, it's not big.

So the high school you moved onto was which school?

Wyong High School.

37:00 **Can you tell us about Wyong High School?**

It was again, focussed a lot on country issues. I did the agricultural component at the high school. They had an agricultural plot, where we had sheep and cattle and a rotary hoe and you planted a bit of corn and looked at the river. It was a good way of getting out of twelve periods a week,

37:30 eight of which we called 'Down the Plot'. It was a good school. We played a lot more sport there. It had quite good rugby league sides and quite good swimming sides, and most of us had learnt to swim in the rivers, so we were quite strong swimmers and fairly confident swimmers. But it was a good school, and I loved it. Most these schools, remember, were only a short walk from home. There was no buses or anything

38:00 involved here. You'd just meander down in the morning and meander home in the afternoon. It was good. Good teachers. I loved school! Loved school. Good.

Was that the time at which you started to take an interest in girls?

Oh, I had an interest in girls.

When did you first take an interest in girls?

Oh, look, I had … well, I remember I would have just been coming on to

38:30 eleven and there was this lovely girl moved from … virtually out west, which really was … it wasn't probably about a hundred k's from out west, and she moved to the school and she was only new and she

was in a different school uniform and she was cute, and I thought, “Ooh, ooh, this is quite nice.”

39:00 And she’s still my friend to this day. Although she’s married and moved away, four kiddies, and yeah, no, she’s still a lovely woman. But, yeah, that was good. But those days, even giving a girl a second look at that age, people would say, “Ah, we know who your girlfriend is.” You got a little bit teased and a little bit rubbed at. So it was, you know, we lived virtually in the same direction

39:30 and so we would sorta would walk down slower than the others, hoping that they were going to get a bit in front of us so we could sort of linger through the park, and you know sorta talk to each other without having innuendoes pointed at us, you know, “We know who your girlfriend is.” Yes, so there’s always been a bit of an interest there.

Why do you think you did love school so much?

Just the people, learning something.

40:00 Although, I wasn’t all that academic. There were times I made up and got away with a lot of. It was … I just liked being there. It was a fun place to be. I enjoyed the holidays, but it was just a fun place to be. And what’s the point if you’re going to wag school or stay home or something like that. I'd think, “Let’s get down there with the rest of them.” You know, there were plenty

40:30 of chances to play and learn.

And you were starting to think what you wanted to do with your career?

I thought it was going to be something geography and in the agricultural business, because I always liked walking around farms, and again, as I say, my parents came from farms. I had other grandparents up on farms up on the northern rivers – Dad’s parents. And we used to go out there I used to help them milk the cows and things when I was up. Yeah, I always thought that was the industry, and I was very lucky to be offered the opportunity to go into it – into the agricultural side of the dairy company.

Tape 2

00:30 **John, on the last tape you touched on a little bit about the beach. Would you describe yourself as you got into your teenage years as a little bit of a surfie?**

I was a surfie probably before my teenage years. My parents enjoyed the beach with the little bit of free time they had. We'd get the bus out to Soldiers and we loved the beach. We were the typical blondish haired. Before we had surfboards we had those poly [polystyrene]

01:00 boards and we'd scrape our stomachs and we'd get burnt. We'd be out there all day. That’s one of the reasons now why I have skin cancers. But no, no, loved the beach, loved the beach. Couldn’t wait to get into the surf clubs and the like. Nippers weren’t overly big and Nippers, it was hard for our parents to get us to the beach, but we virtually went into the surf clubs as soon as we could. Spent a lot of time there.

01:30 **And I guess a lot of your mates were in the same situation?**

Yes, exactly. There was a group of half a dozen of us, and we'd meet and get the bus out to Toukley and then we'd either walk out to Toukley or in the peak periods the bus would take us there. And we'd get the last bus possible home and knew the bus driver, and he'd wait, and blow the horn because he knew we had to be going back; and … but yeah, we did that for most of the school holidays

02:00 and yeah, we liked the surf. We were fairly capable swimmers. We swam in the river and we'd been swimming since we'd been virtually pushed in. It was just the way to go, the way to be. So as you could appreciate, when we began swimming, how quickly the cricket dropped off. But still, was quite passionate about getting one day of cricket in and one day at the beach.

So you played club cricket?

02:30 I played a bit of club cricket. I got more into the surf clubs and once I got my bronze and started to do a bit of paddling, then for someone who was not too big I could move through the water pretty well. And I sort of let the cricket go a bit, but I was still a bit of a cricket fanatic and follower and supporter.

Because you’ve got that working career in environmental science, let’s say, how would you describe the health of the beaches when you were a young guy, compared to today?

03:00 Well, it’s not too bad now. Don’t get me wrong there. But, you gotta remember that when I grew up in this shire there were only eight thousand people, which is a lot different to the hundred and thirty five thousand there are today. And it’s got the second biggest growth rate outside Campbelltown in New South Wales. There’s more people and more houses, and originally the sewerage system before, they were all on septics or

03:30 absorption septics – putting your phosphates and nitrates, leeching out into your lake system and

consequently the beach. It's difficult with the population explosion, but back in those days it was absolutely pristine. But it's still not too bad, considering.

We've heard a little bit about your young romance there, with the girl from the other school. What about as you got older in teenage years? What was the 'chick action' like?

04:00 Oh look, it was pretty good. For some reason I liked the little blondes. There was a lass … first year high school was still pretty slow, because I still had my friends from the primary school. But because they came from all round the shire there was some real little cuties came in first year, when I was second year. So I would have been thirteen and they would have been twelve.

04:30 And yeah, one little cutie in particular was of … her father came out from Poland to work with the Electricity Commission, and she was, with that little accent and the blonde hair and yeah, she was quite, and still is a delightful lady to this day.

How would you describe the ethnic makeup of Wyong in those days?

05:00 There were a couple of Dutch. There were the Vanderpools. There was the Greeks, the Coronises; there was a few English kids around – the Moores and the Hardwicks. There was a couple of … or one Aboriginal young bloke. But he only did a couple of years and then we lost track of what happened to him. But … and of course this lass whose parents had come from Poland. But other than that

05:30 there weren't many. But like the Vanderpools – they'd been in the local district for years. You know, that was it, but they were good kids. They were the same as us. Most of them were born here, though most of their parents weren't. They were just like us. They were part and parcel of growing up. We didn't even realise that

06:00 or know or feel or want to make them out to be any different from us. They were just good kids doing what we did. Bloody good sportsmen! Yeah, they were fine. There's no problems here.

Was there any kind of legacy from World War II about Japanese and Germans?

Yes. There was. It's always funny, it's always funny. When Toyota first started marketing cars in Australia, my Dad and a few

06:30 of his mates said, "Nah, no, no. Wouldn't have a Jap car; rather a Mercedes – they're a different story!" But I was rather amused by that and didn't know why. But we all finished up with Toyotas. My mother's had Toyotas for the last twenty five years, but back in the early days when the first of the Datsuns and Toyotas and Mazda –

07:00 or as my Dad'd say, "Mazutas," came out, he was a bit reluctant. He was a Holden man. He had the company car and he was a 'Kingswood Country' man.

As a teenage guy, what sort of music were you into?

Oh, Beatles, Rolling Stones. If you look behind me you'll still see them. Some of the records are still there. Liked that … and got into the jazz at an early age. Really liked the jazz; a mixture of things.

07:30 Some Australian folk bands of the era were pretty good. I wasn't much into the country and western. I still really … it's not my scene, though really, you'd wonder why not. But ah no, the Beatles, and Johnny O'Keefe – anything that was a bit new and was a bit raucous and had a beat, and you could bop to … no, it's still liked and still played.

08:00 **As you were getting to the end of your high school time, the pot in Vietnam would have been beginning to bubble a bit. What did you know about it?**

Not a great deal. It was sorta … there was a little bit on the television, so I kept up with it and knew about it. I knew why we were there. In 1965/66, the chances of me ever going there were, you know, remote. I honestly thought the last of the wars was the Second World War.

08:30 I didn't think Australia was going to be involved with too many others. I was aware of the ANZUS [Australia New Zealand United States] Pact, not ever thinking that it was going to escalate to what it did.

So from high school, where did you go off too?

Because I was on this traineeship type or apprenticeship type system with the Wyong dairy company, they put me through Hawkesbury Agricultural College, which is at Richmond in New South Wales. Which was a bit of a shock after Wyong.

09:00 I was expected to go there and they expected you to learn. And they expected you to pass exams and do well, and because we had to live in, and because, you know, it was a bit of a shock to the system. I got away with very little study beforehand and got away with it quite easy and enjoyed life, but then I suddenly had to

09:30 do a bit for a living, you know. And besides being down there you'd have to go back to the company on Saturdays to work for them as well, and on holidays and things. And I got a bit of a shock. But … we got there, we got there. We had pressure on us from the older class above. We had to do our initiation, and

so, you know, I being a tad cheeky and wouldn't take some of their crap,

10:00 I was sort of cornered and singled out for extra duties and things by the senior students.

Well in my day, Hornsby Ag College had a bit of a reputation for harsh initiations and partying. Can you tell us what it was like when you were there, then?

It was the same. You couldn't go to any meals without having a jacket or coat on. There was the agricultural science

10:30 and there was food technology and there was dairy technology. They were called the Ag Shags, the Tuckas, and the Dairy Fairies. No, our initiations were fairly tough. I was dragged out of bed at two o'clock in the morning in just a pair of underpants and made to squat on a sun dial in the middle of the square, and I had to crow like a rooster every quarter of and our, like,

11:00 "Cock-a-doodle-do, it's three o'clock, and all is well." Every quarter of an hour I had to do that. To this day I am known in some of the circles as 'Rooster.' It was also my hash name. But no, it was good… we always knew that our turn would come to play the similar game the next year or the following year. But no, it was good, but … I struggled there. I didn't put the effort in there that perhaps I should have,

11:30 but we got by, eventually.

You mentioned that you had to do work experience as well, on the weekends?

Well I worked at the dairy company for a year before as you had had to do a couple of years before you go. So I didn't really go down there till I was seventeen and a half. And you had to do … it was a bit different back in my day, where before, you had to do

12:00 two years, but in my time you had to do two years full time over five years. So the system had changed a bit. So the system had changed a bit. I had to go through that first year because I was half a year behind, so the system had changed.

What sort of routine was there in the dairy business in those days?

Well, in the dairy company I worked in the laboratory. You had to do your bit in

12:30 every aspect of the dairy industry. Locally, we didn't make butter, we didn't make cheese – it was mainly dairy milk. But you'd go to Singleton to learn butter and cheese making, and to Wauchope and Hexham to learn aspects of the industry that weren't carried out at your particular company. We were mainly market milk and cream. We had the full franchise between the Hawkesbury River and Catherine Hill Bay, which was a big area. We had a hundred and thirty dairy farmers back in those days

13:00 and all their milk had to be tested. They were paid accordingly to what those tests were in latter days for butter fat and protein and the like; so I also had the chance to help some of the farms that were having troubles with quality. We'd go out to the farms and have a look around with them and try to work out the source of the problems. We had dairy officers at the time and we also had people from the Department of Ag. But also it was a chance to

13:30 go out a bit, which was pretty good.

So what were you testing for in the lab?

Mainly bacteria. I did all the bacterial work. There are health standards for all the processed milk going out. Also we did yoghurts, and the creams and the favoured milks and everything like that. Sometimes ice cream mix and things. They all had standards, and we had to make sure all those standards were met.

14:00 **What were the main health threats to the animals and the humans in those days?**

Mainly it was colour form. You know, there was a certain percentage of … you know, coming in, it was pasteurized and homogenised and semi-sterilized – it depended on what you were making at the time. You know, it all had to pass stringent tests and we had to make sure that it did, otherwise we were in trouble : our arse was grass and he was a Victor.

How would you reckon hygiene standards were then, as compared to now?

14:30 Well, the dairy company closed up seven or eight years ago. They consolidated to bigger companies. But it certainly passed the tests that were asked of it. But yeah, I left that industry in 1986, but I don't seem to have any problems with milk. If I got crook milk then I'd certainly find out when it was made and the like. I think people are more aware of it now,

15:00 because the amount that used to be delivered by the milkman to your front door compared to how many get home delivery now – it's a very new skill.

What did you do for wheels back then?

Ah, bought me first car in 1967 – a Mini Cooper S. White with a red roof, and an absolute goer, an absolute goer. It was a good machine. It went too well one day with my girlfriend on board.

15:30 It turned over on its side, would you believe, on McPherson Road of all place. We couldn't get out. A tow truck had to come and put it back on its wheels and get us out, and oh, it was a bit of damage done and was off the road for a month or so, but I learnt well with that. But you know, ten inch wheels when you hit a bit of soft ground. Not like the sixteen, seventeen inch wheels we have these days. But no, it was a good little screamer,

16:00 I mean, car. I had that nearly seven years. I had that when I went into the army, and it went well. It went well. Seventy five horsepower, whoa.

Not a lot of room in a mini for a girlfriend as well though?

Oh, mate, the things you can do if you're keen. No, it was a good truck. It was a good truck. I thoroughly enjoyed that. But no, it was a good machine. We did get six in it and drove over

16:30 to The Entrance. This was well before breathalyser, but there were six of us in it. It was fairly low to the ground, but we got six over there. But it was fairly safe. You know, front wheel drive – easy. It made you feel you were a much better driver than you actually were. In a mini you can ride anything. But no, it was a good machine.

How much of a role did alcohol play as a young fella?

17:00 I remember the first time I got drunk. A few of us put in the money together to get a flagon of port. We went down by the river – which we all would have done – and necked that when we were fifteen. I thought I was going to die for two days, and that sort of learnt me the lesson, and I never got much back into alcohol till I was of a legitimate age around eighteen, when I was able to go to the

17:30 hotels and the like. The clubs were twenty-one back in those days, but you know, I've always enjoyed a beer, always enjoyed a beer. But I think it's more the company than … and still to this day, I've always got beer here, but I would rarely have a beer on my own. I tend to think that you've got to do something to deserve a beer, whether you've just got friends around, which is a good enough excuse; or if you've been for a run or you've done some sort of exercise or mowed the lawns in the summer

18:00 or whatever. But yeah, I wouldn't be classed as a huge drinker, but there's not many who enjoy a beer more than I. But yeah, I've had my moments.

And what about ciggies in those days?

Nah. I could never see the use of cigarettes. My parents never smoked, my grandparents never smoked. None of my siblings smoked. I tried it, and I thought, "Gross!" To this day I still think, "Yuk, Gross!"

18:30 **John, at what stage did you start to realise that things in Vietnam were getting a little bit more serious than you thought?**

About 1967, when there was talk about conscription and what they were going to do. It was the first televised war, and being a bit of a news fan/freak I thought, "Ooh, this is getting out of hand. This could escalate." We had advisors

19:00 there at that stage and the first troops were starting to go in, in '65. And I thought, "Oh, this is not gonna be good. This is not gonna be good." But then, reflecting back to the little bit I learnt about Korea, I was thinking, "Why are we there?" They were never going to invade us, so why are we going over there?

19:30 **So you had a TV at home to watch?**

Yes. Plus at night before I went to bed, I'd always have the radio on. The ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] news bulletins, they brought back fairly graphic information and news to us about the Vietnam War. I was certainly not in favour of it. I shuddered,

20:00 I was frightened by the whole concept of it all.

Even given your Gallipoli/Kokoda heritage?

That was for a reason, that was for a cause. I could see the belief in that. But not Vietnam. Not Vietnam. Which, I say that after being there, and really thinking, "No way should we be there."

20:30 Even back then I was thinking we shouldn't be there. Even to this day. There was no need to be there.

So once National Service had been decided upon, what sort of obligations did that place on you?

Well we had to register at nineteen and nine months, but because I was still … hadn't finished my studies. So I was deferred for twelve months, and I thought, "Ah, you know, they're not going to worry about me.

21:00 They'll forget about me." I think they knew the last results before I did because they didn't miss me.

So you were still at college for a year?

Yeah. Well, just finishing off. I was doing a little bit of college and just finishing off.

That year in college there, leading up. Did you feel that time was running out for you?

21:30 I did in a way, because I was fairly fit and I'd seen some of my mates go in, and thought, “There’s a bloody good chance I could wear this.” They were only calling out about five numbers a month. Well, I mean, I'd been called up and I was deferred so … but in the back of my mind I thought they may have overlooked me.

22:00 You know, “Jeez, he’s nearly finished – we’ll overlook him,” but once your number come up and I got the letter to say, you know, “Report for the medical,” then it was thankyou very much.

How did you feel when your number did come up?

Well, the only thing I could … one, I mean … but they used to televise it! They used to televise the numbers coming up, like bloody Lotto! They would televise it. My mother was a bit freaky about it. She didn’t

22:30 really like it. But I thought, “OK, if I'm gonna go into National Service, well I have to pass the medical.” But I was fairly fit and played reasonable rugby union for Hawkesbury at that stage – reasonable. And I thought, “If I'm going to go in, I'm going to make the most of it. I will not buck the system. I will go in there to something where I can learn something, and I will

23:00 make the most of that two years.” And again, at that stage I went in not knowing that I would go to Vietnam. A good percentage went, but mainly infantry and the like, and I thought, “I may stay clear of that.”

Did you see your own number drawn on the TV?

I didn’t, but I heard later that the fourth of the sixth had come up. But I didn’t actually see it.

23:30 I didn’t actually see it happen, but I remember seeing the first few and thought, “Oh, yeah …” But everyone watched it. They'd say, “Oh, look at the numbers coming up.” But they bloody televised it. I can’t believe they that. National outcry and all the problems it caused later, and they’re bloody putting it on television. Amazing.

So it was kinda like the Lotto draw on TV?

It was, yeah it was.

24:00 It was just bizarre, absolutely bizarre. Amazing, but anyway.

As an old digger, what did your dad think about all this?

I don’t think he was real impressed. But I think he was proud that I was called up, of which I was gonna make the most of it; but he said, “Are you in? Again, when you’re in, you’re make. Make the most of it. Make the most of it. Do as you’re told. Do the right thing, and don’t volunteer for too much.” They were his words.

24:30 **Was your dad in infantry?**

He was, he was infantry yeah. Look, really, if I'd have got infantry I'd have made the best of it, but it wasn’t … I thought I'd go into something, and all down, they’ve got training teams, the AATTV [Australian Army Training Team Vietnam]. I wondered if I may be able to get onto that. Training … not thinking about military training. That was not overly my forte, but in training you might be able to get something where you could train farmers

25:00 to be more productive. I was thinking of the science side of it more than the military aspect of it all – because really, at that stage it was still a bit of a game. You know, it was a game.

So you thought you might end up as the '1st Australian Dairy Training Team'?

Yeah, yeah or something like that. The agricultural science team or something. But later on I still did a little bit of that. But that’s another story.

25:30 **What do you recall in those days of the anti-Vietnam protests?**

Yeah, they were … the ninth of July 1969 when I went in, we knew there was the Save Our Sons movement. That was the main one that was televised. And they were fairly vocal, and rightly so. They had a cause. Most of them were bloody mothers and grandmothers

26:00 and a lot of them, when you look back on it, were the wives of Second War diggers. You know, they would have only been in their fifties, and yeah, yeah, no, look, they had a cause and good luck to them; and I certainly think they did well. But I … I could understand why they were protesting : to save our sons. And rightly so. And again I say, in my opinion and in my belief, we shouldn’t have been there.

26:30 But if I was going there, I was going to make the most of it.

So at the time, were you pro or anti Vietnam?

I was anti … I was virtually anti-Vietnam. I didn't believe we should have been there. It was no threat to our lifestyle, no threat to us, no threat to the USA. They went in there to stop what they called the communists coming down from the north with their Chinese or Russian influence. And to me that was just a lot of crap.

27:00 **But did you take part in any formal protests?**

No, no I didn't. Silent protest, but what do you do? If you don't play the game and you don't play it right to the way they want you to play it, you could end up being hurt or you could end up going to jail. So, as I say, I was going to make the most it.

Did you ever have thoughts of evading your conscription?

No. They had me. They had me well and truly.

27:30 And they had a lot of others, you know. There was a few that avoided conscription – and a few quite fairly high profile people. But I … no, I was going to go in and make the most of it.

All right, so tell us about how you came to meet the army in July 1969?

28:00 Well, it's thirty five years tomorrow. We got our call up notice to report, and it was just after my twenty-first birthday. Well, I had it – my twenty-first – on the fourth of June. '69, and that was a big party organised for me at the Masonic Hall in Wyong. There were two hundred and forty-five odd people, which was fairly big for that day.

28:30 And they got me up and they wished me all the well. And I made the local paper to say I was going into National Service. But we had to report to Singleton and we had a rail voucher, and we picked up on a train at Wyong station. I think it was seven o'clock or something in the morning. With one bag. One little carry bag with just a few underwear and your personal items because, 'all your clothes will be provided.' And I got down there with Mum and Dad and my sister and it was a cold, cold

29:00 winter's day. And they all went down to see me off, and there was four or five people on Wyong Station with their little bags and their parents – to see us off. I only knew one other fellow there, and he was from Toukley. The others were local, but I didn't know them. Wyong being the closest railway station to the … the shire's railway station. So up to Singleton we went, stopping at most little places along the way,

29:30 seeing one man with one little bag and his family – mother, probably crying and waving; and we're there with our heads out the window, "We'll look after him mother, we'll look after him mother!" because it became pretty close friends by the time we got to Newcastle and had to go out to Singleton. There were probably forty odd got on in Newcastle. We got on a train at Wyong. The train had left Gosford, so there was another half dozen or more had got on at Gosford. We all sort of got in the same carriages

30:00 because we all knew what we were in for, and we may as well have started our comradeship then. Which we did. And the train arrived in Singleton in the middle of the afternoon, to the green machine, "Line up you mongrels – you're nothing but scum," and "I am sergeant such-and-such." I thought, "Oh, shit."

30:30 **How did you feel?**

I felt, "Well, how do we play this? I can't buck the system. There's more of them than us." All the guys were in the same boat, so let's just play their game. We looked at it and viewed it and thought, "Let's play their game." So we played the green machine's game.

31:00 **How were you processed when you initially arrived there, after you'd been lined up and shouted at?**

We were just … we had our documentation, and one of the first things we had to do was all sit down in this room, and we had to fill out this little card to be sent back to our parents, to alleviate any concern that we'd jumped train on the way up. So that was one of the first things I remember we had to do. It was a specially printed card. You put your name on it and nothing more than that.

31:30 It said, "I have arrived safely at Singleton. Our address is …", which was printed on it, "Your loving son, John." That was collected by the army and they posted it back. Interesting, interesting. Then we were taken up to 1 Platoon A Company and luckily, all those blokes who got on the train together, they were all in 1 Platoon A Company.

32:00 B Company were Queenslanders who had come down nearly the day before or the day after. So they were the 'banana benders', they were the … there were a few northern New South Welshmen … yeah, they were with the Queensland company, much to their distraught; but yeah, it was interesting. They allocated us our beds and lined up to go up and get all our uniforms.

32:30 I had short hair. One of the things Dad said was, "Go there fit and get your hair cut off." So I went there with a fairly short back and sides, but no, that wasn't good enough. We all went in and had it all over the top. Number Three I would say it would be. And we all dressed the same, we all looked the same,

and we all had the same amount of apprehension. But we gave it our best shot?

33:00 **Now it was July, and I know from being there that it's a fairly bleak, cold place?**

Cold as a frog's tit. But it was funny. Everyone as cold. You'd still race to the showers of a morning in your green like underwear shorts and your green army singlet and nothing on your feet. Or … a pair of thongs you had to take for the showers. Tinea was a problem.

33:30 Yeah, your rubber thongs. But you didn't feel the cold because you had to get out a lot earlier, and you had to run here and run there and line up and get your name marked off; and then march down to breakfast and then march back. It was all new, it was all different. It was exciting. It was exciting. Some did it a bit tougher than others. There were some there who hadn't been anywhere or done anything and lived at home. And they done it a little tougher than us,

34:00 but most of us were handling it. Most of them handled it. A few didn't. A couple went over the wall, over the fence, over the paddock, disappeared. Never to be seen of again. To us, anyway. I don't know if they got them or where they put them, but they certainly didn't come back to us. I think in our group there was two I believe in A Company that went AWOL [AWL – Absent Without Leave]. Their whereabouts to this day remain a mystery.

34:30 **How did your background as far as family and education compare with the other guys you were with?**

Well, I was pretty good. For the first few weeks you're all the same. You looked the same, you dressed the same, you ate the same, you were the same, basically. Education at that stage didn't play a great part in it. Physical exercise did. I was

35:00 fairly fit at the time and I could fire a … we all had air rifles as kids too, and we'd been rabbit shooting and duck hunting and things like that. So we knew our way around a firearm, whilst some of those from the city didn't. And we were fairly fit. So we didn't incur the wrath of the instructors as much. They'd say, "You run here," or "You jump over that," and we could find our way up

35:30 to the bush and back. That was no problem to us. We could do it. Some of them found it a bit tough, but no, we could … but at that stage we still thought it was a big game. A big game.

You sound like you weren't intimidated by it much?

No, no, no. I was yelled at. But I always had a smart answer back. I got into a fair bit of trouble, mainly for back-chatting or having a smart comment and things like that,

36:00 but I only had to do push ups, or … I only got one extra duty for that. A lot of the time I made the instructors laugh a bit as well, and you know, I was picked on a bit. But it was my own device, there. A tad cheeky. But there was no harm done. I could take the problems. I was quite good at the other things as well, so it was not as if I was standing out for being nothing but cheeky.

36:30 I couldn't afford to be.

And what sort of petty discipline and so were you subject to as far as the way you did things?

Well, that's right. Your bed had to be certainly made, and they used to come in and bounce a coin on it … which was a whole heap of … but everybody was subject to that. He'd run his hand above your locker, looking for dust … "What is this, soldier!" he'd say.

37:00 "That is dust, sir" … "Well it shouldn't be there!" you know. And you had to clean it or you had to go and do something else. But I played their game. If they wanted it dusted, I dusted it. If they wanted the bed that tight you could bounce a coin off it, then I'd have it that. If they wanted your shoes spit-polished then I'd spit-polish my shoes. It was not a great drama to me. In fact one of the fellows there had trouble spit-polishing his shoes, so I showed him how. "Look, this is the best way to do it," and to save us all getting in trouble, I'd help out.

37:30 Because that was one thing they did. If you did if there was one in your section that was a little bit behind then it was up to us to get him up to speed. Or we could all tend to suffer for that. But it was no trouble. I could finish my chores fairly early, and I was only too willing – as were others – who were willing to help those who struggled a bit. Some of the blokes needed a little bit of help with some of these things … knowing that if I was having trouble and they were on top in that particular event, then they'd help me.

38:00 **The Australian Defence Forces are being a lot more politically correct these days, but in your day what was it like as far as instructors and bad language was concerned?**

Ah, it was … some of those poor fellas they did pick on if they were a little bit behind in something. The marching business, you know, some can, some can't. We didn't find it much of a problem because we went to a lot of dances and things, and we could move a little bit and we picked up a rhythm and they sort of knew we … we had no problem to go and march.

38:30 But you'd be surprised how many people couldn't do an about turn or a right turn or the arms drill with a rifle … or were intimidated by an SLR [self loading rifle]. Just absolutely frightened to use it or to pick

it up. It was something very, very foreign to them. And they were fairly duly picked on. But I sort of got away with it a fair bit. You know, I didn't … it wasn't a great drama to me there, but some of them got picked on, yeah.

39:00 **What did 'picking on' entail?**

One example that comes to mind … one of the fellows was asked at five or six weeks … his hair was still terribly short but it was a bit longer than the others, and this sergeant come up straight behind him and said, "Am I hurting you soldier!" And this soldier's standing there thinking, "What does he mean?" and the sergeant says again, "Am I hurting you soldier!"

39:30 "No sergeant!" And he says, "Well I should be. I'm standing on your hair. Now get it cut." And we all just went into hysterics, because that sergeant could've done that to anybody, because his hair was … all our hair was much of a muchness. His might have just been sticking up at the back for some reason. But some reason! The sergeant just picked on him, and it brought the rest of us into absolute hails of laughter, which made it ten times worse than the bloke that was being picked on. But there was

40:00 a lot of that. Now they call it 'bastardisation'. We look back on it now and it was a different era, a different era. We had no females there either, and I think that's the ADF's [Australian Defence Force] problem now but … you know, you'd wonder why not. Now there's no conscription, and people know what they're getting into if they join the military forces – which service they join. But we were all conscripted from all walks of life and from an age group

40:30 from probably nineteen – though some could go in earlier – up to the age of about twenty six. And that age difference is a bit of a difference. And we came from all walks of life. You know, we had bankers, we had professional men, we had truck drivers. You know, we had all sorts, all sorts. But yeah, most of us, we played the game, we played the game.

Tape 3

00:30 **All right John, we're still talking about Singleton. At the last tape you were telling us about the variety of the blokes you were there with. Can you tell us about the blokes you started to bond with, and some of the closer friends you started to make in those early days?**

01:00 There was one bloke in particular from the mid north coast of New South Wales. There was a few things he wasn't as good at as I was. And there was a few that I wasn't as good as he was at. But we buddied up and we made it a bit more pleasurable for each other. We went out and had a few drinks when we were allowed later on. But we knew

01:30 that it was only twelve weeks, it was fairly intensive, and there was not another person going into the corps that I was going into. So you didn't see them after that. There was another fellow Gosford. We just … when we were allowed to bring our cars in and go back for the weekend, you know, he'd drive to my place and leave his car there and go up with me; and pick his car up the next weekend. So we took turns in driving each other up. But we didn't get overly close to people

02:00 because we knew that when we got to corps training we would see them for the rest of the twenty one months, some of these other people you were going to be with.

So what was the highlight of the training for you then?

Oh, getting out of it was one. But … it's just seeing how it all went together. Looking at the mentality of some of the instructors was another.

02:30 See, some of them, well most of them, were veterans of the war and were regular soldiers; and when you talked to them later … I met a few of them later after recruit training, and they weren't much older than us. They were there to do a job and they had done their war service, so they were virtually filling in time before they moved onto other things. But

03:00 they were doing it the way they were told to handle it, and they had a boss above them who had a boss above them and that was just the way the system worked. And it got us there.

What did you like least about that experience?

03:30 Aaah … what did I like least about? Well, no-one likes getting up at five o'clock in the morning I suppose. But that wasn't a great drama. The other duties we had … the mess duties, they didn't really worry us. One of the bivouacs they had out towards Branxton way, and we had to walk back maybe thirty k's or something like that, that was an all day march and

04:00 that was fairly hard. And we had to get back and go to the range and fire our rifles at the range, and then they gave us a rifle inspection. And you're that knackered after having been in the bush for four days, and then the forced march back and then the range and then for a discipline thing, the rifle inspection. And those that were not up to scratch were in a fair bit of trouble.

04:30 And then the next day they gave us all these inoculations, then took us into their theatre on base to watch the movie 'Zulu' … then they sent us home for our first leave. Well, Zulu backwards is 'you lose'. And we'd just marched and we were covered in blisters and our inoculations, and they sent us home for our first four days. That was handy. I remember coming back on the train and meeting Dad and he said, "We'd better go and have a beer,"

05:00 and he said, "Why are you limping," and I took my boot off in the bottom hotel, and he said he'd been in the war six years and never seen blisters on anyone like I had. But we got over that and got away with that. But after that we could take our own vehicles back and it got a little bit easier. But then of course you knew what corps you were going into as well, so, that was interesting.

Just before we get into how that took place, in those initial twelve weeks, was there much talk between you blokes about the war?

05:30 There was, because those that were going to infantry we were told that they had a ninety-five percent chance of going to the war. So after less than three months of going in – you know, seven, eight months of being in – they were going. And I was told too that if I was going to Medical Corps there was a good chance that I'd be sent to Vietnam.

06:00 And I thought I'd rather be going over there – not knowing where you're going to be posted in Vietnam. So OK, you'd have to have your wits about you, and you'd better start taking in a bit more of what they're trying to teach us, because you never know if your life's going to depend on it. So all of us sudden it starts home to us that we better start listening to these blokes, because one, they're our instructors; and two, you know, our lives could depend on this.

06:30 And still in Medical Corps you could be posted to a battalion.

Were the instructors making direct reference to the Vietnam War?

Some of then did. Especially when we were fairly new in the recruit stage they would say to us they we had a lot of learning to do, because if we went to Vietnam then you know, it would be a different world out there. You know, you can't run around and laugh and think it's just a game. Because they knew that a few of us were treating it as a bloody big game, and were

07:00 laughing, and saying, "No, they won't beat us." But you know, "So smile and laugh now boys, but it may come a time when you see it's not a bloody game. It'll be fair dinkum." And how right they proved to be.

You told us earlier, before you got to Singleton, that you were basically against the war. Was that a sentiment that you spoke to other blokes about, and did you find that many of them felt the same way?

07:30 I did, but there were only a few of us who could talk about it like that. There was a few of us, especially in recruit training, because a lot of the blokes, once they got further into it, they got that bit of a 'gung ho' image about them. They started to believe in the combat theory that they were … and as we all thought, we were six foot tall and bullet proof. And by gee, a lot of us weren't six foot, and we were not bloody well bullet proof!

08:00 But that's how they believed it, and that was a bit of the psychology they used. But there were only a few of us there that thought, "This is … we'll play their game. We'll do everything. We'll do it as easy as we can. But it's still bullshit. We shouldn't be there." You know, we were starting to lose troops and it was starting to come back to us. They would tell us. They'd say, "We lost so many today. If you don't buck up and you don't learn, you will come back in a body bag. So get your arse into gear and pay attention or do whatever you want to do."

08:30 But a few of us got together and thought, "You know," but what are you going to do. You've got to get in there and make the most of it. And it come out to us to that if you don't go then there are benefits perhaps later on in life by being a returned serviceman. Whereas you didn't get a great deal if you just hung around Australia and filled in your two years. Which a hell of a lot did, but there was war service loans and housing loans.

09:00 No-one dwelled to much on how their medical sector was going to be in ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ahead. That was … again, they just all thought they were six foot tall and bullet proof. And that's something you didn't think of when you were twenty one.

Do you recall any of the blokes actually verbalising any feelings of disagreement or protest about the war to any of the instructors?

09:30 No, not to the instructors. That was the worst thing you wanted to do. But I mean, some of us sat around – there were four of us there that day – and we had a bit of free time. It might have been on a Sunday afternoon or something. And I remember just sitting around on the back steps there at Singleton, in the sun, and I remember saying, "How much bullshit is this war. Why are we here. Why are we doing this conscription. Isn't there enough people who have joined the services." I mean, they had a heritage of military service

10:00 and you could see why they joined. But we still, at that stage, we couldn't see the reason behind why they would have to have conscription. But you know, there's no way you'd ever say it to any of the instructors. Well, I never heard. There were a lot more groups there, but none of our blokes certainly

ever had that idea. But then again, some of our instructors were ex-veterans

10:30 and they were in there for six years or however many years they'd signed on for, and they had that experience. They must have felt it themselves. But they couldn't relay that to their diggers and we certainly weren't going to talk about the futility of it all – you know, "What does this all mean?" We weren't really that game. A bit naive perhaps, it was difficult one there. And you know, while we thought we were going to make the most of it, but

11:00 the chances of you doing over there was a bloody sight more real than poncing around in Australia in greens.

What sparked your interest in the Medical Corps?

When I looked at all the things that were available … it was funny. Everyone put in for small ships "Hello, we can ride around on some prissy little barge or something. This is the way to go." But I went to the … in the second

11:30 or third week of recruit training I went to the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] for something. Now I can't even tell you what that was all about. No, I do remember. I got chicken pox. The lot of us got chicken pox. Not bad, and we had to go and see … and there were these two corporals there in the RAP, and they were nice blokes, real nice blokes. One of them had been just doing

12:00 his last couple of months. He'd been to Vietnam, and this other young fella; and I went in and there it is – just like my laboratory. There's chemicals and potions and lotions and things up around the walls, and I'm going, "Hey, hey, this could be all right." So I asked them, and they said, "Yeah," and told me what you had to do to go in; and I said, "Well this'll do me, I'll apply for medical. I'm going to learn something and it could hold me in good stead when I come out",

12:30 because like the infantry there's more scope from medical than there is for a machine-gunner or a rifleman when you finish your National Service. So that was the reason. These two corporal medics in Singleton, they really let me go right into the RAP when I showed an interest. They said, "Come in and have a look," and I thought, "This smells a bit like my laboratory, here's a bit like my laboratory here." And because of my agricultural science I knew chemistry and I knew physics a bit, so I thought, "This is the way to go here,"

13:00 so that's what triggered me.

Did they say anything detrimental about taking that option?

I … if they did, I can't remember. But if they did it certainly didn't deter me. I thought, "No, no, this is the way to go." They were pretty laid back and I said, "Who's in charge of you blokes," and they said, "Oh, a doctor comes in. If we can't handle the case we have a doctor from Singleton comes in. And there's a big RAP on the base and if we can't handle the case we just send them around there."

13:30 And I thought, "Gee, these blokes haven't got a great deal of people standing over them." And everyone's friendly to a medic. Everyone loves a medic, because they dunno when they're going to need you. And there's more to it than just handing out prophylactics; and I thought, "Hmm," and they had a bit of rank. And I thought, "Hmm, they got that you know, they're only … this is the way to go." Bewdy. But just because you applied

14:00 for that does not mean you're going to get it. But I remember being dragged into the auditorium – the amphitheatre type thing they had – and they were talking about Corps Training there, and this big Dutch major got up there. I'm sure his name was Halsing, Major Halsing, and he got up, and I remember him saying about those applying for infantry, "No matter what corps you apply for, if we want ten folds of infanteers, we'll have ten folds of infanteers!"

14:30 And that really made me think, you know, "Here we go. This may not be as cut and dried as I thought." But they must have been short of medics. So that was what sparked the interest in the Medical Corps. I thought, "I'm gonna learn something here."

What do you recall … do you recall what your second and third choices were?"

15:00 Small ships and … ahhhm … engineering … but there was a field of engineering … surveying, yeah, field Surveying, because I thought I could learn something there. I didn't want to know about Infantry in any way, shape or form. So it was medical, then small ships – because that'd

15:30 have to be a lurk. Everyone put down for small ships – everyone! And yeah, engineering and I ticked surveying and something else because I thought that'd get me out in the field. But I mean, thinking back … but anyhow, Medical Corps was it.

So, that was approved?

16:00 Yes, it was approved.

What happened then?

What they did was that they just sat you around in a room, the day it'd all come through, and they just

started off in alphabetical order and told everyone what corps they got. And there were only two of us in the whole of A Company who got Medical Corps. A fellow from Coffs Harbour way. He got it too.

16:30 But he got more Administration than actual medicine, as such. I was relived as. I thought, “You bloody bewdy, this’ll do me. I'm in.” No-one got small ships by the way – no-one. And those that apparently did were those that … one bloke I heard of who wasn’t with us but who I met on small ships, I said, “How did you get that, you’re a Nasho [National Service soldier],” and he said, “Oh, I was a shipwright by profession.” So he went to small ships.

17:00 **Could you actually do anything if you got something you weren’t happy with?**

Yes, but it was very hard to change. I remember there was one bloke with us who was a baker. He was from around Toronto way, you know, up around the southern shores of Lake Macquarie. And they put him in catering corps and he went ballistic. He went on about how he'd been doing that for so long.

17:30 He wanted to drive a truck. He wanted to get out of that : “Oh, I’ve been doing that – I’ve been doing the same bloody thing – I don’t want to be a cook,” and you know. And they said, “Well, you can’t change until you go to that corps,” and I dunno whether he went. I think he might’ve gone to Puckapunyal. But he was gonna leave, he was gonna go AWOL. He was gonna go ballistic.

18:00 He was a tall, slim bloke. I cannot think of his name … but I can’t think of his name. But he was going to give them the big flick. But I don’t know what happened to him. I’ve never struck him again. But yeah, that was your only course of action. You had to turn up at your corps training and then change if you wanted it. But I was happy. I was posted to Healesville in Victoria. Where the? I soon found out.

18:30 **Well tell us – tell us about Healesville.**

Well, first they sent you home for a week, and then you were allowed to drive your car down. So I drove my car down and found Healesville in Victoria. And it was a beautiful town, only some forty k’s or so outside Melbourne. And we were staying in tents. I drove up and I could park on the grounds.

19:00 And we were in these tents that were up on floorboards, and they had this old mansion house where the officers stayed and the classrooms and that were; and I thought, “This is pretty schmick. We might be living in tents, but they’re pretty good bloody tents.” And those from Victoria that I met were … you know, if you lived in Melbourne you could turn up at eight o'clock and go home at five o'clock. But all these blokes were

19:30 studying being medics, you know, so they were all doing the same thing. And of course the course wasn’t starting for two weeks or ten days or something and we weren’t doing anything, so the got us painting garden seats. So we’re there, filling in time until the course started. And some of the blokes were a week before and after us in finishing theirs, for some strange reason. I believe they all went in on the same day, or roundabout, but I think getting people there from Western Australian and Queensland

20:00 and other ports of call – but wherever they were from, getting them there wasn’t … anyway, we were out there painting garden seats and doing things and we were there for the best part of three months. But it was cold. And it was the first time I'd ever seen snow; and there was a light plane actually crashed with about four doctors on it. And they had us walking about the bloody snow looking for this light plane that crashed. They had another army group – a regular army group

20:30 from Melbourne somewhere. They actually found it, and they were all deceased. But yeah, we were on a ten minute truck ride and then we were walking through bloody snow. It was amazing. I'd never seen it before then. We were living in tents but I didn’t really feel the cold much, and the food was great; and the beer was cheap, and you could … Healesville, the town, it was great. It had a movie theatre,

21:00 and you could knock off work and just go into town. It had a great pub and nice looking people in the town. And Healesville National Park was right at the end – so instead of going right down the end and paying your fee to go in, you could just jump over the fence. There was trout fishing there, but I didn’t do any. But one of the blokes – I think he was the CO [Commanding Officer]. He used to wander down through the bush. He had his own way of getting through the Healesville fence, and he used to fish for the trout in the rivers there. And I used to follow him down and watch him.

21:30 And that was a nice part of the world. Cold, but nice part of the world. And we had a few function in Melbourne. I met my Dad – he went down for the Melbourne Cup. I met my Dad down there in '69 and yeah, a few people in Melbourne. I'd go and have the weekend off and I'd go and stay. And that’s where I really started to get close to a few mates who are still mates to this day.

So how many of you started the course at that point?

22:00 Thirty-five to forty. The was what they called the medical orderlies course. They taught you first aid and how it went together. We didn’t learn firearms or anything at all really.

22:30 yeah, it was mostly first aid and field work, because that’s … to be in the battalions you virtually had to go through there first, and then you'd be assigned as a battalion medic or something. The next step was the medical assistants course that they did at the hospital – the military hospitals. But at that stage we didn’t know if we were going to go there.

23:00 **What did the field work involve?**

That was mainly running around the bush, making out … one day you'd be the patient with a broken leg or a broken arm or whatever, and you'd have to be bandaged up and looked after and got back to the hospital in the least time as possible. And you'd have to work out and tell the doctors what you know, the vital signs and all this type of thing. Yeah, it was pretty good.

23:30 We were running around the bush a bit and you know, the bush was nice and handy right around us. It was a bloody pleasant place at Healesville, except that it was bloody cold.

So, the more training you did, you felt like you'd made a good decision?

I did, I did. Especially Healesville, because the tucker was great. Especially compared to what we had at recruit training. And it was a good mob of blokes. Some of them had come from a medical background.

24:00 We had a pharmacist there, and blokes that sort of knew their way around a bit too. They had done more medical training than I had. All I had done was a bit of medical training for the surf clubs, really, which I had played on a bit to get to Medical Corps in the first place. But no, it was pretty good, and that's where we started to bond with each other and make a few mates.

Did you feel you had a natural inclination to that sort of work?

24:30 More so than infantry I think. But yeah, I think so. I could sort of assess the situation. I wasn't sort of a panic person. I could assess it and think about it, which was sort of what they needed. Yeah, I thought I could handle that situation quite well. It was a little bit different for some, but we didn't do too bad.

What we those tents like?

Not too bad. We had one bloke who disappeared from our tent. There

25:00 were only three of us in a tent, and the other fellow was a pharmacist – a qualified pharmacist. Peter Corleone. He worked in the pharmacy, after hours. So you know, he'd lob at eight o'clock in the morning, just as we'd have the parade at half past eight. It was office hours mate. It was gentleman's hours. And he'd lob up there, and I was the only one in the tent because the other bloke had disappeared. We didn't know what happened to him.

25:30 I don't know whether he went AWOL or got a bit crook or what. He just disappeared. Or the duck-shoved him somewhere. I don't know where, but it wasn't in our group at Healesville. So I was the only one in the tent and they'd still have tent inspections, so the other beds weren't being used. But I'd just sweep it out and look after it and … the pharmacist would could in next morning, and he'd still have to have a certain bit of gear in his tent, and I'd have it all ship shape and neat and everything.

26:00 And he'd bring me black jellybeans from the pharmacy – the special glucose jellybeans from the pharmacy. And yeah, I'd get a packet of jellybeans a day. And yeah, that was pretty good. He was a good bloke. He was a good bloke. But yeah, they were good beds, good army beds and the tent was good. Even if it was raining they were good solid tents and up off the ground on floorboards. I didn't mind them, no, I didn't mind them. Again, as I say I was only twenty one too you know. I would like to be on them now.

26:30 **Was any of the training at that stage made relevant to Vietnam? Were instructors talking about particular types of situations you might encounter that were specific to Vietnam?**

Yes, yes. It was all directed towards that. That's what it was. And if it was relevant to Australian conditions then it was the tropics. There was no thought that we'd have to be doing it in

27:00 cold or snow or whatever. It was all … you know, they showed us how medivac [medical evacuation] worked. Even brought in choppers and showed us how a medivac worked. And that was interesting to say the least. Yeah, it was all directed towards military service in Vietnam. And by then we knew we were going. We were told that once we got to this stage and went on and passed the next stage then you're on.

And how was that sitting with you?

27:30 Well, again I thought that if I was going to go then I was going to make the most of it, and I'll do the best I can to look after myself. Again, I was glad I was Medical Corps. But I still could have been put out to a battalion. I could have been put out anywhere. I didn't realise how it was going to unfold later.

So that course, you said it was about three months?

About three months, yeah.

And where did that lead to?

28:00 Well, I was posted … well, they say they took the top … you had to get a certain amount of marks and then you went on to the next stage. That's what they told us but I don't know whether that was right or wrong. Anyway, the top half of the class then went on to become Medical Assistants, which means you had to do another eight or ten weeks. I got Ingleburn in Sydney – the military hospital at Ingleburn. I

did eight weeks and that was fairly intensive. That course then, was with the army nurses, so it was mixed.

28:30 **Tell me more?**

There's a photo here of that class, somewhere. And that was pretty good. It was only two hours from home and every weekend you got off; and they said, "You're going to get five weeks off over Christmas, you know." My eyes lit up. And I thought this was pretty good because I had a girlfriend, a steady girlfriend of a year or so, by then.

29:00 **So the nurses were out of bounds?**

They were out of bounds … but gee, I'd love to track some of those down. Some of those girls were just bloody nice. One girl there … Private Paterson – I can't remember her name. A robust lass. We used to arm wrestle. I think I beat her once. Every morning we'd get down and have an arm wrestle. The morning I beat her I think she was hung over

29:30 but she was … I wonder whatever happened to Patto and a few of those girls. But they'd probably signed on for three or six years, so we were trained by them and doctors and senior nursing staff. It was in the classroom and the operating theatre and the RAP. No field work. No field work at all, because once you got there you knew you were destined for the hospitals. Yeah, you were going to the hospital.

30:00 **And how did that make you feel?**

I was not undelighted about that, because the nursing sister and the sergeant were our instructors there, and they'd both been back from the war. They told us all about it and what to expect. Our eyes lit up and we thought, "Yeah, this mightn't be too bad at all." This looked interesting. We were learning. It made the brain

30:30 work again, and we had some weekends where we had to do essays and hand in reports and things like that. It was fairly 'on'. It was like being back in college and it was full on. Some of the nurses struggled with it a bit, so we used to help out and write a few pages of notes for other people at times … but that was … we were all good friends.

31:00 **So it was a combination of theory and practice?**

Yes, and time in the operating and all. We went in to see some surgery being done, and yeah, it was good.

How did you go with the gorier stuff?

I … well, surgery is not overly gory. You open it up and it's controlled. It's different to field work and gunshot wounds and things like that where …

31:30 But it was fairly controlled and I wasn't too bad with that. And I was interested, having a bit of an interest in anatomy, one way and another. I think the most goriest thing I saw in the first few weeks was a couple of appendectomies. It got to the stage where you could practically do them yourselves … under different circumstances. But then a couple of soldiers came in with fairly bad … there

32:00 was a couple soldiers in a car accident and compound fractures of the femur and other things I witnessed … another fellow was operated on. He lost his leg in Vietnam and it got infected, so he was an amputee below the knee, and it was above the knee, and I saw all that being done. But you know, it sort of went up my mind that this was what

32:30 I chose to do and I had to get in and learn. But really, they weren't the gory things. They were controlled.

What aspect of the new stuff that you were learning and dealing with there did you enjoy the most?

More the medicines and the drugs. What went with what and why. The chemistry came back into it then and I found that relatively easy and

33:00 I enjoyed it. That part of it was good. The First Aid part of it we'd done earlier and that was useful but … and the other diseases which people forget, you know, like malaria, which was a big thing. Although you had to take primaquine and chloroquine and dapsone and things like that, and they frowned very much on … in some parts it was a chargeable offence if you came down with malaria. Getting into the intricacies of all that, your Anopheles mosquitoes and all that.

33:30 That was the biology part of it too, because that was a part of it I liked, and I found that enjoyable because that was something I was interested in. So it didn't become much of a chore for me. So, I was fairly laid back doing that. It was fairly good.

How many of the blokes from Healesville ended up being there with you?

Well, they halved us off. I think there were about twenty. About ten of us

34:00 went to Ingleburn, the other ten odd went up to Two Mill Hospital in Brisbane. Yeah, they did their

course up there. A similar course, but Brisbane. Most of those from New South Wales and Victoria went to Sydney and most of those from Northern New South Wales and Queensland went to Brisbane. That was good of them, and we thought, “Ah, there is a heart, see.”

34:30 So that was pretty good. And there were quite a few Sydney people, and you know, they just went home at night unless we had lectures in the evening. Which we did at the end there. Not that we ran behind, but I think they just decided to pump a bit more into us – which was fine. We used to go home Friday, and be in the bottom hotel at half past five on a Friday. And I wouldn’t go back – I wouldn’t

35:00 leave here till five o'clock and get there eight o'clock on the Monday morning. Monday morning I'd drive down. A commuter. Yeah, no, it was pretty good. I enjoyed that.

Were you starting to get particularly close to any of the blokes you were going through with?

Yeah, yeah, there’s a couple of blokes I'm still good mates with; but we were good mates and because two of them were from Victoria they'd come up and spend a fair bit of time

35:30 with me. A couple that went to Brisbane that I was friendly with in Healesville, they got to Brisbane, and if they were travelling back at all they'd call and come and stay at Mum and Dad’s, because it was about half way between Melbourne and Brisbane; and Dad said he'd often walk out and there'd be a couple of diggers laying on the floor there, and Dad’s get 'em up and make 'em breakfast and

36:00 we … we had a real good family, and those who lived further afield, from South Australia and a few from West Australia who couldn’t get home, then I dragged them up and they stayed at Mum and Dad’s. And I had my girlfriend there and we all went out and we lined up some girls and all go dancing. And we wouldn’t get back into the jolly green giant outfit until you know, early Monday morning.

Where would you go dancing?

Oh, they had some great dances. One week we'd probably go to the surf club

36:30 or something and we'd stomp around. And then there'd be … not so much old time dancing and such, but there'd be some old time dances in some of these … new vogue or what you like to call it, where you could actually dance with your partner and you know, hold a bit close and that type of thing. They were probably some of the other nights. And these blokes loved that. They thought, “How good’s this?” Friendly people around and plenty of girls around, and my girlfriend Carol, she

37:00 had sisters and you know, other peoples' sisters and friends; and you know, we had a great group. A good group of folk.

So the green monster hadn’t got in the way of your relationship at that stage?

No, no it hadn’t. The jolly green giant had, you know, we played both. I played their game and I was allowed to play mine.

37:30 **How did you feel about being in uniform at that stage? Did you feel pretty good in uniform?**

Yeah, but I … look, I was proud to be in the army, mainly because of Dad and Grandpop. I ran into a little bit of trouble one day by turning up in my uniform on the Friday afternoons , and Dad all the time would meet down at the bottom hotel. And you know, you were still in your greens because you wouldn’t get changed

38:00 and as soon as they said, “Go,” you'd have your bag in the car and you were gone, mate. They'd say, “Righto boys, you can knock off now,” and mate, I had the mini cooper cranked and I'm heading out past the Crossroads Hotel at a great rate of knots. But I got in there one day and got a barrage from a few drunks about the war; and then after that I'd just slip out of my green shirt and … in those days there were a few blokes still wearing the army pants, and you'd just slip another shirt on

38:30 and make sure your beret wasn’t in the way; but you know, that was just a bit of niggling from a few drunks, and they were certainly put in their place by other people I knew there. But you know, no, that was their problem. It wasn’t really my problem. But they could tell. You know, we had the really short hair and it wasn’t hard to realise that you were a Nasho. You'd have army boots at times but yeah, we got away with

39:00 that. It was fine, yeah, it was fine. You just had to be a little bit careful about what time of night you left.

Was there an assessment at the end of your time at Ingleburn?

Yes, you had to go before the CO at the time. He asked you a number of questions to pass you, and you had to do a full exam – a full exam. And to see, you know, as long as you passed that you went onto your next stage.

39:30 The twelve months was not up by then. I'd only been in then … it was only six months I'd been in by then, and we were let off for our Christmas break; then we had to go back for a bit over a month after Christmas – nearly two months after Christmas – and then we got a posting, an Australian posting. Not straight to Vietnam, which was ridiculous, but as

40:00 it turned out, I'm glad that it turned out the way it did. But from there I was posted to 11 Field Ambulance at Wacol in Queensland, which thrilled me to the back teeth. I would have rather stayed in Ingleburn and worked in their hospital there, but 11 Field Ambulance was virtually a holding unit for Vietnam. And when they wanted you, that's what they'd draw you from.

40:30 But what were we going to do up there? What were thirty off medics going to do hanging around up there? Not much.

Those two months prior to getting there, where were you then?

I was still in Ingleburn. We were finishing our course. It was fairly laid back then. We had finished our course and had passed and were just waiting to go up to 11 Field Ambulance at Wacol.

41:00 **Do you recall how well you went in that assessment at Ingleburn?**

Yeah, I passed. In fact I've got a document over there to say that I passed.

It was a simple pass/fail situation?

Yes.

No further comment made?

No further comment made. But they assessed you. On your army records they would certainly assess you as the top dozen.

41:30 But we were never told that. Later on, when I found my records and how I was assessed. But they asked you a couple of tricky questions that you had to sort of fathom out. And mine just happened to be on one of my great subjects and something I delved into later, which was malaria, and they asked me about the malaria and things like that, and I thought, "Halleluiah," and things like that. But they asked you a lot of questions.

Tape 4

00:30 **So John, there was a bit of time killing to do at Wacol, there?**

Exactly. That's all it was. At one stage there, we're raking leaves during the day. Now, we're talking about twenty qualified medical assists. We're raking leaves, and we say, "What'll we do with the leaves, sergeant?" And he says, "Leave 'em in a pile because the wind'll blow 'em away and that'll give you something to do tomorrow."

01:00 Ridiculous. There was a few things on. We did a few visits to other RAPs at Enoggera and the other area. We did a guard one weekend at the Northern Command Personnel Depot or wherever it is … the Victoria Barracks thing in Brisbane there. And a few of us did a funeral. The first time touched a firearm, which was amusing.

01:30 This old medical doctor had died. He was part of the Australian Medical Corps for years and so they wanted a contingent of medics to do the cortège for him. And we hadn't picked up a rifle since recruit training, so we were … so they sent out this infantry sergeant, this hard nosed, hard-arsed infantry sergeant to try to teach us drill : rest on your arms and reverse and

02:00 march by the coffin, and fire the salute – the rifles. We were hopeless. We hadn't had any drill since recruit training, whereas infantry blokes had done it all the time; and this sergeant was absolutely beside himself. He yelled, he screamed, he raged, he had a week to do it. But we were hopeless, absolutely hopeless. But they took us along and we did this funeral, and instead of all the rifles going off all together, they were like, "Bang-bang-bang-bang," and "Bang-bang … bang …. bang-bang," and we couldn't get these blanks off at the right time;

02:30 and as we were slow-marching one of the wags that was with us started to sing the Jose Feliciano song, 'Come On Baby Light My Fire', as the coffin's being … and of course we started to chuckle a little bit. Unbeknownst to the other people that were there, here's these soldiers slow-marching with rifles, trying to hold back a little bit of laughter. We

03:00 didn't know this gentleman, I can only look back on it now, but yeah, that was probably the most interesting thing we did in the three months before we were sent to Kununurra.

You better tell us about Canungra then, because a lot of people found that pretty tough?

Canungra was tough. I wasn't as fit as when I went in, because this was

03:30 nine or ten months later and we just had been having a good time really. I hadn't been doing much, I hadn't been playing football because I was in the army. I wasn't as fit, and all of a sudden they wanted us to read maps, they wanted us to carry weapons, they wanted us to strip down an M60 machine gun –

give us a break. We had to shoot these things and we had to go back and live in the bush.

04:00 We were kept up all night. We had to crawl under these wires while they're firing live rounds over us. We had to jump off towers and we had to swim creeks; we had to run everywhere. You know, we were only doing a two week course – the infantry did a three week course but they got one day off in the middle of it I think. We never had that because we were doing the two weeks. But we found it tough and demanding and they really stuck it into you.

04:30 They're used to infantry going through. But we're a lot of medics, not as good as infantry. We had a couple of navy blokes and officers went through. We were what they called 'pogos' [person not involved in contact] – we weren't frontline soldiers, and the sergeants there thought we were the most hopeless people on earth. They'd say, "If you don't listen you'll all die!" And we're starting to think, "This is a bit tough," but we knew where we were going. We were going to a hospital. We weren't going to be running around the scrub. But we endured it,

05:00 we got away with it. We got bashed a bit, but I remember, you had lectures at night and then you got up early and you had to run everywhere, and it was physically demanding. On our way back to Wacol in the back of a truck there was I think about eight or nine of us from our particular group; and we went to sleep sitting in the back of a truck driving from Canungra to Wacol – just sitting there bobbing up and down, asleep.

05:30 So that was an interesting fortnight, but it definitely was tough. Especially when it comes to this map reading and stuff. Although I knew me way around a map, some of these blokes didn't. We were put into groups and we all suffered a bit, having to carry M60s and things like that. But we did it. We did it. But we found it bloody tough.

How did you regard yourself then, in comparison to front line solders?

06:00 We knew they had a job to do, and they had a fair bit of respect for us, because they knew, as I said before, they never knew when they might need a medic. And then they started, because we were qualified, they called their medico's 'doc', so you were all, "Doc, this," and "Doc, that," so that made you feel a little bit … you know, pretty good. All medics were known as 'doc', which related to the fact that their unit medic was the only doc they had. So that was pretty good, yeah, that

06:30 was pretty good.

Did you consider yourselves in the Medical Corps a little bit of an 'elite'?

Yes. We knew we were going to be paid a lot more – well, more – and we had a lot more training. I think there was only one corps training longer than the one we did, and that was Intelligence. I think that was a bit over

07:00 **What did your dad think about you being in the medics?**

He didn't mind it all. He said he knew quite a few doctors in his era that

07:30 had bloody near served on the front line, just with a bit of canvas over them and the light of a tilly lamp, you know. It was a different era. But I think he was a bit relieved, and I know mother was definitely relieved when I was posted to Vung Tau hospital. Little did she know.

When did you find out exactly where you'd be going?

Once we got to Canungra and we got back to Wacol they made the announcement that we were going to Vietnam. Just because you went

08:00 to Canungra, well, you had to that first, but we didn't really know when; and I was back there and some of the blokes had gone, but I was the last of our little group to go, and they said to me, "You know, you've got to be down to Eastern Command Personnel Depot at South Head the week after next. You've got a week and a half at home, and then you've got to report," and not knowing the date you were going to go, because they used to keep that a bit of a secret – so you wouldn't tell

08:30 anyone and so it wouldn't get back to the Save Our Sons movement.

So what did you do with that time?

I went home. Drove home, drove home, and got engaged. My girlfriend Carol had been with me four, three or four years by then. She wanted to get engaged while I was … so I thought, "Yeah, well this is fair enough." So off to Diamond Traders in Sydney we went, and I think my mother came too. We bought the engagement ring

09:00 and had our photographs taken and had a bit of an engagement party and … yeah, so still wasn't sure exactly when I was going, because Eastern Command Personnel Depot at North Head … that's just up from Doyle's Restaurant. It's near the gap. Hair was playing in town and we all went in to see [the musical] Hair,

09:30 and the greatest of views, and what did we do all day: just sat around in the sun and waited for the call

to do. And you know, I came down with the flu, and I was the last of our little group of about seven to go; and I got the flu and they said, “You know, you won’t be going on the Wednesday, you may as well go recover at home from the flu.”

10:00 And on the Thursday morning I was packing my dilly bag to get carted off to Wyong Railway Station and they said there'd been a change of plans and that I'd be flying out at nine o'clock that night. I said, “I’ve just told my family I'm coming home,” and they said, “Well you’ve got a couple of phone calls. Let 'em know you’re not.” And I said, “Are you sure,” and they said, “As far as we’re concerned we’ll let you know fully

10:30 at three o'clock this afternoon.” And I'm going, “This just does not look good.” See, I'd planned to be home that weekend. There was another party planned. There was people coming around. But three o'clock came and I walked in the door and they said, “You’re on the nine o'clock plane tonight.” I was allowed to make two phone calls. So I rang my fiancé Carol at work, and I rang Mum.

11:00 And we were then shot into a room and I think we had a couple more injections, and the doctor looked over us; and then we packed out bags and shot off to the airport at about nine o'clock at night.

What on earth can you say to your fiancé who’s expecting you home?

Well, she just burst into tears. Mum started crying. They were different.

11:30 Carol was at work and Mum was at home, but she rang Dad. Because this was all I could do. I can’t speak to Dad … “Can we ring you?” No. Yeah, that was a bit hard, that was a bit hard. But remember, the adrenaline was starting to pump then. You know, the adrenaline had started to pump. So I thought,

12:00 “OK, bugger this dicking around; if I'm going I don’t want to go at nine o'clock at night. Get me on a plane and get me out of here. I want to go now.” They said, “No, the planes …” because we didn’t really know what was happening in the next step, and the Save Our Sons movement were big time picketing Sydney Airport. That’s why they flew you out at that time of the night; but as it coincided with other things that happened later on that night it all fell into place.

12:30 **Why was it that your girlfriend wanted to get engaged before you went?**

I think she felt more secure or felt better about me going over there knowing that we were engaged, you know, “My fiance’s in Vietnam,” and I felt good about, “My fiance’s at home,” and it gave you something to cling to, something to sort of say,

13:00 “I’ve got more than Mum and Dad at home, I’ve got my fiancé, and I’ve got a new life starting.” And I believed too, that Carol thought too, that I would be a bit more aware of my surroundings and I wouldn’t do anything too silly regarding the war – nothing I would do privately – because I had a fiancé. Someone else to be responsible for, sort of.

13:30 That’s what we spoke about later on as the reasons. But no, yeah, so instead of being home I waiting to go.

Those last few hours at the personnel depot, what sort of travel notifications and advice about what to wear were you given?

Ah, it was strange situation. You had to pack your little dilly bag. But in it you had to have a civilian shirt.

14:00 You had to have a civilian shirt that when you landed at Singapore, because they weren’t going to be involved in the Vietnam War, we all got out at the air port there where they gave you breakfast – they couldn’t have soldiers there. So you got out in GP [General Purpose] boots and a civilian shirt. Of which I had this old Hawaiian shirt, this brightest Hawaiian shirt that I could find … because they told

14:30 us to take the civilian shirt, I had this Hawaiian shirt I put on before we landed at Singapore. That was one of the main things. Plus they inoculated you plus they gave you a bit of a brainstorming session with you about what they expected of you and what you could say to your relatives back home. Then they trucked us off to the airport. But Mum, my parents, had got onto my uncle and aunty, and my uncle

15:00 at that time had just finished or was still working at Qantas as a radio operator. So my auntie and uncle were there at the airport to meet me, and so I could see a few friendly faces among the Save Our Sons and a few placards and things. So here’s my aunty and uncle. Now that just blew me away, absolutely just blew me away. But you know, you didn’t have time to linger – they just virtually marched you in: “Come on private,

15:30 come on, come on, come on,” so I wouldn’t have spent five minutes with them before I was ushered into the back room where we all sat down before being put aboard the plane. Because it was military … it was a Qantas plane but it was hired out to the military. There were no civilian passengers except for a pilot and a few of the hosties. And we thought, “Hello,

16:00 we’re going to Singapore,” because we had the funny shirts, and away we flew, not knowing what was next.

What did you think of the presence of the Save Our Sons people at the airport when you were flying out?

Look, they were kept away from us because we were in the back rooms and everything, and I was quite surprised they put us through the airport part where I could see my aunty and uncle. Look, I had no problem with it. I think they had a right to do what they did because they believed in it, and I believed in it as well, so good luck to them. Good on 'em. Pity there wasn't bloody more of 'em.

I'm assuming – I'm making the assumption that was the first time you'd been on a plane?

16:30 Oh, a biggie style plane. I'd been on a few small ones before – a few Cessnas and a Tiger Moth. I'd had a couple of drives in a Tiger Moth. That was a gift my parents had given to me earlier. My twelfth birthday was a Tiger Moth flight.

But first time out of Australia though?

First time out of Australia, yes, yes, yes. It was only four days before my twenty second birthday so I was regarded as one of the older

17:00 ones there. But it was different. We all got on and the plane was only … I knew there'd be more coming than just the East Command Personnel Depot. I knew there were more must have been coming from somewhere, because when we got on, the plane was only half-full. That was a bit strange. We were going to take off and be in Singapore in a few hours, so we had to sit back and relax … we knew they weren't going to serve alcohol. Bit of a bummer, 'cause some people said they do and some people said they don't.

17:30 So we flew for about and hour and then the plane's starting to land again. What's all this about? No-one told us. Down we land and we're in the back part of this airport and God only knows where were are. Didn't have a clue. Townsville we were. And on comes another sixty odd bloody troops. I found out it was Townsville because I asked one of these blokes, "Where are we?" and he said, "We're in Townsville." So they gets themselves settled, and we're there the best part of an hour, and off

18:00 goes the plane again. Singapore here we come. By that time it's a bit after eleven or getting towards midnight. The plane's up for another two hours and down we come again. Where the bloody hell are we know. It can only be Darwin. And Darwin we were. And we're there another hour or so and then we had to put our civilian shirts on and off we go to Singapore.

18:30 So we landed at Singapore and had to put on our civilian shirts and went out this sumptuous breakfast. Aah. And then the plane refuelled, and we were about an hour at Singapore with me in my Hawaiian shirt, and then yeah, up we went again and landed at Ton San Nhut Airport in Ho Chi Minh City. Or Saigon as it was known as in those days.

19:00 **Give us all the sort of impressions, images, smells – that first glimpse of Vietnam when you got off the airport at Ton San Nhut?**

Shit ain't it hot. Got down and the plane was … at that stage it was the busiest airport in the world. Aircraft that we'd only dreamed of were coming in and out of there.

19:30 It was absolutely chokkas [chockablock]. They'd got us off the plane in the middle of the tarmac, and remember, we'd left Sydney on the 29th of May, and we landed over there and the adrenaline was pumping. It was, "What's going on here!"

20:00 and they ushered us over to this semi shaded area where they all gave us this little boxed lunch, with some sorta kinda bread, and this sort of filling on it. There was a cake, an orange juice typed substance and an apple. And we had to sit under the wings of these

20:30 planes and wait while they allocated what sort of plane we'd get to where we were being posted. And there were planes coming in, and the smell of the av [aviation] gas, and the noise, and we're just absolutely blown away by this. It was just unbelievable, the air traffic at Ton San Nhut. I was just amazed and blown away, You just wanted

21:00 to do the military crow call, "Farrrq." It was just amazing. And the smell of the av gas, because they're refuelling and there's planes coming in and coming out; they're sitting there warming up and they've got that shimmery haze that you see from the exhausts on these planes. Just absolutely amazing. I'll never forget that.

21:30 And the apprehension on everyone's face …

And on the plane coming in, from say Singapore to Saigon, how was the atmosphere on the plane as you got closer in?

Quiet. No-one was saying too much of anything. Everyone was just so quiet. It was … everyone's trying to look out the windows, and you could see everyone being very, very nervous. The cabin

22:00 crew – they were Qantas planes so they had cabin crew or stewardesses as they were called in those days – they were all … but I mean, no drinks, and we started to think then, and the adrenaline was

really pumping. From when we first left Sydney really, and then with having all these stops. Yeah, but Ton San Nhut. That was a place. That was a place. And that's when you say, "Oh, shit. There really is a war going on here.

22:30 This is not make-believe any more. How much did I listen? How much did I take in."

So you ate your 'play lunch' underneath the wing of a plane …

Yes, yes, with everyone else. There was this mysterious substance on those sandwiches. To this day I don't know what they were. A lot of it … you didn't eat much of it. The apple was done, the juice was done – we were so thirsty.

23:00 And they had these big barrels of juice around so you could get more, but they were these little cardboard box play lunches. But I think everyone was just too excited or too apprehensive or too … to eat much. You know, this was an adventure, this was 'boy's own'. This is real life. We've suddenly got to have

23:30 our wits about us here. And then we were just put in our groups. "Who's going to Vung Tau, who's going to Nui Dat, who's going to …" where we were all going. So yeah, the next thing, we were put on the back of a Caribou and up in the air we went again, to 9 Squadron base at Vung Tau.

24:00 **The back of a Caribou, not being quite as luxurious a trip as a Qantas plane?**

I near shitted myself. Were on these webbing seats and the back of the plane was open – they left the door open, and you're looking out, and it was noisy, and it was cool – because we're up pretty high. And you're looking out and you could see all these bomb craters and you could see all this jungle, and you could see the roads winding underneath, and

24:30 you could see other planes and helicopters down below you and around you. Because we were up fairly high. But it was unbelievable. We had these seat belts on, on this webbing seat. And there was a lot of gear on board. You wouldn't want to do it on your own. Luckily there was a dozen or more of us on that plane, and we thought … "Yeah, yeah, can't we go any higher. Aren't we a bit close to some of this green stuff down

25:00 there? A good shot with a rifle could … you know, that could make this tad interesting." But yeah.

At this stage I imagine the apprehension was great?

It was amazing. It was amazing. You didn't know whether to laugh, cry, what to look at next. It's a feeling that I've never had before and never had since. Absolutely amazing. You're just trying to take in too much. And it's

25:30 your first day … and Christ it's hot. And you know, you sweat, and yeah, it's an amazing feeling. An amazing feeling. 'Cause it was so busy.

And how sort of green and inexperienced did you feel?

I … well, we're certainly what they called Long Timers', because we hadn't even had our first night in country. Experience wise, I thought, "Ah yeah, we've been prepared as good as we can for what we're doing." We were going to a hospital. But if they suddenly said to me, "OK, you're going to be on the front lines in the sixth row," or something, then I would have shitted myself. But I had an idea

26:00 of where I was going and what I was getting myself in for; and I was confident with what I had learnt as far as the medical side of it goes, and going to a hospital, yeah, they're normally in the middle of a big compound and are being looked after fairly well. So I felt fairly comfortable there.

26:30 But I was a little ill at ease about all the rest of it that was going on.

OK, so you landed in Vung Tau …

We did, and that was a busy little airfield too.

27:00 We loaded out and found out who was going to where from Vung Tau. "All those going to the hospital …" we were all on the back of these jeeps; so there was three of us. I didn't know … I only knew one other person that I'd met at the Eastern Command Personnel Depot. There was another person on the jeep going to the hospital too. He was a warrant officer … all of a sudden, rank became unimportant. You know, once it was big time. But all of a sudden you're sitting next

27:30 to a warrant officer and he's never been there either. He's a career soldier but he's never been to Vietnam either, and he's older than you, and he's a bit apprehensive too. And so rank meant nothing. There was no, "Sir," in it. We're on a first name basis. And yeah, we loaded on the back of these long wheel road base Land Rovers. We sat in there on our trip from the airport into an Australian Logistical Support Group,

28:00 which was probably about a ten to fifteen minute drive; and yeah, into the hospital grounds. And that's where you see the local people up first. You're going past the paddy fields and you're going past the people working, and you're going past the oxen. And I'm going, "Hey, this is pretty good, being down at ground level. Gee, I'm feeling a little bit more at ease here that there's no-one racing out trying to shoot

us.” But remember,

28:30 we’re still the middle of a pretty safe compounds there. So we drove through the outskirts of the town and round the side of the town to 1ALSG – the [Australian Logistics] Support Group – through the front gates. And they looked at us and they started to say then, “First Timers? You know, “Long Timers,” you know, because the thing was to count the number of days you had left in the country. And we’re three hundred and sixty four and a wake-up, and there’s no newer than us.

29:00 So yeah, they dropped off a few at sigs [signals] and some at transport and then we were dropped off at the orderly room at 1 Australia Field Hospital, where one of my mates – who knew I was coming over – was there to meet me. And they had a hut and a bed and you had to go in and meet … we didn’t meet the CO that day, we met the orderly sergeant and a few other key people in the orderly room there, and signed our things and

29:30 gave over our paperwork. Then I was escorted by my mate up to my bunk, my room.

How long had your mate been over there?

Two and a half weeks.

So he was a real veteran?

He was, he was. He was going in a shorter time than I was.

What was your mate’s name?

30:00 Dick Chesoni. Yeah, Dick, he’s still a good mate to this day. I think he’s probably the one who lined me up for this. Having been born and bred in Orange.

He dobbed you in did he?

Oh well, yeah, we were good mates. Still are.

OK, so I guess that was about twenty four hours since you left Sydney and you were up there.

No, no, no, no. That would have been about two thirty in the afternoon, but we didn’t get to the airport till about nine o'clock.

So much less than twenty-four hours?

30:30 Yeah. Because we stopped everywhere it was something like a seventeen hour flight, something like that.

Any sort of culture shock when you arrived up there that got you?

Well, just because there were quite a few civilians working at the hospital in their native mai dai dress – the local Vietnamese people. There were quite a few of them running around the place. I was quite sceptical at that stage: “Are they on our side … or?”

31:00 because, you know … but no, it didn’t take long to work out what it was all about. And of course, having people there that had been there for a long time to show you the ins and outs and whatever. But then the normal con jobs came. You know, the guys that had been there for six or eight months, they played the games and play the pranks on you. You know, Tuesday night was one of them – the first day before we got to the line

31:30 and they'd come down to meet you, and they'd say, “Are you interested in going to the dogs,” and I said, “What do you mean,” and they said, “The greyhound races. The Dapto Dogs. Tuesday. Be down here at six o'clock. Everyone gets caught. So be there at six o'clock on Tuesdays and a vehicle will be there to pick you up and take you to the greyhounds – the Dapto Dogs.” So you do turn up

32:00 and to go and of course there’s no such thing. Everyone’s laughing at you for turning up for the Dapto Dogs. A few other things like that they get you with on the first day. No-one’s allowed to tell you and you’re not allowed to tell the next group that comes in. It’s just a joke. But you turn up thinking that you’re going to the greyhound races.

What things did people that had been there before tell you about safety, security, and that sort of stuff?

32:30 Yeah, that was told to us later on in the day by the CO and the RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] and the CSM [Company Sergeant Major]. They got us all lined up and they told us what they expected of us, what to do, what not to do, “Make sure you take your malaria tablets,” and how the hospital functions, what times meals were, what’s off limits, where the nurse’s quarters are,

33:00 where the sergeants mess and officers are; and you know, and what time everything happens. Then we had to report to the ward master, who then gave us a list of things he wanted you to do and a program of where you should be. Your starting orders, you know, and what ward you turn up. So I had the next day off to familiarise me with what was going on and the like

33:30 and then I started the next day.

What sort of facilities were at the hospital there?

I was absolutely amazed. It was a bloody beautiful hospital. It had a medical ward, an isolation ward, a surgical ward, an intensive care unit, a good operating theatre, a triage, and a helipad out the side. It was really set up to be a bloody schmick hospital.

34:00 I was amazed. And a good RAP. It had its own laboratory and the Red Cross unit was there; and they had games and you could write and do things. There was an orderly room, a radio room, and you could go down there and listen to where the contacts were and whether we were getting any casualties. There was a briefing room … and I was absolutely amazed. I think it was a brilliant hospital, absolutely first class.

34:30 The old staff and the nursing sisters we met that day, they were good and they showed you around – because the better you worked the better everything worked. That really was a team. There was a lot of teamwork. And being absolutely squeaky clean. You wanted to toe the line and they put you into medical ward first. They didn't just shoot you into something more harrowing. You did a couple of months medical work there to familiarise you with it, and then they rotated you.

35:00 **What sort of severity of casualty was the hospital at Vung Tau capable of dealing with?**

We could deal with them all. Major head injuries they shifted out to the American hospital at Long Bin – major facial, head injuries – and all the rest we could handle. It was a great team,

35:30 a great team. There couldn't be enough sung about them. That's why we were put there, because we were quite good at our trade, and that's why we were put in the hospital, not out in the field or up at 8 Field Ambulance. We were put there to do a specific job, as we found out.

Where did your job … your job was a medic's assistant. Where did that fit into the hierarchy as far as you duties and responsibilities were concerned?

36:00 Well, we're … because they had some nursing sisters there, we were the nearly equivalent of what I always thought of as a nursing sister. Our responsibilities were way above what a normal nurse could do. You had to clear things with them, and all the nursing sisters were officers, but you know, we could make decisions, we could make judgements, and relay that back to the sisters or the doctors.

36:30 I was fairly happy and amazed how high up the ladder we were taken. They knew we were Nasho's, they knew we knew our job and what to do, and if we didn't have that training then we could pick it up real quick. That was the reason why we were put there, because we could learn real quick, and by gee we had to learn quick at times.

37:00 **What sort of procedures would you be entrusted with?**

Well, you just look up the charts … we'll start off in the medical ward. You'd see what sort of medication they had and you could just go get their medication for them. You could administer the medication for them. It would be all ticked off, of course. We were let to do that. And you could make judgements, you know, if there was something wrong you could go through your nursing sister

37:30 or whatever … but you know you were allowed a bit of leeway there. And that was appreciated because the nursing sisters there, there was a few of them but not a lot of them. So, yeah, that was only in the first couple of months. In the medical unit itself, not so much in the surgical wards – just the medical wards.

38:00 **What sort of cases would you see in the medical ward?**

Oh, there was a lot of malaria; there was a lot of hepatitis – they had an isolation ward down the back, the 'hepo [hepatitis] ward'. They were all good blokes. Most cleared up and some got evacuated back home. Medivacced out. Other cases, there was … quite a number of them had like dysentery

38:30 and that type of related problems. A lot of people developed rashes and other sorts of skin complaints and ailments. They were very, very hard to look after in that environment of hot and sweaty and prickly heat. Foot ulcerations, and yeah, just sort of medical complaints that you get in tropical warfare.

39:00 **So skin infections were a fairly common thing?**

Yeah, yeah. On that point, they needed to come back where they could be treated. It was quite difficult to do that even at the 8 Mil [Military] hospital at Nui Dat. You needed to monitor them, because some of them had to be shipped back home. There was nothing you could do. They'd come out in rashes that just absolutely immobilized some people.

39:30 **What could you do to treat that?**

Oh, there were baths and different things you could soak them, and medications they could apply to their skin. The hygiene was better too. I mean, some of these diggers lived in bloody awful conditions out in the bush all the time. Some of their hygiene was the best they could do. You know, the best they could hope for was to get rained on. You know, but being in stinking, wet clothes … and some of these

blokes their skins were nearly going green. They were nearly going mouldy. It must be hard.

40:00 So we were in an air conditioned environment where we could begin to get them back on track.

What about malaria? What sort of medications did you have for that?

You just had your dapsone, and you know the medications that they had at the time; and you'd just monitor their temperature and you'd normally get them out of it in eight to ten days. But you see, you're supposed to take your anti-malarial tablets every day, and it was

40:30 nearly a chargeable offence sometimes if you got malaria – you had to find out why or whatever, and yeah. There were quite a few who came down with malaria. I think, gee, not matter what, we all suffered at some point with some degree of malaria. A lot of us came down and felt crook, and for years after felt crook with something like that – elevated temperature and the sweats and the headaches and things.

41:00 **The hepatitis cases. Do you know what strain of hepatitis it was?**

Ah, it'd be A or B. But they just went bright yellow and we had to isolate them. They had their own cups. We used to write on them, "Do not drink this or you will die." And you know, a lot of them went for five or six weeks, and that can be highly contagious in a group that's altogether under conditions that are not real savoury. So that was something different.

Tape 5

00:30 I've got shoes on now, so only half the interview's been done barefoot.

Thank goodness for that.

No, it's not a good look.

All right, now you were telling us with the way you'd deal with some of the common problems you'd face in the medical wards; how would you deal with someone who had some pretty serious dysentery at that stage?

01:00 Oh well, a lot of dysentery problems were to do with dehydration, so you'd keep your liquids up to them. There were different formulas and things going around for how bad. The big glucose drips, and the saline drips to keep the fluids into them. The medications they used to 'block them up' for want of a better word. But, some of them were

01:30 fairly severely down with dysentery and the like. Some bad cases. I never thought I'd see it as bad as I did with some of them. You know, quite poor condition.

So how long do you think it took you before you were fairly settled and in the groove in the hospital, working in the medical ward?

I reckon by a month. They used to say that if you haven't got a grasp of it

02:00 by a month then you'd be wondering why. Although we'd had the training, we'd never actually worked and been responsible for it, but you just fitted in. You were a team, and you know, you just went along and did what you did. You got used to your surroundings, your bed, and your room, and your roomies, and what time the bars opened

02:30 and you just got into the groove pretty quick. And remember too, we were, I was just twenty two. And you know, you grasped things a lot better in those days.

When you were getting settled in the hospital what did you … how did the morale of the place strike you?

I was impressed with that. It was good, it was good. See, a lot of the doctors we had over there brilliant. They brought them in as specialists

03:00 and gave them the rank of major or lieutenant colonel; and they sent them to a couple of weekend schools – what they used to call the old 'knife and fork' school. They were more civilians than anything else, and they were quite tolerant of us. I was quite surprised. They weren't military men. They might have got around with the peaked cap and a bit of braid or a few pips on their shoulder, but you'd salute 'em some days and they'd say, "Ahh piss off Macca," you know.

03:30 And we used to do it for a joke. You'd them coming and you'd throw them a salute and they'd … you know. That's the sort of camaraderie we had. And if you didn't walk past them and the RSM – who's a regular soldier who's not there as a medical man but rather to run the unit – if he sees you not saluting an officer, as long as you both had hats on and that sort of thing, then he could right up you. So we used to do it to play the game. Play the game. That's how it was.

04:00 **How did you go settling into your quarters? Can you give us a run through of the area you**

were in and the quarters you were staying in?

Well, I could show you on the laptop. But it was a hut of sixteen folk in it. The windows were pushed up at the ends with a pole and they had a bit of a screen on them. They had a screen door on them. You had a locker and you had your trunk that went underneath your bed.

04:30 And you had a bit of a bookcase, because you had probably been the fourth person who had been in that hut in that particular spot. I had a different spot for a couple of weeks before this one became vacant. You could move to another one as long as you told them, in case they had to wake you up to go on duty or if something happened. And I got in, and I had some good people around me.

05:00 We looked after each other and yeah, it worked out well. I had an aquarium. I went down there and bought a big glass jar, and places over there sold fish and I had an aquarium there. I had photos of my fiancé up, and we had Dick who painted that painting … did a few, actually of me looking through a glass fish bowl and the fish looking back at me. And that hung up there; and I was as comfortable as any soldier. I had a decent bed,

05:30 and as someone moved … you'd go and check out their bed, especially if they moved out and there wasn't anyone coming in for a day or so, you'd go and check their mattress. And if their mattress was better than yours then you'd go and flog it. There was a bit of that going on. I actually finished up with an ex-hospital bed. It wasn't just like a quarters bed, it was one of the first they chucked out from the older hospital, the older part of it before they got the proper hospital beds in.

06:00 And it was a beauty. Yeah, I was quite comfortable.

And it was common for most of the blokes to personalise their spaces?

Oh yeah. Yeah. You had up on the wall how many days you had to go before you left, and you'd colour in that and mark it in every day so it got smaller and smaller. There were a few variants in that.

Such as?

Oh well, there was a naked female on one of them and you crossed out

06:30 the squares until it got to a vital part of the anatomy. That was 'home' time. But there were a lot of variants on that. Some of the blokes – especially the younger ones – had every centrefold from Playboy they could get their hands on hung up around the place. But the group around us didn't tend to do that much. There was some. But nothing … we didn't quite do that as much … but some of them did.

07:00 **Was there any initiation involved?**

No, not really. No, no. Not to that. Other than the Dapto Dogs thing, and a few of the little things like that. But no, we were fairly well into it. And of course, everyone for the first few months was a bit tense and a bit … so, no. But you could get a leave pass and go into town if you wanted. I think that was after the first week

07:30 you could get a leave pass. You could go in at six o'clock and as long as you were back by twenty three fifty nine – a minute to twelve – you were quite … it was easy to run around Vung Tau and go out for a meal and things like that. It wasn't like the poor buggers who were out in the bush every day. We bloody done it bloody easy compared to some of those fellas. Those blokes, I don't know how they did it. I've got bloody good mates who did it and they're

08:00 paying the price now.

Well, we'll talk more about that. But what was Vung Tau like to go out and socialise?

Vung Tau was good. It had a lot of bars and there were a lot of girlie bars, if that's what you're interested in. There were places to get away and few beers. Their beer wasn't too bad – actually a bit better than the Australian beer that came over on the Jeparit. But you know, you could have a whiskey, you could have a Vietnamese meal for not very much money at all. There were places you stayed out of,

08:30 stayed away from – you know, that weren't nice areas. A few of the Australians got bashed and robbed there … and, well. But it was pretty good. And the other thing too you've gotta remember is we were right on the beach. The surf would have been … or the beach, the Vung Tau beach, it would have been three hundred metres away. They had a surf club, which was part of their R&C [Rest & Care]. They had sailboats you could get out, they had surfboards, they had the Badcoe Club which was about another

09:00 hundred metres away. They had a swimming pool and you could get hot chips and tomato sauce. Which a lot of the ones went for RIC – rest in country. They'd go there for about four or five days. They were allowed to do that. And yeah, we had a few things around us that made it quite pleasurable at times. And at times we got some great waves. If there was a typhoon on out at sea and it came up, then we got good waves there. I've come down six foot waves there, not a problem

09:30 at all. So we … and again, we worked three shifts at the hospital. You did seven till three, three till eleven, and then the night shift was eleven till seven in the morning. And I probably would only done six or eight or twelve of those in the whole twelve months I was there. The seven till three – you're down the beach at half past three, unless you've

10:00 had a lot of casualties and you've got a lot of work to do. The three till eleven shift, you'd go down the beach at nine o'clock and wouldn't come home till two o'clock. And at eleven o'clock you've still nearly got time to go to the boozer and have a couple of beers before you go to bed. So, you know … and we had a good boozer. You know, you're allowed quite a bit of beer and unless … sometimes we played up and it got closed on us. The RSM closed it on us because we were going to go on strike.

10:30 **How did you find the locals? You mentioned there were some areas where you couldn't go to because they were dangerous. What other sort of reactions did you find you got from locals?**

Vung Tau wasn't too bad. 1 Australian Logistic Support Group and the American base on there and the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] base were spending a lot of money on the town. They were spending a lot of money in there.

11:00 So they tolerated us quite well. There were a lot of bars and there were a lot of bar girls and things if that's what you wanted. And they tolerated us. We spent a bit of money on food and other things like that. But all in all, the townspeople … if they knew they were going to make a shekel off you, they'd tolerate you, as most countries do.

The bar girls. That wasn't a territory that you were interested in?

11:30 Look, I went with some of the blokes and they went off with the girls, but what they did … I don't know what they did when they went off with them. I can only assume … but yeah, they'd get up and they'd dance and it was a bit of entertainment, and they were playing the latest songs from the US [United States] and other sorts of things. There were normally

12:00 quite a few Americans in there, and it was just somewhere to escape. That's all it was. I know some people who went in every second night. Some people probably went in more than that. You know, I went in and had a few drinks every couple of weeks. But Dick and I and some of my group, we'd try to find somewhere nice to have dinner. There were Korean restaurants; and then you'd go back to the Grand Hotel and there'd be a bloke in there playing a piano. And you'd forget. You'd forget where you were, y'know.

12:30 You wouldn't get too liquored because you had to get back to the base, and there's always someone watching, and you were an easy target. They knew you always had money on you, and you know. So you know, we were always a little bit careful and a little bit wary about where we were and what we were doing. We were there to set a bit of an example too.

Did you directly mix and socialise with the Americans?

There was a signal station at the top of the hill and we got them to come down to our boozer a couple of times. And we went up there. But all we did was eat hot dogs and

13:00 drink Budweiser. You know, we had VB [Victoria Bitter] and Tooheys Flag Ale and Suffolk and Swan. It was all tinned beer. Better than drinking their Budweiser. And their Budweiser was really … you know, it's a bit light. And they'd come down to our boozer and have four or five cans and we'd have to drive them home.

13:30 But yeah, we mixed a bit. And we had a few casualties, a few American casualties come in. We went round … they had a big PX [Post Exchange – American canteen unit] system and we were allowed to use that too. You could get out of your own base and go around to that. And they had a nightclub … I think it was called the Zebra Club. It was on the base. And of course you could go in there, and they had go-go girls and bands, and you know,

14:00 their beer was cheaper. But you could throw in for a bottle of champagne. A lot of it was French champagne. It was fairly good sitting there by the water, sucking it out of a plastic cup. But yeah, we socialised a bit. A few of the 'dust off' helicopter pilots that came in were Americans. You'd meet them on the street and you'd say … I dunno, a lot of them had never seen Australians before and I don't know what language they

14:30 thought we spoke, but you know, they'd drawl, "You guys Arzzies? You don't sound like Arzzies." They had no idea, no idea. A few of the black Americans … I got fairly friendly with a few of those. They were an ostracized race, I can tell you. They weren't given any liberties much at all, but yeah, no, we didn't have a great deal … more the with Kiwis [New Zealanders]. There was lots of Kiwis over there. But yeah, you'd them around a lot

15:00 and you'd get on well with them. But we got on well with everybody, you know. When you're five foot six and seventy kilos, mate, you get on with everybody.

Can you give us a bit of an idea of what the boozer looked like, and how it operated?

Well, the boozer was probably a room of about forty feet by twenty with a bar up the end there; and because you were paid in military payments

15:30 certificates – MPCs – the beer was normally fifteen cents a can – remembering that most of us were only drawing twenty dollars a fortnight. The rest of it we were sending home by direct debit sort of thing to home accounts. And then a week after that, because we were paid fortnightly, it'd go down to ten cents. And then the night before pay night we'd normally have a five cent night. So the MPC, the going rate

was ten cents, but you'd put it up so you

16:00 could have a … But most boozers did that. At times you were only supposed to allocate two or three beers per person per man perhaps. That was the story. But you know, it was normally a bit more than that. And the patients were allocated two cans a night too. So if they did drink because they were too crook … it didn't matter if they were at death's doorstep, they still got allocated their two beers. Sometimes those two beers … I dunno where they went.

16:30 So we had a few beers. There were a few beers floating around.

Who would man the bar?

We had two medical orderlies – Kevvie Hazzard was one bloke, and … just trying to think of the other bloke. But they were there a few months before I got there. Steve somebody … and Kevvie Hazzard was from Orange. He was a butcher in Orange. True story. I don't know where he is now. Yeah, they'd sort of man the bar

17:00 and do the ordering in. But geez, that's be a bit of a cush [easy job], wouldn't it : "What did you do in the war?" "I manned a bar." But I mean, they cleaned it and they ordered in and they cleaned up around the joint too. They were good. They were good. And we had a bit of a boozer committee. We all worked behind the bar when we had to, and did our thing and sat around – like in that photo I showed you where we're sitting around

17:30 in that arm chair sort of thing. We had a darts room out the back that we painted up in all the psychedelic colours and a bit of graffiti … which we got in trouble about. But that's another story. Yeah.

Was there any music in the boozer?

Yeah. Normally we had a radio going on, with Armed Forces Radio. But there was no juke box as such. I heard somebody who did have. The Americans did have. I heard one of the Australians knocked one off from somewhere

18:00 but we didn't have one. We just had the radio going. But sometimes you just wanted to go in there and sit down a grab a beer with your mates or stand at the bar and have a couple. It was a pleasant place, but it was part of our complex. You used to walk downstairs. Our accommodation was up there and you'd walk down a bit of a hill and down a couple of concrete stairs and the boozer was there and the mess hall was there. Then you'd walk straight on past that level to the hospital. Yeah, it was a good set up.

18:30 **So, alcohol was a big part of the culture?**

It was. Some people I knew there, they were drinking ten cans a night. And we had our moments there. You know, if on a Friday night and you weren't working Saturday, or if … you'd get into it. You'd get into it. But a lot of the time it'd be triggered by something. You knew something had happened or if someone had passed away, or if you felt a bit

19:00 yeah .. but we were lucky that we had a fair supply.

So as a therapeutic sort of …

Yeah, well … I believe it did. I believe it did. I believe there would have been a lot more trouble if we didn't access to something that could take your mind off things. It was only beer. You could buy spirits at the PX and some people who didn't drink beer, they'd go for Scotch.

19:30 **What was the mess like?**

It was good, good. You know, being in a hospital, that's where the best rations go. You know, the hospital is the thing. It's a sacred area. They get the best of everything. If there's rations then you've got to feed the sick, and luckily there's those who look after the sick. So no, I never found it much of a problem. A lot of it was American rations

20:00 but our blokes did fairly well with it. I had no complaints. You'd get prawns and shrimpy types of things, but no, no, they could do all right. No, I've got no complaints with the food over there. Going into town you could get salad rolls and things, but that's another story … the 'hogey rolls', or 'hepatitis rolls' as we used to call them. You'd send somebody in

20:30 in a vehicle just to buy a dozen hepo rolls, and they'd come back and you'd all sit around the con-acs [convalescent accommodation], because you're not supposed to take booze away from the boozer. Every time they'd give you a beer they'd open it for you, so you know, sometimes they'd forget or something, and you'd take them back and sit near our lines or sit near the con-acs, like you see us there in those photos, staring out at the South China Sea and sucking on a beer.

So, were they dangerous, the hepo rolls?

21:00 Well, none of us got hepatitis. But because being French they made beautiful bread. Being colonized by the French, they had French sticks, and they had cucumbers like we'd never seen before, and they had greens and things with bamboo shoots, and stuff that's just been coming in here in the last fifteen years here. But that's what they lived on, and it was just made magnificently. Slithers of pork – they was they

used to dry their pork. It was just amazing and it didn't cost much at all, you know, twenty cents or twenty five cents or something.

21:30 You get the duty driver or ask someone to go in and they'd sell them off the street stalls. They'd line them up in these bags and you'd come back and … it was a bloody treat to get a hepo roll. And they still sell 'em to this day.

Were there any other facilities on base for recreation?

We played darts and we had a rugby union side, and there was always someone walking about with a cricket bat and a ball,

22:00 and you'd find a cleared space somewhere; but we had the beach. The beach was just over the back. I used to run on the beach, or I'd sneak out and go fishing with the locals. You know, that was my thing. If I could be near that beach, that was really what kept a few of us … and a couple of the blokes, especially Dick from Orange, I taught him to surf. He hadn't done much of it. I taught him to surf, and we'd go running on it,

22:30 and we'd go up through the wire – right out of the area, where you shouldn't have been. And the fishermen would be bringing in their nets – dragging them into the beach. And you'd go out and help them. We got a bit game doing that. But also, outside the surf club, on the tower, these blokes set up there with .30 calibre machine guns, and if any Vietnamese boats – you know, their fishing boats –

23:00 and if any of them came to close to the thing they'd brass 'em. You'd be out having a surf and then suddenly, brrrrrr, they'd let the boats know they'd come in too close, into the exclusion zone. That was handy. Especially if it was calm and you'd taken one of their little yachts out. We used to go out and hassle them, yeah, we took a few liberties.

Who was running the surf club?

23:30 There were fellows there that were running physical instruction training and things like that. They were sappers. All the physical training blokes belonged to artillery. They were called sappers I think. God, my memory is going. But most of them had their bronze and things like that. But we didn't have a surf boat – we had surfboards and smaller boards and a couple of yachts. Sabots, I think they were – the little ones.

24:00 **So when you surfed, where did you get your board from?**

You'd go and sign a thing and get it out of the club house. They had boards there – long boards, short boards, and some pretty good boards too. But every time they'd get a new batch they'd be donated. There were quite a few donated every year, but you know, you'd get the novices out there and they'd knock them around. But there were quite a few good boards. There was one I had there for a good while there that I used to hide. I put in on the bottom of a rack and put an old tarp over it. I'd go and grab that one.

24:30 It disappeared. I don't know where it finished up. But it wasn't a bad board, that. It was about eight four and one of the first swallow tails.

Don't really know …

Well, it was pretty flash. Heavy. It was full of glass. It was a glass board. But that was the core in those days. No, that was good. I think being in close proximity to the beach and being able to utilise it kept quite a few of us sane, I think.

25:00 **Was the surf club built out of an existing structure, or was it something created from scratch?**

I think it was something that was created from scratch, because it was well and truly up and running by the time I got there. Well and truly up and running.

Did others have a hand in that or was that just strictly Australian?

Strictly Australian. They may have supplied the … because most of our stuff was American. But they might have supplied the timber and fabric to make it

25:30 but it was wholly and solely Australian. The Americans couldn't believe it. Very few surfed, and they'd come down. They had their own beaches up and down the coast too, but they'd come down and check us out. They'd shake their heads a bit.

Why?

Oh, I think they were in disbelief that you know, here we are surfing and it was a far cry from … the movie that was made

26:00 with the late Marlon Brando – 'Apocalypse Now' – with the, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning," and we're there surfing these breaks up and down. What a load of crap, but anyway, it made for a good yarn to the Americans. But yeah, it was good. That surf club was a good unit. But as I said it also had yachts. There were half a dozen yachts there.

And were there people patrolling?

No, not really. No, no. There'd be a bloke sitting there and he was supposed to be the life guard, but you wouldn't call it a patrol as such. They were there and they'd be looking out to sea to make sure no-one was going to stick their heads up.

Were there any problems? As far as rips or …

No, not so much rips. But they'd go there on R&C and get pretty pissed, and that was mainly the thing – to keep the fellows that were drunk out of the water and watch them. But no, I had an incident in the water there when

26:30 I was bitten by a snake – a sea snake. Apparently it wasn't too venomous, and they just put me in the … bit me under the knee, and I felt a bit funny and had pins and needles, so they took me back to the hospital and sat me down and put me under obs [observation] for twelve or fifteen hours. Nothing much seemed to happen. I got a bit tingly, but I went back on duty after that. But yeah, bitten by a sea snake. Apparently they're venomous during a certain part of the year only. They've got small fangs,

27:00 so you didn't get much venom in. And we had one bloke who … novices crack their heads open all the time. They slip on the board, and not having leg ropes and things, they'd flick 'em and break their noses and things. But nothing that really … not in my time.

27:30 **Apart from the local fishermen, were there any other locals who'd be around the beach, or would it be strictly Australians?**

Well, the locals weren't allowed on that beach. They had it wired off. You could slip through the wire at low tide and the wire was fairly rusted and things; but no, there wasn't too many Vietnamese would be allowed anywhere near where we were. Not like it is today.

28:00 No, it was pretty good. It was mainly the fishermen I used to go and talk to. They'd see me and they'd laugh – I'd be falling in with the nets, and

28:30 they'd want to give me some fish and I'd say, "No, I'm only here to help; just to help, sort of," and they knew me by the time I was finished. I went back to their village and they were growing some crops and things too, and I snuck round there to see how they grew their rice and the sweet potato and some of the other crops. They had a big hole there. It was apparently a bomb crater. And they had freshwater fish growing in this.

29:00 And they had pigs and other sorts of stuff. It was a bit of agricultural science for me. I got a bit of a 'fix', yeah.

When you were on duty with the medical ward, what would be a typical shift for you? Was there a definite pattern to what you had to do?

29:30 Medical and surgical ward, you had one of the three shifts, as I explained. You'd just … it's just like any hospital. You'd walk down and the sister and the medics that were on overnight would give you a run down on happened during the night and how they were going; who was going home; what was happening. And you just had your job to do, you know.

30:00 They had people to clean the floors so you didn't do much of that. The cleaning aspect of it all. You just made sure their drugs … and we were full there were probably two on each end of the wards – two or three medics on the surgical ward. One in ICU Ton San NhutIntensive Care Unit] and triage. A couple down the RAP, and one in the Special Treatment Unit – known as the 'Jack Shack'. Yeah, that was …

30:30 **Can you estimate how many patients you'd typically find in the medical ward?**

Oh, well that varied considerably. But you could have forty in medical ward. Thirty-five or forty in medical ward, counting the isolation patients and whatever. Sometimes there could be nearly the same in surgical ward. That's been fairly full.

31:00 But you know, if you're in medical ward and someone had to be lifted then you'd get someone out of medical ward to help you or you'd help them or something like that. If you were in medical ward you weren't always in medical ward. It was only up the corridor. You know, they weren't too far away.

Did you ever get paranoid dealing with the hepatitis blokes?

No, no, no. They were funny blokes. We'd stir 'em up you know. Some of them, they'd get the shits after they'd been in there

31:30 a couple of weeks, but most of them were 'here', not out in the bush. But look, we did find at one stage, because we had a bit of an influx … they thought that they might have been deliberately trying to get hepatitis. But that's only … I dunno why you would. But I suppose, if you're out in the scrub and your life's in danger twenty-four hours a day there's a lot of things you'll do.

32:00 A lot of people did more severe acts than that to get out. You know, I wasn't paranoid. It was just like anything: you wash up afterwards, you don't … there was rules set in places like the isolation units and you just abided by those rules. Yeah, not a problem.

So, it was the initial three months that you were in the medical ward?

32:30 Probably only did about two months. Maybe it was closer to three, yeah,

33:00 nearly the three. I did have a lot of it written down, but you know, it's gone by the way now. But yeah, I went then from medical to surgical ward.

How did you find that?

Yeah, that was interesting too, because before they shipped them back to Australia – medivaced them back – you had quite

33:30 a lot of amputees and you had gunshot wounds and the patients that were more in dire need. You also had the people who were in there for dislocations of arms from falling over, and burns and all sorts of stuff there too. Plus we had a few civilians in there as well, and a baby that was very badly burned with a flare. So we had some civilians in there at times.

34:00 It was pretty sad to see the kids all burned up and everything. That got to every one of us. [UNCLEAR] … I don't know what happened to him. He finished up losing a leg. A lot of the patients were pretty good. Another too was there was virtually no rank. Once you're … mate, you could be the top brass mate, but in there you do as I tell … so there was no rank. And we played a bit on that too. But everyone was in there for a reason and we did our job well. We did do our job well. There was

34:30 only a few things where we bucked the system which I'll talk about later … but you had to, you know, a lot of things like the dressings on amputees and things like that, you still remember that and you smell the medications and the infections they got from little fly things that hung around that. I can still smell it to this day. But you know, burns victims come in. And of course there's a percentage of road accidents, and people in horrific pain from other outside accidents. In particular I remember a fellow in a tank – no, an APC [Armoured Personnel Carrier] – and he was sitting on top of that and going through the jungle, and he must have just glanced this tree, and there was a wasps nest in it.

35:00 And the wasp nest fell down, onto the turret of his APC, and all the wasps came completely out and absolutely stung him completely all over. I've never seen a man in so much pain. By the time he was dusted off and back to us, you wouldn't think there was a hospital with enough morphine to quell him, and he come up in welts … the other blokes, one of the other blokes virtually went into shock. He only had a dozen stings in him that we tried to get out, but this other bloke was covered just down his face and down his head. Although he had a hat on, he'd tried to get that off

35:30 and once he got that off they got all over his head. And I don't think I've ever, ever seen a person in some much pain. They came in screaming, and they'd been administered morphine on the way in. Geez, he was a mess.

How did he end up?

Oh, five or six days later he walked out with a few red blotches on him. He thanks us all and walked out and got in his APC and off he went. Hmm. There you go. But geez, that was interesting, that day.

36:00 Then if you had the dust-off chopper come in with casualties, then everyone from medical ward raced to the chopper pad when the siren went – no matter where you were or where you were working in the hospital, everyone had to meet down there to get them off. Once you heard that siren go …

How often would it go?

Oh, when there was … when they needed a lot of hands on deck. You know, you the normal flights that would come in of a morning at eight o'clock – the ones from up north or from somewhere. There was one that would come in a three or four o'clock in the afternoon …

That was regular?

36:30 Yeah, regular ones. You could just walk up for the. You know, they'd radio in, "No, we need a litter," or "No, they're all walking," so you'd just walk up. But that was my later job in triage to do that. But the rest of them were just routine, what they'd call the 'mail run'.

Working in the surgical ward … did that involve participating actual surgery as well as to tending to people after surgery?

37:00 No, no, that was after surgery. No, we didn't … it was mainly the dressing of wounds and looking after them and making sure they were comfortable and normal … you know, when the dressings had to be done, if they were badly stressed then the doctor would do it – you'd assist the doctor or the

37:30 nursing sister. Yeah, so surgery wasn't a part of it at all. But the more mundane ones, you'd change their dressings and administer them this or the medicines or whatever help or support or whatever. Because you had physiotherapists there and other therapists there that do the other work. You'd help them up on their feet and encourage them to get up and you know, there's a lot of psychological work there too,

38:00 trying to get some of these people back on their feet again. They didn't want to be there. Didn't want to be back on their feet some of them. Some of them could only crawl.

How did you find you were with that side of things?

That started to pain you a bit. Once you see the wounded there. The amputees and the gunshots. Some of them were semi blind too, and you'd be reading them

38:30 their letters that they'd be getting from their families or their wives or the girlfriends and you'd just be reading the letters to them because they couldn't read or didn't want to read. And they couldn't write, some of them, and so you'd be writing their letters and things for them. There's a lot of things that people didn't know we did, you know.

Which would have been a huge part of the job, I reckon?

Well, it was for some of us, yeah. Yeah. Some of us who were not a bad hand with the quill, we were sort of given that task a little bit. They didn't mind doing that task. And the sisters were very good at that too. By God they were good at it. They were real good, some

39:00 of those nursing sister. We had our favourites. And of course they had their favourites. It worked well. And when we had a lot of casualties, mate, busy, was it busy! But then there were slack times, yeah. That started to play on me a bit. I started getting a bit, you know, "What the bloody hell

39:30 are we doing here. This's starting to get a bit …"

What particular element of it got you thinking that way?

Just the futility of it all. And a lot of them were National Servicemen the same age as myself. Or regular soldiers. And I liked the people so much – the Vietnamese people – and I was starting to get into a little bit of their culture

40:00 because I'd been reading about it. And I was trying to learn a bit of the language and really, trying to come to grips with it, which I thought was the best way to do it. And the more I did that, the more I got pissed off with the whole war and the whole scene. But I was there to do a job, and a job I did. But it wasn't only me, there were half a dozen of us – or four of us – that started to …

How far into the tour did you start to fell that way?

40:30 Probably four or five months I started to. But we were there to do a job. But it was when we started to buck the system a bit. But we had a great CO by then. Colonel Parker, Colonel Laurie Parker. He passed away last year. He was the only non full member of the military force to ever command a unit in Vietnam. He was our CO and a CMF [Citizens' Military Force].

41:00 He was a specialist too, but he was CMF and he was the only non regular soldier to ever command a unit in Vietnam. He was very proud of that and we were very proud of him. He was a really nice bloke.

Tape 6

00:30 **John, I'd like to ask you how the CMF and National Servicemen worked in with the professional career soldiers? Any tensions?**

No, really the only CMF bloke I met over there was Colonel Parker. There was a few come in – high ranking CMF that went over there for just a couple of weeks

01:00 because they got a bit of rank … a bit more rank when they got back. But I didn't have anything to do with those. But I mean, as far as the Nashos and the Regs [Regular Army], there was a lot of banter. There was a lot of sometimes good natured rivalry and at other times it was a bit heated; and we tend to stick together. I mean, even from Healesville on there was only one of our group that was a regular soldier

01:30 and was married, and he was the only one of us that killed later on. That's something that perhaps we could get onto a bit later on. John Gillespie. Because there's a bit of conjecture over what happened to his remains and I think I know, but no bastard will listen to me.

In what ways would you conscripts try to push your luck a little bit with army regulations and dress and standards?

It was so much the National Servicemen. It was more just our little group.

02:00 The more we got into it the more people could see what job we were doing, and the more we got pissed off with the war. We did our job well, but we started to flaunt the regulations. We grew our hair longer and we really tried to get away from all the 'green machine' bullshit. And which really, our CO at the time, he let us go. But the RSM

02:30 and the CSM were career soldiers, and they couldn't see the funny side of it. They tried to bring us into line, and lucky we had Colonel Parker to back us up on a few things, and say, "They're my boys, they're

the best we've got." Because at one stage there we overshot the line to a little bit, to the fact that at one stage there was talk about sending a couple of us home. But, as I said, Colonel Parker … but then we realised

03:00 that Colonel Parker was only there for six months, and now we realised that for the last three months he's not going to be there. They could make it awful bloody hard for us in those three months. Then we started to buck the system less, and we thought, "OK", but we were there for four odd months when we thought we were a bit of a law unto ourselves. But we were leapt at too, because the RSM and the CSM were told to lay off

03:30 because all of us were doing our job, and it was a hard job. We were getting quite a lot of casualties in and they couldn't really bring people up to speed. By that time we'd been there eight months, and we were starting to know the ins and outs of how it all went – what to do and things. We were as good as any nursing sister in the place.

In what way do you reckon you over-stepped the line in some way in your behaviour?

Oh, a little bit insubordinate sometimes. A little bit cheeky. Flaunting the

04:00 dress rules a bit. Wearing no hat. Silly little things. Just things that we thought … you know, "We will buck the system." Getting around in tie-dye clothing with ribbons in our hair and peace symbols around our necks, with … instead of our dog tags. Not carrying a weapon. But we still did our job. No-one would ever tell you that we did not do our job.

04:30 And that was the reason why we were a bit flaunty at times. But the regular soldiers, the career soldiers, it pissed them off a bit. But that's fair enough. And you know, we were given the rank of corporal and we never did a subject. Some of them had been in there for ten or fifteen years and they're lance corporals or just about to make sergeant after fifteen years. And we're coming in, and we're getting Group 16! And the

05:00 the poor bloke out in the field is getting Group 6. He doesn't know where his next meal or his next bed's gonna be. I had a roof over me bloody head and three squares a day and as much booze as I wanted, really. I could go into town and had the beach sitting there, and I'm on Group 16. Not fair. Not fair. And we knew it wasn't fair.

You made a small reference earlier on about going on strike, or nearly going on strike?

Ah yeah, that was a whole group of us. They thought we weren't pulling our weight or we weren't … they just thought – the hierarchy –

05:30 that we needed to be taught a lesson. The RSM and the CSM. And we'd upset a few of the other officers, so they said, "OK, we're going to shut the boozer down. You can't get any booze. We thought, "Huh, fair enough. We'll just go to the sigs down the road or the transport company down the road, or we'll go to the … but oh no, it wasn't. We weren't allowed to leave our compound.

06:00 So we all sat there on the steps one night and said we're going to go on strike. And the duty officer came down and said, "Come on boys, this crap, away you go." And then they went and got the sergeant and then the CO. The big boss came down as said, "Come on fellas. We'll talk about it. Get a delegation down the office and come and see me about it tomorrow." Then we disbanded. But we were going to go on strike. They could have shot us. That's insubordination. But that's crap. I dunno what

06:30 we were thinking, but we had a … it was just us four inciting the rest because we were just pissed off with the whole war. You know, the thought of being over there and the lives lost and the futility of it all.

Who were this little hard core club that you were part of?

Ah there were some blokes. There was Dick and Willy Smith and Bobby Bird. They know. G'day boys.

What did you call yourself?

We were called 'the Six' or 'the Five' or whatever. This is the same group, I may add, just around

07:00 Christmas time that we were fairly well liquored one night, and there was a red alert on. You couldn't go out or anything. And we thought, "Yeah, this crap," and then they changed it to the next thing down, yellow or whatever that was. But we were fairly liquored and we knocked off and found some nice bottles of wine, so we decided to

07:30 climb up on the roof of our hut and sing Christmas carols, when the rest of the whole unit is supposed to be quiet and mucked out. You could hear us for miles, absolutely for miles. Pissed as, and singing Christmas carols. And I got down off the roof … I wanted to go to the toilet or something, and next thing the duty NCO [Non Commissioned Officer] – who was virtually one of the blokes,

08:00 one of us – he comes up and says, "Come on fellas, down off there." "No we're not coming down – stuff 'em." And then the duty sergeant come up and we told him likewise. Then someone else came up and said, "Come on blokes, down you come or we'll get the MPs [Military Police]. "Yeah, yeah, get 'em." So the MPs turned up and pointed their 9 mils [millimetre gun] and .45s at us, and said, "Come down!" and, "Yeah, comin' down, comin' down!" And so we were duly … I said, you know, "You can't do this – I'll

act on their behalf."

08:30 So they dragged the other four blokes away. I happened to have been down off the roof at this stage, so they took them down to the front gate and locked them up in the jail house and took their shoe laces and belts – so they wouldn't hang themselves. And they were sort of charged the next day. And they knew I was part of it, but I happened to have just slipped down the roof at that time. So I was going to go into bat for them. So yeah, they had a bit of CB [Confined to Barracks] and things like that,

09:00 but that took it off our chests a little bit. Mainly because they said the singing wasn't good.

Were you ever personally the subject of formal disciplinary action?

Well, brought into the CO. Colonel Parker called us in one day and said to us that it was maybe time … that we'd had a good run but maybe it was time because he was going in another month or so, for us to toe the line because

09:30 the new guy coming over was a career soldier and mightn't take it. So he said, "Keep doing the work boys because you're doing a good job, but look, you are in the army. Just take the last few months and pull your heads in a bit, and just sort of go with the flow." And he agreed wholeheartedly with why we didn't like it and told us they had a psychiatrist there. He said, "You know, do you want to go and talk to these blokes," and we said, "No,

10:00 you know, your right." It sucked, it sucked. But we had to do our job, and it got mean from there on. And work got a bit harder for me after that.

He sounds like a fair and wise commanding officer …

He was, he was. He was a smart man. A bastard to work with at some of his ENT [Ear, Nose and Throat] clinics. But he was a bloody humanitarian of a man. And a fair

10:30 lump of a boy too. And remembering then, he would have been fifty. That's where I am now, but back then, he looked so old.

What work did you do outside of the hospital?

We … at times when there wasn't … when we had a bit of spare time or things were a little bit easier in the hospital,

11:00 a few of us were taken out to the villages, and we'd go out there with a doctor and an interpreter and a driver and a guard. And we'd go out to the villages and inoculate the kids and dress their wounds. And we did that in the orphanages and some of the schools. And that was fantastic. And they were doing that one a week. So a couple of us were picked for that. Funny how we were picked for that. We probably … at times there'd be

11:30 three or four of our little group would be picked to go out and do that type of work. And that was fabulous. You really felt good about it. Going into these little villages and inoculating the kids or dressing their wounds – they're going to be dirty again tomorrow, you know, and it's only a little bit, but it made you feel good, and it was really a good thing to go and do. That was excellent. Enjoyed that.

Did you feel exposed out there?

12:00 Well, we had to carry firearms out there. I had a side arm thing. But you had a guard there and you'd only go twenty k's or so out; and sometimes just to the orphanages in Vung Tau itself. But we couldn't speak Vietnamese so we had an interpreter, and we picked up some words and there was the universal language. We'd try to get some lollies. And I remember

12:30 one time we came into a whole heap of soap, and we gave that to all the mothers. And it Lux soap. They just thought was absolutely amazing that we gave these mothers some soap. Yeah. It just landed in our hands. I don't know where it came from.

Describe to me the orphanages there.

13:00 Oh, they were pretty crude. There could be three kids in a bed. They had bigger beds there and they'd be lying sideways in this bed. But it's the best they could do. But they were starting to get a bit of aid come into those orphanages at the end, when I left. But yeah, they were pretty crude. We'd try to put on little pantomimes and things while we were there to make them laugh – like, we'd dress up like we were dressed in rabbit suits and we'd hop around, and we'd try to teach them silly

13:30 nursery rhymes in English. It was good therapy. And it was quite good therapy for us too.

I was going to ask, therapy for who?

Yeah, well that's right. But again, you put that down to the boss. Most of the time he knew the ones that wanted to go.

What sort of medical conditions would you see amongst the villagers?

There was a lot of sores, a lot of scabies, and lot of

14:00 head lice, and wounds that just didn't heal up – you know, cuts. And we ran into a lot of the youngish girls there … and it finished up, we had to go back and the next time we took one of our nurses with us because it was, you know, it was beyond us. They needed to talk to a female nurse about a lot of those problems.

14:30 They finished up, just before I left, that orphanage had a whole Red Cross mob arrived up there and really done some good work up there. But without our prompting and saying, "Look, we need a woman to talk to these young girls because they're ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen … and some of them are just from orphans, and something needs to be done here." So they were building a school for them and …

15:00 **What did they need to be talked to about? The conditions, or just puberty?**

Yeah, puberty – stuff that just wasn't our expertise. And they don't want to hear it from an Australian bloke. What they did finally was they got a Vietnamese nurse. There were people working in these orphanages but a lot of them weren't qualified. We could see very plainly that they needed to be spoken to by

15:30 someone who had been through it, and we hadn't. So I was fairly happy about getting all that done and persisting and you know, about getting some other things done.

Speaking about nurses, I believe you had a run in with one particular nurse?

Sister Buchanan! Sister Buchanan! Yes. Well, after I got out of Surgical Ward I went to the Intensive Care Unit. After Intensive Care … that was full on.

16:00 I did it pretty tough there and they put me down, just for a couple of months, down at the RAP. And we'd just do a lot of the inoculations or cuts and bruises. It was a twenty four hour thing, it went. Anyway, standing orders were, every Saturday night you had to defrost this fridge

16:30 which all the injections and everything, it kept them cold. And these fridges were struggling in temperatures … and that type of fridge … and defrosting them every week was just causing problems for these fridges. They were getting turned on and turned off, so I said, "This is bullshit," and didn't defrost this fridge. And she came in on the Monday and said, "That fridge hasn't been defrosted – who was on Saturday night," and I said, "I was," and she said, "Why didn't you?" and I said, "Doesn't need doing – that's a good way of ripping up a good fridge."

17:00 "You're supposed to do it." And I said, "No, that's crap," and next thing she went over and got the RSM, and she was a major, and the RSM come in and said, "You're being insubordinate," and I said, "I'm just telling her the facts," and he said, "Whether it be fact or not, it has to be done." And I said, "Well, that's bullshit," and he said, "Well, we'll take you in front of the CO." And Colonel Parker got me in and sat me down and said, "I'll

17:30 work it out with her and there'll be no charges laid, but it'd be best to do it," and I said, "Yes, sir." And I did it from then. But we were at arm length with Sister Buchanan from then on.

Why did you say you did it tough in the ICU?

The Intensive Care Unit was straight out of the operating theatre. That's

18:00 where … we had quite a few people pass away in there. You had probably two or three patients in odd beds, and the other bloke with you had their three patients. And it was full on. That was as full on, hard nursing as I could ever … and you had a nursing sister in there full time with you as well, and no, it was fairly tough. And you know, they went in there after surgery –

18:30 straight out of the surgery itself and into ICU; and it was fairly emotionally hard. Not physically hard, but emotionally hard and draining; and we really knew what they meant then about nursing and getting these blokes, and surviving mostly. It's all right the fellow who goes into the ICU after an operation

19:00 for a couple of hours. But some of these fellows were in there for days. We knew they couldn't survive, and you're there with them. What do you do? What do you say? Sometimes it was a relief if they never regained consciousness. And that was fairly hard work. And we made light of it. We look back later … well, you look back now, and while you were doing the job that didn't enter the equation at all,

19:30 but afterwards it made you think a lot about it, and you wonder, again, "What does it all mean, what does it all mean?"

How do you comfort and care for a man you knew was probably not going to make it?

Well, it's hard. Remember, we had limited training in this type of thing. You just learnt off the sisters and people like that, and there's specialists there, but mainly the sisters. One sister there – Deirdre Coy – she taught us a lot about

20:00 about … it's very difficult. It's very difficult if they're going in and out of consciousness, but if they remain unconscious, well that's a little easier on us. But if they're not then we're at their beck and call – which is fine, which is fine, which is what we're there for – but to watch them go downhill is hard and say nothing; and the doctors come up and say …

20:30 and you're included in the doctor's meetings and the doctor's rounds. And you're part of that. And he's saying, "Look, he's got no hope – what'll we do." So I did it a bit tough there. As I say, I only did a couple of months there, and that's when they put me down the RAP, which was stitching up drunks at night after they fell through the wire, pissed; and fights, and blokes that would come down. And because the whole of the Logistical Support Group were open twenty four hours a day, and they'd come down and you'd stitch them up or you'd

21:00 patch them up. Or blokes that drunk too much. And that was pretty good. We did a lot of suture work there. That was the only time we were doing it, which I didn't mind doing unless it was a big bleeder and then I'd send them to one of the doctor's. But we'd stitch them up. And then on Saturday they'd have all the inoculations, you know. A hundred a fifty diggers lined up, shirts off, and we'd be giving them all their

21:30 inoculations on a Saturday after day. And of course there was the Special Treatment Unit, known as the Jack Shack. It was just up the corridor there too. And they used to get all the bar girls in there for their monthly VD [venereal disease] checks there. And yeah, that was interesting.

What sort of VDs did you see in the Jack Shack?

I didn't see any, because I never worked in there. But you'd see them come in with syphilis and gonorrhoea, and NSU – non-specific urethritis. We didn't know much about chlamydia but it would have been

22:00 rife there at that stage I should imagine. But mostly tetracycline will clear that up. Or crystalline penicillin if they had it really bad. An injection in the backside, and ooh, that's real thick syrup, and that takes a while to inject that – fifteen or twenty mil or something. That hurts and that takes a long time. And we used to say to them, "Was it worth it?" Especially if they were regs or they were someone who was giving you a bit of a hard time.

22:30 **Was … how commonplace was VD among the troops?**

Ah, there was a bloody lot that didn't they had it. Look, it wouldn't be a big percentage, but still a percentage. But … see, it goes on your record. And a few of them would come up, especially before they were about to go home, and they'd say, "Look, I don't want that to go on my

23:00 record – is there something you can give me Mac, " and … yes. So we'd give them this tetracycline or something so it wouldn't go on their record. We did that a few times. But that's what you do.

I mean, I guess that sort of thing doesn't matter for a simple NSU case, but …

… yeah, and we wouldn't do it if it was anything else but that. You were

23:30 certainly wouldn't do it for syphilis or gonorrhoea … no, no, no, you wouldn't do it. But NSU you'd do it, but not otherwise. That'd be a hanging offence.

And what about prophylactics?

Oh, you could get them anywhere. The Red Cross handed them out. You could get them at the RAP. They'd come along

24:00 and they'd just ask you for some and you'd just get them out of a bloody big box. They used to come in the gross, and you know, "What size what colour." It's a shame they don't come in army green. And advice on VD. And they knew which bars were clean and which weren't. You know, there were places that were off limits, and if it was really bad the MPs

24:30 would come and put an OL on it – that's Off Limits. And if you were caught there, then you paid the price. But you know, you'd be nuts to do that.

I'm sure there were a lot of repeat offenders?

Aw shit yeah, there was, there was. Yes, some habituals.

25:00 **So the bar girls around the base were subject to a regular health check, were they?**

In Vung Tau they were. Once a month they'd come in. I think some would come in on Tuesdays and some on Saturday afternoons. Everybody would come out and … everybody wanted the results. But no, you'd see 'em. But a lot of the times when they'd come in for the health checks they'd be back in their traditional clothes. Away would go the mini skirts and high heels and little tops.

25:30 They'd come in, in their mai dai and they'd, yeah, nothing was flaunted on the base.

So in some way, there was almost like a certification of …

Yeah, yeah. What was it : steam baths, bars and brothels. And a lot of them were checked out by our health people too. We had a few health inspector type people

26:00 over there. They'd go round and check some of those places out too.

When guys did come into the hospital … I mean you mentioned that some came out of surgery and did die in ICU, but generally if someone did make it back to Vung Tau, what were there odds of surviving no matter how badly wounded they were?

26:30 Well, if they were badly wounded it was worse. But generally the odds were pretty good. They'd come in on dust-off helicopters, which means a lot of people you'd pick up off the ground could be in Phuoc Tuy Province in fifteen minutes – nearly on the operating table. We had a very, very good record. Excellent. But it depends, you know. That's when I found next when I went on to triage. That separates the men from the boys. That's when I knew where I was.

27:00 And yeah, but no, we had a terrific record over there. Any of the documentation will show it. Fantastic. It was great. There were a lot of civilian surgeons but even the ones in the army were excellent, excellent. And the chaplains were there too and the Red Cross people.

Tell us about some of those ancillary staff there – the chaplains, the Red Cross, the Salvos [Salvation Army].

Yeah. Unbelievable. 'Everywhere Man' – he was the bloke who'd be giving out bloody cordial in the middle of a bloody battlefield.

27:30 But no, the Salvation Army people, and the chaplains. The chaplains were virtually next to the hospital lines. And if there was casualties there then they'd be coming over. As soon as that siren went, they were the first ones there. They'd help you get them in and yeah, they were good. They were bloody good. Some of them should've been medics or doctors. Some of them might've been. No, they were really good. They done a top job there.

28:00 I hope you get a chance to interview some of those blokes because geez. And some of them weren't real young. They were amazing. And of course we had x-ray people there too. And pathology people taking blood, trying to match blood types. You get a lot of casualties coming in to triage mate, and it was on. 'Cause that was my next stint after the RAP. I did most of my time

28:30 in triage, more than any other medic there.

OK, so tell us how triage works?

Triage is French for 'sorting' and if you had a lot of casualties come in then you would sort them out and prioritise them. Who you could save and who you couldn't save, or those that you know, if you could save them all, then those most injured got done first,

29:00 depending on the team of surgeons you had and how big the place was, and that's what it was. And sometimes you got half a dozen casualties come in, then there's some there that couldn't possibly have made it; and others that you can save, and you save. It was very, very hard. Very, very, very hard.

Who's making that decision?

The surgeon. The chief surgeons would make that decision. But I ran the triage room. I had to keep everything where it's supposed to be. I'd meet the choppers,

29:30 even the routine ones, and those that were walking around with paperwork, "You go here, you go there," you'd do that.. Triage we could take six or eight or wheel in other beds, you know. There were some there that couldn't be saved and you were the last person they ever saw – we'd be told, you know, "Macca or John," or whoever, "Could you just stay with this soldier. He's going to pass away." And you were the last person they heard, saw or felt, and you know, that's hard.

30:00 That's very hard, very hard. You know, I can't remember their names but their faces are as close as yours is now. Amazing.

How could you pass the time with somebody you knew wasn't going to make it?

What can you do? It depends on whether they're coherent in any way, shape or form. Some of them weren't, which like I said was a bit of a blessing. But some of them, especially that were … some of them I know

30:30 that were like … their legs were just blown away and just you couldn't do anything for them. They had other internal injuries and it was just a matter of time, you know. That was hard. But a lot of times you'd have a priest with you. You'd have maybe a junior doctor or someone else with you, as well.

What could you do to ease their passing?

31:00 Well, there's … just hold them, you could just sort of talk to them, you could smile, or put their hand … a padre always told me, "Put your hand on their forehead. Touch them."

Do those things … do those times still trouble you?

Yeah, oh yeah. If you want to and you let it you can see those faces

31:30 every night. You've just got to try and put it to the back of your mind. It's over, you know, thirty four years ago, but they're still there. Their names are not, though I could look their names up in a minute.

I've got the book in there with everyone who served, their names, the whole lot.

The situation of a surgeon 'playing God' like that … I know he had to do it, but how did you feel when he'd more or less point at somebody and just shake his head?

32:00 Yeah, but he's got a job to do. He's saving that other soldier. And that's what he had to do. He's a trained professional, to do that, and … it worried me at the time but not as much as it did later. You'd go back to that night and think about it, particularly … I think there was a couple dead and they went straight to the morgue, and there was five or six injured and five or six walking wounded that

32:30 you could virtually put straight in there. You know, we had dressing rooms and things in the hospital there. You could put them in there and they could wait their time. But a couple of times there it nearly went twenty four hours a day. And I ran that triage for that length of time. I never left it. It was mine. If I worked the seven to three, and if someone come in that night I was down at my lines. If they come in the middle of the night or no matter what, if my hours were

33:00 seven to three and they came in the middle of the night then I was there, no matter what.

In the case of a big contact, or let's say a big rush at triage, roughly how many case would that represent?

Oh, that's a hard one. I think the most we had in there at one stage was about ten. A couple of those, as I said,

33:30 a couple deceased and they went straight to the morgue. We had a shell explode in the turret of an American warship and there was a whole lot of casualties. That's when they came in on the Chinook, and it half blew the morgue down. The pre-fab [pre-fabricated] morgue we had. We were pretty rushed that day, and lot of the ones we had were black Americans, and yeah,

34:00 that was amazing. A few of those too were head injuries, and we just got them stabilised as best as we could then shot them off to their own hospital in Long Bin. As we did with a few of our own head injuries. They specialised in head injuries at Long Bin. I went up and had a look at them doing that one day. I went up there a couple of times.

What sort of wounds were the worst to deal with?

Mines. Mines that had jumped up or mines that just blew legs off. They were the ones that … they'd have to be patched up,

34:30 and you'd be there trying to rip their clothes off or cut their clothes off so they could be ascertained how bad they were and yeah … just the blood, the smell, the whole thing … yeah. And if you had a big contact you had to make sure everything was there – drips and needles and catheters and everything the doctors wanted. And they'd be yelling and screaming

35:00 and they wanted it now and that bloke wanted it now. It was big time. Even the padres were in there, "Explain to me what you need."

So even in rush hour there wouldn't be purely medical staff working in there? There'd be other people who'd be on the deck?

Oh yeah. Well the X-Ray bloke, he's preparing X-Rays to see who's going in next. You'd have people taking blood because they've got to be matched up for blood.

35:30 The padres would be hovering. When it was really on, it was big. They'd come like ants, which was fabulous. But once they started to go into surgery then there was other duties for those people to do, and so at times you were left with yourself and the padre.

Battlefields are fairly grubby places. What sort of extra threat was posed by dirt and just detritus in the wounds?

The beauty of the dust off was, as I say, to get in them in soon, then you could irrigate the wounds and clean them up fast, because infection

36:00 was a big part of it, being over there in the tropics. And medicine thirty five years ago, it's come a long was since then. And yeah, that was one of the main things. You'd disinfect or you'd irrigate. But we had some really good nursing sisters who knew they way around too.

What sort of cases did you have where guys that didn't look too bad died, and vice versa?

36:30 Oh, gunshot wounds. You'd find they'd come in and their vital signs are virtually nil. Why, well he's been shot. Where? And there's a tiny little hole. You could take his shirt off and he could have a hole four times the size on the other side or whatever, or it hasn't gone right through him. It's just hit a vital organ and killed him stone dead.

37:00 Or the guy that was killed by lightning. You couldn't see a mark on him, but he was dead. If you can see something … like if a bloke's got both legs blown off, well, but if you can't see why … there's a reason why, but you know, you're trying to find out why, then that's hard. The Christmas night the three sergeants were killed – they were shot by our own fellows – that was a busy sort of a

37:30 night. Two of the three of them dead.

What happened there?

Oh, a bloke went berserk in the sergeants mess. He wasn't a sergeant. He was just another rank. He just went in there and blasted up the sergeants mess on Christmas afternoon, and I think it was three dead and three wounded. That made for a nice Chrissie arvo.

38:00 **You said that if you weren't on duty and you heard the choppers coming in …**

… no, you heard the siren go. Then you're there, you're there. It's all hands on deck. But if it wasn't big they'd say, "No, no it's all right. We don't need you, you blokes stay, the rest of you just got out of the road."

No, sorry, I thought that because you considered it 'your' triage room …

Oh, if it was my triage room then yeah, OK, because it was my triage room. My word. But normally, no. If you were in Medical Corps and the siren went then you'd still go and see,

38:30 or they'd yell out, "Everyone down here!"; but for everyone to be there to get them off, then that's a major problem, major problem.

John, how did you deal with the mental stress?

Ah, well you don't think it's going to affect you at the time. But we had a few mates and we could talk about it. We could have a few beers, or again, we could go to the beach.

39:00 I used to find a lot of solace in the beach. I don't know what I would have done if I'd been out at one of those hospitals in the scrub and not been able to get away – or you couldn't get away or whatever. And yeah, that's how I find my solace, and still do. Yeah, but it's … but we could talk about it and have a drink about it. It played on your mind that night, but we had a job to do. It's when you get back and later and it's all over …

What about other cases with staff there. Can you recall any cases where it was getting on top of other people?

39:30 Yeah. It could start to affect quite a lot of us at the finish, whether you be in triage or even blokes who did a fair stint in medical. To deal with that, especially I say the National Servicemen. It wasn't their field of choice, and it was just … it was pretty hard on a few of the Nashos. And the regulars too, and the regulars too.

40:00 Nashos seemed to suffer a little bit.

Do you think the high rate of drinking was a part of dealing with that as well?

Yeah, yes. Because some of them were fairly big drinkers. Even by today's standards they were fairly big drinkers. Yeah. I, you know, I could look at it in a different way. I could get out and relax and sort of ease my mind with something else.

40:30 You know, no-one liked a drink more than I did. But I didn't overdo it when there was … like, over a crisis or anything. When there was a crisis or a problem.

What about other forms of substance abuse that you saw?

Oh, there was quite a bit of dope smoked. That was fairly easy and free and available. But not many of our immediate little group smoked it, but I knew quite a few who did. I wasn't a smoker, no was … I think only one of our group was, but I think …

41:00 I think one day there was a bloke with a cigarette and he passed it to me and took one draw of it and no, not to my liking, "I'll have a beer thanks."

Tape 7

00:30 **You were saying that you ended up spending the longest period of your stay in triage. Which area that you worked in gave you the most satisfaction?**

Well, when we went out and did the MEDCAPS [Medical Civic Action Program] at the orphanage, as far as that goes.

01:00 But triage was different. They were all different. The Medical Corps just got you used to how the whole system worked together. Surgical Corps brought you up to the next step. Intensive Care Unit. But the triage, with a stint RAP, that was the twelve months – it was taken up by those five. But the stints out to the orphanages and the villages and some of the schools we went to,

01:30 that was really something to look back on. You seemed to be doing something a little bit purposeful. Not

that looking after your own troops is not purposeful, but there was a good, nice sense of doing something for the community rather than dealing with your own kind or soldiers – yours or allied soldiers that have been wounded.

So were those visits frequent?

02:00 To the villages, yeah. I think I was – especially in Laurie Parker's reign – did as many as anyone did. They went out nearly every week and sometimes a couple of times a week, but I was able to go when I was in a position where I could go. Sometimes you were at a station and couldn't leave it. When Laurie left and I spent my last time in ICU I probably didn't

02:30 go for the last three months. But in at least six months of the time before I went out nearly every … sometimes once a week, sometimes once a fortnight, depending on how many they was to take out. Because it was a bit of a … it was a bit of a treat, you know. It was a bit of a treat, and that's how we looked at it. There were a few other treats that we did too, you know, visits to Long Bin hospital. And I remember he – Colonel Parker – took three of us away to the opening

03:00 of a new head unit at Long Bin, and he got us there; and he said, "Don't wear any of your shirts with your stripes or any of your ranks or anything; just put your Australia badges on." So of course the Americans thought he was there with some of his junior officers. So we got in the officers mess, and we really had a great day. That day with Laurie. He wore all his paraphernalia, but he said, "You just wear this," and we all felt like his junior boys. It was good, drinking champagne out of paper cups

03:30 and coming back in the back of the helicopter, singing dirty ditties. Yeah, that was pretty cool.

So, were they trips that you could apply for, or were you assigned to them?

We were assigned to go up and have a look at how the new transfer station and head surgery buildings at Long-Bin was going ahead,

04:00 and how it was to be and staffed and so on. It was a fact finding mission.

So would the sub-text be that Laurie would do his best to make sure that he got his favourites along for the trip, so that you had the opportunity to have a break from what you'd normally be stuck in the middle of?

Exactly, yeah. That's what it all meant, really.

So how many of you were in the inner circle with Laurie?

04:30 Oh, probably about five of us. We were probably subject to a little bit more rank too. Although we were getting a higher duty allowance for sergeants at times, we only ever had one or two stripes. Laurie couldn't do too much for us, otherwise it would seem to be blatant, perhaps favouritism. So we had to be a bit careful. We knew that. But we were getting, as I say, sometimes Group 16 and high

05:00 duty allowance, whereas the guy out in the bush is getting Group 6, you know. We had a bed, we were fed, we were very, very lucky. Because it could have been turned out … it could have been out with a battalion too. Different story.

Did anyone take offence to the fact that you were being looked after so well?

Yes. Some of the regular career soldiers like the RSM, the CSM, and some of the … a ward sergeant, and people like that. The dental sergeant who had probably been in fifteen or twenty years, or what.

05:30 He didn't like us at all. He made life a little bit difficult for us. But the night someone left, he went out to find that his Land Rover was with four flat tyres. But that's another story. I dunno how they went down [winks].

So, who exactly was the 'koala club'?

06:00 The names?

What is just …

Our little group. We were called by others. It was mentioned by one of the career soldiers, you know, "Nothing's going to happen to you McPherson, you're a member of the koala club," you known a protected species. But then we had to remember that Laurie was going home and the new CO that took over from Laurie,

06:30 he must have been duly informed. Because we didn't take the liberties and have the liberties granted to us. But you know, we weren't harassed or harangued for it.

There was no backlash?

There was no backlash for it, no. Hallelujah, because we thought there was going to be hell to pay.

So when exactly did Laurie leave?

07:00 He was only there for six months, but he left when we had only about three months to go. So he was there for virtually the middle six for us.

I believe there was an incident when you and Laurie were doing a spot of nocturnal swimming?

Yes, that was interesting. We thought we'd go out to the Grand Hotel, which was out on the other side of the peninsula.

07:30 They had a piano player and the like, and we had dinner. Now it was a balmy evening and we were fairly primed with cheap French plonk, as one would, and we decided a dip was in order. So we just crossed the road and there was this little bit of a half arsed breakwater wall, and in we go, into the South China Sea.

08:00 And we're just splashing around, making a little bit of noise. Probably more than we should. And the next thing we know there's a big spotlight on us and some American MPs were shining their big searchlights from their jeep on us, and pointing firearms at us, and wondering what it was all about. And Laurie got out and said, "I'm here with my junior officers." "Would you like a lift back to the base sir," was the response. At that stage he'd put his shirt on, and,

08:30 "I think we've had enough boys. If you could just wait till me and my officers get dressed, and we'd appreciate a lift back to the gate." Of which they duly did. Yes, that was an interesting night.

Did your travels take in Saigon much?

We went to Saigon on one day – aside from the day we arrived – but there

09:00 was a 'body escort' going through. When a soldier had passed on, his medical records had to be handed – personally handed over – to one of the officers at Saigon. You couldn't just put the paperwork with the deceased or the body, it had to be physically handed over in an envelope, and that had to be like that. It was protocol. And I went with one of those to Saigon one day.

09:30 But we only had one night over. And then to get back, you had to go up to the control tower and you'd look for the first plane that was going back to Vung Tau. And I come back in a Jet Starfighter. Sat in the middle of a Starfighter. Yeah.

Did you do a spot of looking around, that night that you did have in Saigon?

Oh, no, no. They book you into a type of

10:00 dormitory style thing, and I can't remember the reasons why we didn't. Maybe we weren't allowed into town, or we were in town, but we had to be driven by an American jeep the next day … but … they supplied your meals and they also had a wet canteen. We were able to have a drink there and I think we just stayed there.

10:30 We just stayed there. But I didn't want to do a lot of running around Saigon. I've done that since.

What were your impressions when you were just driving around Saigon? Or what was the place looking like at that stage?

It was bustling, it was vibrant. Every third fellow was an American. Every third soldier in a uniform; intermingled with kids going to school and the traditional

11:00 Vietnamese costume, whether mai dai or black pyjamas. It was just bustling and different and that's about all I can recollect with it there. It was just busy, and a lot push bikes and small older style motorbikes. A few Citroens. Plenty of army jeeps …

Could you hear guns going off? Any explosions?

11:30 No, no. Didn't hear a thing that night or that day. If you were back there in '75 you'd have heard plenty. Or '74/'75. But not in '71. No, no, that was the only time I spent other than arriving at the airport and departing. And really, not many Australians would have ever seen into Saigon. Not too many … maybe some guards

12:00 outside the Australian headquarters in Saigon, but not too many people would have gone into Saigon. Not in our era, anyway.

Could you tell us about John Gillespie and the incident where …

Well, John Gillespie was a real good friend of mine. We met in Healesville and we

12:30 studied there together. He was in the next tent and was a Victorian. He was the only one who was a regular soldier in our little group, and he was the only one that was married, and he was a great bloke. He did his medical assist training in Brisbane, not in Sydney with us, and Wyong, my home town and my parents, they got to know quite a lot of the soldiers. And when Bruce and John

13:00 on their way through – that's Bruce Tingwell, another one of our friends – he would stay at Mum and

Dad’s quite a bit. And I was just talking to Carol – my ex-wife – the other day and she could remember one night he arrived. I waited, I knew he was coming, and we went down to Carol’s place, and she said she remembers vividly, us sitting on her bed talking about it all. And he unfortunately was the only member of our group who was killed. And he was out of 8 Field, and he was on a chopper

13:30 on a dust off, and he was winching up some Americans – they were hovering – and he was winching them up into the chopper, and apparently a North Vietnamese with a rocket propelled grenade, fired it into the helicopter and it crashed over the top of him and he was virtually incinerated. But a lot of people saw that. The other two pilots were killed, and I believe one of the other’s escaped with some fairly major injuries. But until

14:00 fairly recently he was posted as Missing in Action. There were some remains that came into our morgue. They could have been his. I tried to tell the [Department of] Veterans’ Affairs or someone in Canberra about it, but they said, no, I must have mistaken. I don’t think I was, but I’ve done my bit. But I met his wife at one of our reunions and she has now remarried and has a couple of children, but is still saddened by the event.

14:30 I have a vivid memory of John coming down on the afternoon chopper with just a couple of walking wounded. Nothing serious. I think they were both medical cases. And I was in triage and I'm just sitting with him on the stretchers they had outside triage there, and he was there for about a half hour before the chopper flew back. And that memory sits there, because it was only

15:00 a couple of weeks after that, that he was fatally killed.

And you were told at the time that he had been killed?

Yes, yes. We were told that he was on the chopper; because sometimes we knew which choppers. But he was on an American chopper, not an Australian chopper. And when we knew that … we could hear in the radio room. You could go in and they could pick it up – all the radio signals. So that’s how we

15:30 knew there were casualties coming in and what unit and what section.

Can you tell us a bit more about Dick?

Dick Chesoni has been a really good friend of mine from Healesville days. He was from Orange. He lives in Victoria now, but had a stint in Sydney, and he’s done a lot of his trade in New Zealand. He’s a

16:00 NIDA [National Institute of Dramatic Arts] graduate in graphic design – arts and a design – a brilliant artist and brilliant bloke. He’s gay, but I’ve never found that a problem. He says, “A mate’s a mate no matter what”, and I’ve travelled overseas with him and I’ve had a lot of good times with him, although I am certainly not gay; and I respect him for what he is and he respects me. He loves my family dearly and my children love him dearly,

16:30 and he is a great bloke, a bloody good artist, and a great friend. I was speaking to him last Sunday. We ring each other quite often. I go and spend a couple of weeks a year with him in Melbourne and he comes up here when he can, although he’s been very busy with one of his major shows that’s been touring the world – ‘the Urban Dream Capsule’ – of which he has principle rights over as well.

17:00 **Now he was responsible for those tie-dye shirts?**

He certainly was.

How else did he bring his artistic bent into his day at Vung-Tau?

Well we would go along and we … we painted out what was the darts room in the rec room. We painted that out with psychedelic colours – a lot of peace signs and a lot of sort of graphic designs depicting peace and friendship and love. And parts of the boozer were painted and some of the con-acs were painted. A few other things were painted, but they

17:30 didn’t know who did it. We were hauled in over the coals again for the …

How were those designs received? Particularly the ones with the peace sign?

By the career soldiers and some of the officials : not very well. Again, they thought we were definitely bucking the system and were going to cause anarchy and we weren’t setting an example at all. We were classed then

18:00 as some of the more senior staff there. But, ah no, it was something we did. There’s some great photos around of the hand handiwork mainly attributed to Dick and his helpers.

Can you tell me about the Red Cross girls?

Yeah, there was a lovely Kiwi lass there. Absolutely brilliant. I’ve seen

18:30 her all day writing letters in the hospital there, for people who couldn’t write their own. And supplying biscuits, and … she was Australian Red Cross, but they had quite a lot of Kiwis. They used to get blasted. They'd come in all the time. They were very gung ho. We had a lot of Kiwi casualties, and she was just absolutely dedicated. I don’t know how she did it.

19:00 I think she might have been a nursing sister because she had a very good knowledge of nursing as well, as she was … nice style of a girl as well … pleasing, pleasing. And very professional.

Can you tell me a bit more about Everyman, or 'the Everywhere man?'

Everywhere man was funny. It belonged to some religious organization.

19:30 I'm not sure which one. He, even at Canungra, or when we were doing the route march I referred to earlier at Singleton, he'd be there on the side of the road or dressed up in army greens giving out cordial or good cheer, or matches for you cigarettes if you smoked them. And he was in Canungra giving out cordial and drinks. They were in bloody Vietnam. And we don't know anything about them.

20:00 There's some people who would … and again, if there were casualties come in then there'd by the Everywhere man. I'm not even sure – and this is how sad this is – what religious denomination sponsored them, or who they were. But … it's … that'd be a story in itself, if someone could trace down … because some of the diggers in the field would know a lot more about it than what we did. But you know, amazing. Everyone speaks …

20:30 you just talk to front line soldiers. 7's, 9's, 8's … about the Everywhere man. He'd turn up in an old Land Rover – crazy people, but … that just amazed me. I'm blown away by them. It's above and beyond the call of duty, that.

What part did your faith play in your involvement in Vietnam?

21:00 Ahhh, not a lot. Not a lot. We did go to church on Christmas Eve at midnight, because nearly everybody did. I saw the Last Rites administered to a number of people and I … if that gave them solace, that's fine. But it didn't do much for me.

21:30 I worked with some great chaplains, but … yeah. There was only the three types. There were the Anglicans, the Catholics, and the OPDs – Other Prodigal [Protestant] Denominations. They were all bolted into one group, 'cause you know, that could be a multitude of … and we did have over there a number of them who were non-combatants. They come

22:00 in a little bit later. Were they Seventh Day Adventists or were they Mormons? Not sure, but I remember two coming over. But that was only in my last couple of months there. I don't know how they got on. But the hospital I suppose was the place to put them. I know they were non-combatants because of religious belief and they were Nashos. I can picture one of them.

22:30 He sort of walked around like he was in a dream all the time. But no, getting back to it, it didn't play a great part for me. I didn't think much of it then. Nor now. As a scientist I wanted a bit more proof.

Did you get involved with your patients to the point where you wanted to know where they ended up, and to follow their progress? And was that difficult?

23:00 Yes, I'd do that. And when they come back to 2 Mil or 3 Mil or 4 Mil hospital, a lot of times they'd send reports. And a lot of times too they'd send letters back to us. Because we used to say, you know, "You make sure you let us know how you're going." A couple in particular that we've lost track of now, but probably for four or five years we did. Dick still keeps in contact with a couple of them

23:30 and he let's me know how they're going. One was a dual amputee. Another was … why he got Infantry I'll never know. He was an architect, and he got his arm blown off. Hmmm.

Were you exchanging a lot of letters with home?

My fiancé Carol used to write me at least four times a week. Again, it

24:00 was above and beyond the call of duty doing that. And I mean, not just half a page, but she would write two or three pages. All with the smell of perfume and with 'sWALK' – 'sealed With A Loving Kiss' – on the back of them. All the blokes used to go, "Ah, you got another one!" That was absolute. How can you write to someone four days a week – sometimes five – and when I was doing it a bit tough, they came one a day. How do you make a letter interesting every day? And we had to read them and destroy them.

24:30 **Well, you had no choice …**

Well, they asked us to. Although, if one was left in the pants and they were washed by the locals and they got the letter out then that was a bit of an issue. You got a couple of weeks worth and then you just put them in the incinerator.

25:00 **And they were a fairly important part of your sanity at that stage.**

Yeah, they were, they were. A lot of people didn't get them. A lot of people that weren't married or weren't in my position … my Mum and Dad would write one a week between them. And that's all you expect. My other friends would write me. Part of my football side would all get together and scribble little notes on a piece of paper, and on would come this rubbishy shit, and you'd go through it.

25:30 And Mum would send me clippings out of the paper. Because the local paper kept a bit of an eye on

what I was doing, and things of that nature. Yeah, no, I did real well. But there were people there that didn't, and I felt sorry for them. In fact, the guy in the bed next to me – Gus Crick – a great man. He wasn't a great writer. A regular soldier, and he would do my

26:00 washing and I'd write the letters to his wife – with his … he'd tell me what he felt and I'd write them. And I'd write his letters.

A bit of Cyrano de Bergerac type work?

Exactly. And she knew damn well it wasn't Gus.

But she wasn't complaining?

26:30 No, no. But he'd always say what was written and he'd always sign them. And I'd write, like, "I've done your letter, now you add something on that at the bottom. That's yours, that's for your wife," and he'd say, "Oh, what'll I write," and I'd say, "What do you normally tell your wife, you goose!" And he was only over there a couple of weeks and he had to take his R&R early because she fell pregnant.

27:00 It must have been the week before he left, and he had to go home and get married very early in his tour.

How did you keep up with current events in Australia?

They put out a bit of a newsletter and they also had a radio station. But

27:30 there was no more bigger news in Australia than the Vietnam War I don't think, at that era. There was a bit of political unrest but that was probably the major issue, having four or five thousand troops in Vietnam. Yeah that was the main thing. And of course, American Services Radio went … it was Chicken Man and the whole bit. It was in your face.

28:00 But they had their radio station and we had ours – Australian – I'm not sure how it was done, but it was only on a few hours a day. So that was good. And we had the Melbourne Cup radio on live, and we had a bookmaker, and oh yeah, it was all happening.

Did you have any Australian entertainers come over?

Oh yeah, there was … and being at the hospital they'd sometimes have

28:30 those on Sunday afternoons, and sometimes – especially if you were in the wards – you'd go down and … there were the Little Patties and the Col Joyes. But there was always entertainment on a Sunday. There could Philippino bands and they'd sing the same shit songs all the time – pissed you off to the max. Ah, 'the Green Green Grass of Home'. That was the last thing you wanted to hear. And 'We've Gotta Get Outta This place'. Yeah, if it's the last thing we ever do.

29:00 **You didn't need the obvious stated?**

We did not need that, no. But the patients that were well enough were always carted down to the club and sat in the front row; and of course all the entertainers would come down because they were patients. They were patients, you know, they were injured. And we'd be standing there with our patients. And a lot of them would come through the hospital. We had all the stars. Johnny Devlin, and you know, the list goes on.

29:30 **Did you get to see American shows as well as the Australians?**

There was a few of those around. We didn't see the Bob Hope Christmas shows and things like that. That was a bit out of our league. There was another comedian – an older comedian who's now passed away. Aaah. I can't remember his name. We went up and saw that. That was down at the Zebra Club.

30:00 We saw him there one Saturday or Sunday. We got in there. But he was a bit of a magician and he played the piano, and you know, told a few jokes. But that's about the only American one that we saw.

What about movies?

Oh yeah, there was movies on an outside screen. You take your chair up and grab it … we didn't have it,

30:30 but the transport company above us had it, and the sigs had it. The bigger companies had it. Yeah, yeah.

So you got to see their movies, or you guys missed out?

No, no, we could go and see it. We could rock up there with our chairs, sure. Yeah, the movies were put on by the 1 Logistic Support Group, with the screen placed at a strategic location for

31:00 one of the transport companies or 17 Construction Group and us to use. I think maybe there were two or three screens. Some of the movies were fairly good. I saw 'Paint Your Wagon' over there, and quite a few others. You'd sit out on your chair and you'd smuggle your beer in, under your shirt. Because you weren't allowed

31:30 to have beer out of the boozer. But yeah.

Any particular type of thing that you boys used to enjoy more than others?

Oh, a comedy. You'd have to have a comedy of some sort. The last thing you wanted to see was a war film. Yeah, yeah, most some comedies that were around at the time. The one that really sticks was ‘Paint Your Wagon’. I thought that was fantastic. In fact we saw it twice, a few of us.

32:00 When things were tough, one of the them would burst into a show tune or something. That was Dick’s influence again.

Humour was important, in general?

Ah yeah, ah yeah. If you didn’t laugh it'd shit you. But again, I keep referring to the fact if you’re a forward scout out on a patrol for seven, eight, nine, ten day op [operation]. Living in the same clothes, eating the same shitty rations,

32:30 how could you laugh out there? How'd those blokes do that. Jesus, that’s tough!

Were you hearing a lot of stories like that all the time?

Yeah, you'd have soldiers come in and you'd know about it. And of course, I met Bob on R&R. That’s me mate. Lives in Toorak. We went to Hong Kong together, and I met him … we’re very close friends. We went up to Cape York for three and a half months. Left twelve months ago tomorrow. And he went in ninth of July.

33:00 I didn’t know him at recruit training, and then of course he went to … I tried to get him interviewed for this, but he wouldn’t be in it. But he has got some stories to tell. He had to fight for his life on many occasions, but he wasn’t interested. But he’s now moved away. He lives on forty acres in isolation at Coonabarabran, on his own. I was best man for his wedding and he’s godfather to my children, and I'm godfather to his children.

33:30 **Let’s talk about that R&R visit?**

In Hong Kong? That came along … we were always told it was best to do it three quarters of the way into your tour, so that would have been about February. We had a choice. A lot of people went home, and I could have come home, but I discussed that with Carol and said I didn’t want to come back for four days. A lot of blokes didn’t. But there was a percentage that did. It'd be very difficult to do. So we hopped on the plane

34:00 and about five of us went to Hong Kong. That was good. We bought the obligatory suits and got ourselves well and truly liquored. We had a look around. We had a look at the new territories, which was Communist then. We went over on a bus. If we'd been caught over there we would have been in trouble. Yeah, and genuinely relaxed, as much as you could relax. But again …

34:30 **Was it quite a challenge to relax at that point?**

Well, it was for me. And a few of us there, they were infantry – front line soldiers. But again, amazing what alcohol does. But yeah, it sort of eased the pressure and the tension to have these blokes go out and you know, because your adrenaline’s been pumping so hard,

35:00 it took a couple of days before you stopped and realised that, “Gee, I'm not going to be under attack tonight,” or “I'm not going to be …” I'm speaking more of the front line boys, here. But then they started to relax, but only three days after that they’re back on the front line again. You know, the equivalent thereof. And I'm back to a roof, and knowing where me next feed is. Yeah.

So what were your priorities in Hong Kong?

35:30 Ah, get out and see Chinese life, one way or the other.

What did you make of Chinese life?

Well, in Hong Kong it’s hard. But to get out to the New Territories, then it’s much the same as how the Vietnamese worked. Subsistence farming, rice, a lot of fish. They had a very … because it’s like Sydney, when it opened up for the Americans on R&R, then Hong Kong too catered for them. You know, you had the

36:00 Boomerang Bar, which was not frequented by females as such. There wasn’t a prostitute around there. But they had draught beer. You could get a meat pie. You could get fish and chips. You could play darts. Well I mean, you could play darts back at the base; but you could play pool and things, you know. The Boomerang Bar, the Kangaroo Club, and a few others.

36:30 I think some enterprising Australians got over there and said, “Gee we’re going to capitalise on the R&R here.” But that was pretty good; and of course you'd go over to the island of Hong Kong itself. I tried to travel like a peasant, but we didn’t have a denomination low enough. I think it was half of one cent – the equivalent in Chinese – to go on the lower deck over to the island. The had a duty free … a big American PX store

37:00 over there where you could buy, duty free. We all bought suits, which is a very funny story. It’s take time but it’s a very, very funny story. Do you want to know?

Yeah, go for your life.

Well, we all wanted to buy suits. And you've got to remember there's a bloke like myself, who's five foot six; and Bob my mate was six foot and a hundred kilos; and another bloke who's with us who was six foot two; and a bloke

37:30 from Katherine in the Northern Territory – territory born, territory bred, big in the shoulders and thick in the head – he used to sing that himself. And there was a fellow of French-Canadian descent whose parents had a timber mill in South Australia. Of all sizes, me being the smallest, and apparently they all wanted to follow me around. So people said, "If you're gonna buy a suit, go to these tailors

38:00 because while they're measuring you up they'll give you a couple of beers and things. And we didn't have a lot of money, unlike the Yanks, so what we thought what we'd do, instead of buying all our suit from the one tailor, we'll make out we are, but we'll only get one there and then we'll go to the next one and drink their beer. Righto, so this is what happened. We all got measured and we're having a couple of beers there. I think we had Vodka for breakfast with our eggs, or something like that. And by three parts of the way through the day

38:30 there's only me left, and we're pissed. We'd all ordered our suits from different tailors, and we're nearly fully pissed and walking along virtually arm in arm, singing things. It was a bit of an awesome sight, as you'd appreciate. And next thing I see is all these racks and racks of suits, and I'm thinking, "Here we go," because I'm not much bigger than a Chinese man; and I'm thinking I'll get one of these suits off the rack. And here's all these bloody suits. And they're going, "Hey, here's one Macca, here's one," and the

39:00 staff are going berserk. They're waving their arms around and they're carrying on in Chinese, and they're shaking their heads and trying to stop us; and we're going, "We're just trying on suits, we're not doing anything bad." And this went on for probably fifteen minutes, and they're getting more uptight. And they grabbed this little girl, a girl about twelve in a school uniform, and she grabs my hand and takes me outside and shows me this sign, all in Chinese writing. And then underneath it say 'Dry Cleaners'. True story.

39:30 **Nice, very nice. So you mentioned one of your priorities over in Hong Kong. Were there any others?**

Oh, a couple of the other blokes went out to houses of ill repute. I didn't go. We did go to one place where they were hush-hush and everything up there and they were showing blue movies from the fifties. But I mean that

40:00 was fairly ordinary so we went back downstairs to another bar. But in Hong Kong itself we didn't see a great deal of prostitution. You had to ask the taxi drivers and they took you somewhere, but I didn't partake. But a few of the blokes did. It's not like Bangkok or some of the other places where you could have gone, and they were knocking on the door and part of the deal was you could buy one for a week. Especially in Bangkok they tell me, they'd get one for the six days and she'd save you

40:30 plenty on duty free clothes, because she was a local. And that was worth the price of … so for six days that woman would live with you and you would make that money on the stuff you bought. Hong Kong was a bit different. We went in the mountains and did a lot of day trips and went out on the junks at night, and we'd just come to a junk and all throw in a couple of dollars and have them take us out around the harbour at night.

41:00 And that was big time for them, you know. And they'd make you cups of little Chinese tea and we'd have a great look around. Not many people did that.

Tape 8

00:30 **John, why didn't you go into the houses of ill repute in Hong Kong?**

I was engaged and I respected that. I knew there were some dangers there. I was, whereas I'm a very red-blooded sexual male, that just in Hong Kong really didn't interest me. And it's not because the women were unglamorous

01:00 or unflattering to you, no, I just didn't think it was … but by God I was tempted. I was tempted, I was surely tempted. There's nothing prettier than a cute little Chinese girl in a short dress on a dance floor. I danced with them, I drunk with them, but I didn't … but they were not professional girls as such, they were hostesses.

01:30 You could have, I believe, have made arrangements with them but … mainly the houses of ill repute were a fair taxi drive away.

Being away from your fiancé for a year, what worries did you have about her fidelity?

No, I trusted her explicitly, no implicitly. She was living at home with her parents and was very close

02:00 to my Mum and Dad. My Mum and Dad would take her out. She went out with my brothers and sisters and I trusted her as she did me. And to this day I believe it the case.

Did you see any cases among men where they got the 'Dear John' [letter informing that a relationship is over]?

I did, I did. Yes, one particular guy, we thought he was going to do

02:30 something fairly serious to himself, and we sort of had to take him under our wing. Yeah, there was quite a lot of that but this was a close case. And his name wasn't John but he got one. They were writing Dear John letters every day, as one would.

Did a lot of men worry about their girls back home?

03:00 I think they did, yeah. Some of them that were on fairly shaky tenure to start with. But I never had that thought.

In your work on the MED-CAPS and so on, what evidence did you see of mixed race and orphans?

Yeah we were starting to get a few of those, remembering that the oldest ones we would have seen would have been four, maybe five.

03:30 A lot of those – a lot of those – would have been taken back to the US. A lot went back to the US. But we did certainly see some, especially with the Negro, the black Americans. It was quite profound in some places to see, quite a number. And that's only the ones

04:00 we saw. There are figures out, but I just can't recall those figures. Quite substantial amounts. Remembering that there were a million and a half US troops there. Yeah. There were Australian ones too, but yeah, it wasn't just … yeah, it was mixed race.

04:30 **We talked a little bit about music and so on, but you also made reference to the fact that you were in the back of a helicopter singing dirty ditties. What were the dirty ditties?**

Oh, you know, the one that goes …

\n[Verse follows]\n "I don't care if it rains or freezes,\n as long as I've got my long-haired Jesus,\n hangin' on the dashboard of my car."\n

And a few of the good old army ones, 'The Good Ship Venus', I remember quite vividly was brought up, and you know, 'Ask Your Mother for Sixpence'

05:00 was brought up. And those type of things – those harmless type things.

Where did you learn those?

I grew up with them. You know, they're local songs that we grew up with. They take off the 'Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner' and things like that.

Do you remember any of them you'd care to share with us?

Oh, they're a little bit explicit. We could probably leave that one alone.

05:30 But no, just in case if someone ever looks at this again, you know. But there's certainly … for further information please contact me over the phone. I'll certainly sing them to the right person.

You could look at yourself as you know, a living repository of toilet humour in the military …

Well, we all are. Although I wasn't as good an exponent of it as some. Some of these career soldiers, that's what they delighted in. They had precious little

06:00 when they weren't fighting overseas to occupy their time other than learning dirty ditties and the like. It was nothing being a National Serviceman compared to some of those fellows.

How would you describe the level of bad language that was used around everyday life?

Not so much in the hospital. But you could hear it over the radio in the field. A lot of it was fairly explicit.

06:30 Especially the Americans. The Americans used it quite a bit when they were under attack or ambushed or whatever. They'd yeah, they were fairly explicit. That was their culture at the time I think. Not so much the Australians. You know, everyone swore and everyone had a bit of bad language, but not as much as they were using at the time. And a lot of that stemmed back too, to the black Americans.

07:00 **So they were using profanity on air and in the clear?**

Yeah, a lot of times you'd hear it. You'd hear chopper pilots doing it as well, especially in the hot areas. But again, not so much the Australians.

Can you compare the level of professionalism between the Australian and American troops? Now, I know that some of you weren't professionals, but the level of training and performance, I guess?

07:30 I think amongst our infantry, when you look at casualty rates and things, our soldiers were more trained and sort of had more comprehension of the big picture – of what they could get away with and what they could do. If they were on patrol then they'd be a certain distance apart or if they needed to be quiet then they'd be stealthy. They would have their wits about them. Now, not being a front line soldier myself,

08:00 but you could see Americans walking back from a patrol and they'd be walking in a group and some of them would be smoking. I've heard some of them having radios on. And the Viet Cong , being a very stealthy, very good fighter, he'll pick that up. And I think a lot of their casualty count would go down to, you know. Whether they'd been trained like that or whether that's just how they finished up and their superiors let it go, I don't know. But it's not only me that says that,

08:30 there's statistics that show that. If you look at some of the books written by Americans they'll say the same thing.

What about in your corps. How would you compare the American medics with you guys?

Yeah, a lot of those were professional soldiers – a lot of their medics that we met. A lot of them seemed to have been in a good while, and they spared no expense or time in training their blokes.

09:00 I know some of those … one fellow I met a Long-Bin that I wrote to a couple of times and met once more over there, he'd been in for three years and he said two of those years were full training. They shot us out after nearly twelve months and we were supposed to be fully well trained. But we picked it up quick, and we could work it out ourselves. That was one of the reasons we were put in that position.

What names did you have for your enemy?

09:30 I didn't go with some of the names that they called them. I got into quite a bit of trouble over this. There was one particular when we had a North Vietnamese soldier – female – brought into the hospital. She was shot and was going to be interrogated, and we looked after that woman for at lest two weeks in hospital. They had a guard on her. She couldn't move.

10:00 She had one leg broken and another with a bullet through bone – leg up, like in a holding thing. And they were calling her everything and I wouldn't stand for that. I got stood down from duty when I was a medic on her side, when I was in surgical ward, because I would not let them abuse her. Like, they were going to … names like Gook, or Nog or Charlie or things like that.

10:30 'Charlie' I could live with, but calling them Gooks and Noggies, I didn't like that, especially the way that POW [Prisoner of War] was treated. She was shot on suspicion. It turned out to be that she was VC [Viet Cong], but it doesn't matter. I stuck up for her and I dismissed the armed guard they had on her. The ward master came in and said, "Why isn't she guarded?' and I said, "I told him to go," so they dragged me in front of the CO about that too.

11:00 **Who were these guards – Americans or Australians?**

No, no, Australian guards. They had someone just sit beside her with a loaded SLR, and they were prisoner detail – prison guards. She couldn't get out of bed in a fit. She had one leg broken and she was all wired up and in a stirrup arrangement, you know. Where was she going to go? And the last thing she needed was a bloke standing over her with a rifle.

11:30 And I kicked up a bit of a stink about that. She could hardly feed herself and I'd go in and feed her. And yeah, I got myself in quite a bit of trouble over that. And because, we did have her in the isolation part of surgical, and we did have Australian troops that had been shot. But I just couldn't see that. There's no reason for that, and I had a couple of mates that were with me on that. But I got particularly in trouble over that.

12:00 **Was it common for you to treat Vietnamese patients?**

Not much. But in my time there we probably had five or six North Vietnamese that were brought in to be treated, especially if they came from Phuoc Tuy Province, where the Australians were. You know, yeah probably there would have been at least that many.

12:30 And there were some civilians there that were run over by some army trucks and jeeps and run off the road. There was one who had his leg amputated because he picked up a flare and was burnt that bad. Another couple died. You get a few in like that. The kids were the worst ones though. That's sad no matter what race. It doesn't really mater to me what race they are, but it's especially hard if it's kids. And then the next moment

13:00 you've got your own fellows, you know.

What about ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] troops?

Yeah, ARVN … we didn't have too many of those because they had their own hospital. I saw the outside of that and I shuddered. Compared to what we had, it was fairly rough. I think we only had … it might have only been three or four ARVN through.

13:30 I remember there were a couple of regular officers came in for treatment at our hospital. They were fairly high ranking officers. I can't remember what they were there for. I didn't have much to do with them. I was either in the RAP or triage at that time. But I can remember them being there.

So you're saying the ARVN hospital wasn't all that good?

Ah, shit no. No.

Can you describe it for us?

Oh, we only dropped some people off there or dropped something off there

14:00 one time, and I just walked around the perimeter of it. It was just virtually like an aluminium shed, you know, they were second hand American shit beds and they were waiting, and it wasn't very nice at all. We had – and I say again, 1 Australia Field Hospital was a bloody ripper – I was so delighted when I walked through that when I got there, I said, "This'll do me!" I don't know what I expected. We were told

14:30 before we went but I didn't realise till I got there how good it was.

We'll move on towards the end of your tour now. I don't know how to phrase this, but you'd been pulled out of a lottery and drafted into National Service, you'd been determined to make the most of it, you'd gone to Vietnam and seen so many ways to die and have your life taken off of you – so how were you feeling towards the end of your tour?

15:00 I was relieved to get out of there. Honestly and truly, I'd had enough. I'd had enough. My time was up. I was only five or six weeks off and I'd had enough. I wanted to go home. I'd had enough. If perhaps I was a regular soldier and I was going back somewhere else, or if I knew I was going to have a good break,

15:30 then I may have been fine. But I wanted to go back to my job. I wanted to go back to my fiancé. I wanted to go back to Mum and Dad, my Mini Cooper S that my mother was driving – and taking off in second gear. My dog, and you know, my life. I wanted to get back to the laboratory – put me back in a white coat, mate, put me in the area I was trained to do.

16:00 So I was happy and tired and I'd had enough.

So if you could look at your tour of Vietnam – like on a chart – how was your morale going up and down as you proceeded along?

Well, the first couple of months was pretty good. As we got more into it and the job became harder, then emotionally you tend to collapse a little bit.

16:30 You still had to do the job. And again I say, and I can't emphasise this enough, I was so lucky to be in the place I was in. I would have probably cope in the front line if I had been an infantryman, and I don't think I would have shirked it. But gee, when you looked at how I was given that part to go down, compared to where I could have been, you know, to this day I'm extremely grateful and lucky that someone must have been looking after me.

17:00 But yeah, so certainly plateaued. You could have good days and bad days like anywhere else, you know. It was just … I knew I could leave it. Which was not so much leaving it was hard, it was getting back into society.

A lot of Vietnam Veterans we've spoken to, they've said that coming back home … in almost twenty four hours they could be back in Australia. How was it for you?

17:30 We left at … flew out at half past seven in the morning and we had to leave five o'clock, drove down, got on the plane – Qantas – round eyed, wide eyed. We're still in our

18:00 uniform. "What would you like to drink sir," and this was on the way home. "Hallelujah! What have you got!" And there was a full plane load – 707 or 727 or something. And yeah, but I arrived back in Sydney after thirteen hours – straight flight, no landing this time, straight back. And back in Sydney. They turned the beer off at Darwin. They said, "You'll need a couple of hours to sober up,"

18:30 because a few of them were pissed. They really laid it on for you on the way home. And I landed back and there was my fiancé, my mother, my father, my brother, my aunty and two uncles all there to greet me. And I'd come back, and it was freezing cold.

19:00 And I was just, yeah, I was just so relieved to get back. And they drove me straight back to Wyong, and the first thing I remember doing – Dad's new Kingswood Holden. And Mum had put my Cooper S out on the road and I just got in it and I drove it around the block. I virtually hadn't driven a car … I'd driven a jeep and an army Land Rover a couple of times. But I drove it around the block

19:30 and I was happy with that; and yeah, went inside for a couple of hours. It was getting fairly late by that

stage, and then I just grabbed Carol and took her home to her place and stayed there for two days. She had a couple of days off work and stayed there for two days. I remember in her bedroom … I woke up and it was early morning … no, it was late

20:00 morning. It was nine o'clock and I'm still in bed. And here's her mother and father and two sisters, because I got home too late to wake them up that night; and there they opening the curtains and looking through into her room. And I woke up and saw them and thought, "Jesus, where am I?" Yes, that day … got in the mini and drove out to the beach – Soldiers Beach – freezing cold. Just to make sure it was still there, that me surf club was still there,

20:30 because I had a month off. I nearly had five weeks off, because I went back for a week before I was discharged. It was hard coming back, because we'd just left the war zone and as you say – twenty hours. I'm back home. It was strange, you know. And people were sort of looking at

21:00 you and saying, "Ooh, geez it's Macca all right, but can we talk to him? Do we talk? Is it OK?" Because I was fairly thin and I looked like I'd been twelve months in a war zone. Yeah, but it was difficult to come back. And also, it was around the time they used to celebrate the Queen's Birthday. First of June or something. And there was a lot of kids letting off the … you could buy the bungers [firecrackers] and things then. And they were letting off these things, and the first couple of bungers I heard

21:30 were like … if you heard a shot go off near the hospital area there, you'd think, "Geez, something's bad, something's going on." So you're very jumpy and the like.

At that point in Australian history the Vietnam War was graphically unpopular, and some of that was taken out on servicemen. What were your experiences?

22:00 Oh, a little bit later, probably a month or so after that, I remember going to the RSL Club with Carol and my sister and the like. My sister, by the way, was a hairdresser. And they pulled me up at Tuggerah Lakes, at the Memorial Club at The Entrance, and said to me, "You're not allowed into the club because your hair's above your collar." And I said, "I'm just returned from Vietnam and I'm a member of the sub-branch." They said, "Don't care." So I had to go out and Irene, Carol's sister, she had a pair of scissors in the car. And here they are chopping my hair off

22:30 to let me get into an RSL Club. I was pretty right at home. I didn't get blood or paint like a few of those did when they marched down the road at Townsville. Which is strange, because Townsville is practically built on army barracks and army ways, but only small things like that. You know, I was asked about it, "What is it like over there?" and about killing women and children, and I was

23:00 only able to say, "Well that's not what I was there to do." But I didn't feel it as much being in a country town. Not as much as they felt it being in town itself. You know, it was certainly around and we were certainly aware of it.

And being aware of it, how did it make you feel? Because you obviously had been doing good work over there?

Yeah, I mean, but so were the … you can't say that

23:30 our front line soldiers weren't doing good work. We shouldn't have been there though, and virtually everybody realised that, but they had to do a job. What were they going to do? It was a bit of 'us or them', isn't it? But yeah, I really felt sorry for those front line troops because they're the ones that marched back. Like, we came back in dribs and drabs. They came back as a bloody battalion. You know, they marched them up

24:00 the bloody main streets, and of course they were highlighted, you know. Who cares about one bloke coming home to Wyong. You it's not going to make news … though the local paper did put me on the second page about how I was back again. Of course, my mother and father had fairly high profiles and so I became fairly high profile because of that.

You mentioned very early on in the day about how you came back from Vietnam there was more of a bond with your father because of that military angle …

24:30 Yeah, he was someone I could talk to about it. 'Cause a lot of people, like at the RSL, they said, "It wasn't a war, it was a police action. Our war went for six years." Well you know, the Vietnam War went for ten years. You try to tell them, "You know, we had fifty thousand troops there and we lost five hundred." That's a fair percentage, and the amount of days that a soldier was on the front line

25:00 and he was in a position where he had to fight or protect himself, compared to what was in the First or Second World Wars … it's staggering. But we weren't privy to that at that stage. But I think people understood it a bit better later when it was more publicized. Buy yeah, I didn't become closer, mainly because I could speak to him about it. And I was back into the RSL a couple of years later and I was one of the youngest directors – one of the youngest Vietnam directors – on the board of the RSL and things.

25:30 And I changed the dress rules. They wouldn't allow them in wearing jeans. I got them in wearing jeans. And you couldn't wear running shoes and I got that changed. Silly little things that I got and that now … well, we're the ones who's keeping these clubs going, because the others are out of it. I mean that was thirty four years ago. And I've marched every Anzac Day. I have not missed one in Wyong. Every one.

26:00 And it was only up till four years ago that I marched with me Dad. Although four years ago he was still in the wheelchair, but I pushed him and we went to the service and we still had a fair bond there. And my brother was in the air force and he did thirteen years. Two years in Malaya. And he's come back with virtually nothing. Oh, they're forging a medal now for them. But yeah. And not long after I got home my brother was conscripted into the army. Brother Peter, my younger brother.

26:30 But he was only in for about thirteen months and there was a change of government and that was the end of National Service. So it was an interesting time when I came back and it was mainly because of my age that I became a bit closer to Dad.

How did you go settling back into work?

I found that a bit more difficult. I remember about four days after I got back home I went out to see the general manager;

27:00 and he said, "Oh, you're back? When are you going to start?" And I said, "I'm having a month off," and he said, "Oh, I thought you'd start this week." I said, "No, no, I've still got another month in the military." And he said, "Do you think you'll stay or are you going to piss off on us?" And I said, "Oh, I'll be around for a while." And I just sort of smiled. And of course I was around till 1986.

27:30 But yeah, settling back into the job, all the blokes were saying … and I was quite quiet, yeah, compared to what I was when I left. You know, I was this cheeky little upstart bastard that went away at twenty one, came back around twenty three, and was quiet and bit more reserved; and I wouldn't say I was big when I went away but I was certainly plump when I came back. And it took a bit

28:00 of settling in too. It took a bit of settling in. And there'd been a few changes in those two years too, but that didn't take me long to catch onto. But again, good friends around me and I'm back playing footie, and the surf club again; and you tend to put things to the back of your mind – which is probably one of the worst places to put it. And you let it just sit there. But what else do you do?

28:30 I went back after a month and was demobilised or whatever they call it within two days – gone, finished, out of there, all over. No thank you, no nothing.

You're mates welcomed you back?

Oh year; look, it was a non stop pissathon after I sort of had my fill with my fiancé for the first couple of days. But then we hit the pubs and it was big time.

29:00 Big time, big time. The blokes I played cricket with and the blokes at the surf club. Yeah, they welcomed me back.

What do you think could have been done differently in bringing Vietnam veterans home that would have alleviated some of the problems they've had?

29:30 Oh, they should have had a one-on-one with a psychologist or psychiatrist, and really, because … they knew a lot of this from the Second World War. A lot of misinformation. I'm not putting it down to the Agent Orange, but to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorders [PTSD]. That's been around like, forever. They knew about that type of stuff I think,

30:00 to be said to you, "Well done, thank you." They didn't do that till the march out parade in 1987. Things like that. I do believe that we had a bit of a medical, but all we wanted to do was to get home and get out of there. But there should have been more done you know, there should have been ongoing treatment as part of it. And we all needed treatment, there's no risk of it. It's no matter how tough you think are,

30:30 it all paled to insignificance psychologically. Everyone. I haven't met a Vietnam veteran yet who hasn't been changed by that war, and I know quite a few vets – career soldiers – who went twice. I even know a bloke who went three times. Career soldier. He's virtually in a building like a vegetable now.

A lot of the World War II veterans would say you were soft for needing all this treatment and counselling.

31:00 That may be true but a lot of those blokes … it was a different era as well, and it was a different war. Maybe we were soft, because they came back to nothing as well. But I mean, they were regarded as heroes when they came back. We weren't. But yeah, it was a different era, thirty years down the track … or twenty five or twenty two.

31:30 We may well have been called soft. But I think that was the least we deserved. But so do they, so do they. There's some sort of … if you could receive counselling then or to know what to expect, because they knew, the government knew. And I'm not now singing the plight of the National Serviceman,

32:00 but I think he suffered more because it wasn't his choice and not everyone went. Certain numbers got out, and if you didn't go you could have gone to jail, so you know, I think they owed that to all soldiers and especially the National Servicemen.

How did your Vietnam experience affect the rest of your life up until now?

32:30 Well, it's something you always think about. It's always there. It's a part of my life. I retired early because of it. I'm on a disability pension from the Department of Veterans Affairs. I … yeah, it stays with you forever unfortunately. I'm a lot better than some,

33:00 although … I live on my own surrounded by a big fence, which is my moat. I still like to have company and I still like to have people around me and I still like to play team sports. I still do quite a lot of the things I did before I went and have since. I've got two loyal children and good siblings and a good understanding mother

33:30 and a bloody good understanding ex wife. Because it makes for a bloody good ex husband.

What experience have you had with what they call PTSD?

Mainly flashbacks and the thought that it's always there. You try to push it to the back of your mind and you try not to bring it to the front of your mind.

34:00 People have said to me, "Doing this interview today – how will you feel about it? What will it do to you?" And OK, it brings a lot of things forward, but by telling someone else and doing this, it relieves you a bit more of the pressure. I think it'd be good for a lot of people to do this, to relate their experiences and bring it forward. Because I do believe that every time you bring it forward, a lot of it can be released.

34:30 You know, you can maybe get over a few things that have been very stubborn in your mind for thirty five years.

Are there any sort of triggers for you that do send you into a flash back; or any little things which make you think back to Vietnam?

Yeah, some. One is … see, I live quite close to the hospital – less than a kilometre away in a straight line. And

35:00 nearly every second night the helicopter comes over and because they land into the breeze, if it's a westerly, whatever. They land, they hover over my house. Nothing wrong with that because I think, "God, someone's having a bloody bad day, a lot worse day …" and a lot of it's the Careflight children's chopper. I don't mind that, but I can be laying in bed and suddenly at some ungodly time of night and you think,

35:30 "Gee, the sound of that chopper …" and it's not unsimilar to what we had as a dust off chopper. But that can trigger me off, but then you think, "My God, that's some poor child, how are their parents, what's happening." And at times I think, "I wonder what's happened," and you hope everything's all right, because you don't know who it was or what it's over or what it was. But you know that Careflight chopper comes hovering over my place and then you can hear it go

36:00 and you always lay … they can be there for a couple of hours but you're always laying there listening to it. That's probably the main thing. And of course they have 'Back to Long Tan Day', which is a really good day with a march and drinks and other sorts of things. And Anzac Day where you start talking to a few people, especially some of the navy blokes who never left ships and the air force blokes who never left bases. And then you talk to a few of the grunts who were out there all day every day.

36:30 **In your life since Vietnam, was there a point where it all got too much, or has it been a constant memory for you?**

It's been a bit of a constant memory. Because I've had a good job and a fairly high profile job, the last fifteen or sixteen years of my working life – fifteen years – that has … I've always had something else to fall back on. But it started to get too much and I thought,

37:00 "Well, I will give it away." But people claim that you've got nothing to do if you retire, so you know, it could get worse. But it hasn't. It seems to have got better 'cause I certainly amuse myself in other ways. It was just a culmination I think. The time had come

37:30 and I'd done thirty seven years in the work force and I thought, "That's nearly enough." And having the ability, with children off my hands, and a good superannuation scheme and help from the department of veterans affairs, that I've been able to do so. And again, still keeping in contact with my profession. I'm on a few panels and attend a few meetings and get rung up

38:00 for a little bit of advice, that makes you feel rather good that you can still be able to contribute.

You obviously kept in touch with quite a few of your peers from that time too?

Yes, a few in particular. There's three or four that I've stuck fairly close with. They're good mates. There's not one of them I couldn't call on in a split second. But you know, I'm probably better psychologically or physically than what they are.

38:30 So it's not uncommon for me to go and visit them to see how they're going rather than them-me. But it's beneficial for both parties when we get together to do. The more you do that though, the more you put

behind.

If you were to say it to some that doesn't know you, maybe over the phone, "I'm a Vietnam veteran", what do you think their image of you would be?

39:00 **Ah, back what they used to say about the First World War, "We're just tired old men from a tired old war." A lot of us now are middle to late fifties going on toward our sixties, some of them not I, but I think they think, "Get over it." The young people say that: "Get over it," tell 'em to get over it. You put yourself in that situation. A few blokes that I play**

39:30 **touch football with. They can't believe it, "You're a Vietnam vet but you're still playing touch foot. Are you still driving?" What am I supposed to be? They say, "We thought you blokes were really old." There might be a little bit of age about us but there's not much we still can't do. And then they smash you in the next tackle.**

40:00 **What about the public perception of the mental state and behaviour of the Vietnam veterans?**

It's accepted a lot more now than it was. They realise that the future of veterans … I mean, how many veterans go around and talk about Anzac Day to the kids. When I first came back to Wyong, and I said I've marched every year since 1972. I have not missed one. And the crowds are getting bigger and bigger and bigger on Anzac Days. And the majority of the diggers marching now are Vietnam vets. The first year, God, I think

40:30 there were four of us. I think last year in Wyong there must have been close to forty. There's a lot more people in the area too of course. But I think there was fifteen hundred at the service in Wyong. Fifteen hundred people there. Unbelievable. You know, in the old days, going back, you'd be lucky to get a hundred and fifty. Look at it now. And a lot of young people,

41:00 a lot of young people. That's where the benefit is going to be I think. The perception is, "We respect that now." The younger people more respect it, that yeah, you did fight for the country.

Tape 9

00:30 **John, considering your involvement as a medic, did you ever ponder more of a medical career? Was that something you thought about or considered?**

It was. I worked with a lot of good surgeons. One I mentioned – Dr Bob McGuiness – was an anaesthetist at Gosford Hospital, he offered me

01:00 when I got out to come down there and work for him in the operating theatre at Gosford Hospital. I thought about it, I spoke to Carol about it, there were some new innovations coming in for the agricultural and dairy industry at the time, and I knocked it back. I look back on it now and think you know, "I wonder if?" But how many times do you look back and say that. Too late now. I did think about

01:30 it though. I was also approached a few weeks before we left Vietnam. The army was recruiting people and they asked if we wanted to get a commission and stay in. No thankyou. I'd had enough of the Green Machine by that stage. But for someone who didn't have a job like mine it would have been a good career, a real good career. But unfortunately that wasn't for me. But certainly the medical did intrigue me, and still does intrigue me, and I try to keep up with

02:00 some new innovations in the medical world.

What do you think you missed most about the green machine?

Camaraderie. To have so many people thrust into the same thing with about the same amount of training, under similar circumstances, yeah, it

02:30 was pretty good. I liked that. The camaraderie, and you could soon sort out who you could rely on and who you couldn't rely on, who played the game and whether it was your game or not. And there were always games to be played. Yeah, it was, I sort of miss that. Not the bumbling around and trying to look after that many people that the green machine was famous for. But that happens in any army with that many troops.

03:00 Especially when they're prepared and ill trained. Because I do believe we could have been trained a little bit better for what we did. But I said that right along. There's things … twelve months before the end of my tour there's things we could have done. But a bit more specialised though, and it mightn't have … but yeah, yeah. I think they're doing that now. There's more specialists in the medical field

03:30 that are in. They're not just waiting on National Servicemen and hoping they're going to learn it quick. But you know, it was sink or swim.

For all its trauma and horror and torment, was there something about the intensity of your

Vietnam experience that you missed when you came home?

I came back to having a month off.

04:00 Within twenty hours of leaving Vietnam I was back home. I had a month off and it was just the highs and lows. There was so much difference in that, that it was very difficult to, you know, comprehend. You'd step back and think about it, and the thing is, you can't tell anyone. You can tell people but they don't understand,

04:30 they weren't there; and the more you tell people, the less they understand and the less you want to tell people in the future. It's one of the big problems with the veterans.

Were you able to find blokes that you were over there with and try to talk on those terms with people who understood what you were talking about?

Yes, yes. With other Vietnam veterans – whether you were infantry or medical or drove a truck.

05:00 You know, you smelled the smells, you knew what it was about, even though you were in different fields. But having mates like Dick and Bob and Bruce and things of this nature was a help. You, it helped them too, not only me. But they had a similar story.

05:30 **You said in the end you put a lot of things to the back of your mind and you appreciated the opportunity today to bring things forward and release them. Do you feel there are other things you want to release that we haven't touched on yet? Are you satisfied that you've released what you wanted to release?**

Yeah, certainly there's plenty of other stories you could touch on. But virtually, that's all I have to say about it all. You know, without going into separate little stories again that applied to a few of us that were there at the time.

06:00 But I can't sing the praises high enough of the nurses, the hospital, the chaplains, the Red Cross workers, my colleagues … it was an amazing little hospital.

06:30 It was well run, when you consider it was run by the green machine. It if had been run privately it would have been run even better. But they weren't. But it did a lot of good work. There's a lot of soldiers today, alive, that would have had no chance in other conflicts. To have the injuries they had, to get them in, to get them out … that's physical; but you know, mentally,

07:00 I mean you can't do much with that, unfortunately. But we all suffer from that. But the physical wounds, in the hospital with the staff and the like, I think there is … there is I think a really good book put out by a couple of our nursing sisters about 1 Australian Field Hospital. To anybody, that would be a bloody good read.

You've returned to Vietnam a couple of times?

I've been back twice since.

How was that?

07:30 Fantastic, absolutely fantastic. You talk to a lot of veterans and they say, "Hate it; couldn't go back, I could never go back," or "We hate the bastards," and I say, "Why? What did they do to you?" And they say, "Aw, they killed us, they shot at us." But you think about it. Why did they do that? I've been back. I didn't have any problem with the Vietnamese back when I was in the army. I never had any problem with them. We were invading their country. They weren't invading ours.

08:00 We were there because of the ANZUS pact – whether that be right or wrong, we were there. I really think that we owe the people a lot. And I'm glad we took in the refugees when we did. Being back there twice really gives an insight into how some of these people live, and the meagre way some of them live. You see some of the North Vietnamese soldiers or some of the South Vietnamese soldiers. They don't have the repatriation

08:30 that we have. They were given the money to buy a cyclo. Or they gave them a job. I think they were given the equivalent of forty Australian dollars to buy a cyclo, which means you've got to peddle people around for a living for the rest of your working life. That was their rehabilitation. And that was the North Vietnamese soldiers. So it's very difficult and I like talking to them. But going back there, people can sort of tell. Once they realise that you're

09:00 not Americans, because they don't really like the Americans, because they're brash and they throw a lot of money around and they're loud. Whereas we tend to go over there and we're a little more sort of incognito or we don't make as big a fuss about it. But they can tell. They say, "Have you been to Vietnam before?" And you say, "Yeah I was here before," and they say, "Oh, were you a soldier?" And you say, "Yes," and they say, "Oh, my Dad was a soldier. Would you like to meet him?" Of course I'd like to meet him whether he's North, South or whatever he was.

09:30 And I've met quite a few North Vietnamese soldiers, and they hold no animosity towards. They hold no fear or problem to do with us at all. And geez, haven't some of those blokes done it tough. And the first Australian soldier who thinks, "Oh, I've been badly done by it all," go over and have a look at what

they've had to put up with too. So as I say, we were invading their country. They weren't invading us. And that's the way I

10:00 view it, and I think they're a bloody terrific race of people. I really like them, and I hope that I can go back with my children before too many years are up.

I believe you started doing some work with vets in the central coast area generally, and that led you to become a little bit frustrated with some of the blokes as far as the way they were treating the system?

10:30 Yes. I joined the central coast Vietnam veterans' association. A good mate of mine started that. I was the treasurer of that. We virtually didn't have any money so we put out of our own pockets for that. I was the sixth one. That's my number there: 00006. And you get a lot of people come in

11:00 and we say, "All right, we're here to help you, to help you get the benefits you're entitled to." So you get a lot of people join the Association and they get their benefits and then you never hear from them again. And there's quite a number, and this goes for everywhere – you talk to a lot of people, like veteran's welfare and the like, and there's quite a few of them saying, "Yeah, you get these blokes in and they promise they'll stay and help with this and do that," but they just get their benefit and they're gone.

11:30 That's all they really want. And there's a few of them there putting stories across that make you think, "Gee, I wasn't everywhere but I've got a good idea of what happened there, and you know, they're trying to rort the system." That's what I believe, fairly well. But I suppose that happens with a lot of repatriation systems.

Are you satisfied that the Vietnam vets have finally gained the recognition and understanding that was lacking?

12:00 I do, I do. They've certainly got more than they originally got. But again, a lot of this is due to the impact of younger people on Anzac Day. We are realizing that we are the next generation of diggers. We are the soldiers who are left now. And people are starting to think about the wars, and they can see us marching down the street on Anzac Day and a lot of them come up and say, "What do these medals mean sir? Can you talk to us about that?"

12:30 And when you explain it to them they understand that. And now they can turn on their television any night of the week, and you know, you get Iraq, you get Afghanistan. They know what happened in Timor. People are more aware. And a lot of this has been taught in schools too. Part of the curriculum now deals with places soldiers have served whereas it wasn't earlier.

13:00 **Is the Anzac tradition important to you?**

My word it is, my bloody oath it is. And important to Australia too. Very important to Australia.

Why so?

Well, being virtually a fledgling nation we haven't … a lot of our lineage doesn't go back to the Roman times and whatever, and it was very important, very important on those days to have the Australian forces, or

13:30 the Australia-New Zealand forces to fight. And I do believe that made Australia grow up and realise what sort of a country it was. And that was because of that force on the 25th of April 1914.

How do you feel about the way the Vietnam War is often portrayed in Hollywood, or in films in general?

14:00 Some films that I've seen – and I haven't seen a lot of these – are portrayed not too bad. Some of them are just outright absolute rubbish. They're made for an audience and people who don't know what it was really like. They say that in all journalism now : "Don't let the truth get in the way of a good yarn." And that's how I think a lot of it has been portrayed. But there's been a lot of

14:30 good ones. One of the best ones that I've seen was the Australian one, with people like Graham Kennedy, 'the Odd Angry Shot'. That was one of the best Vietnam stories that I've seen. Some people laugh at that, but tell them to have a good look at it.

How do you feel about war as a general concept these days?

Oh, dead against it. I think if Labor does get into office this year

15:00 and they pull the troops out by Christmas, then good. I don't believe we should be there. It frightens me. There's just so many devices and one pull of the trigger and you can obliterate a lot of the world, and it just frightens me a little bit.

15:30 **Have you noticed parallels between the war you were involved with and the Iraq War?**

Well, the Americans going in … yeah, there's quite a few parallels about how we're being drawn into it. But there's a lot more nations joining into this. But I just can't see any end to it. You can place every scenario on the table and you can pull it apart any way you want,

16:00 but I just cannot see an end to it and it frightens me. You know, it's just a waste of lives, whether you go down the weapons of mass destruction path, or the overthrow of Saddam. I think that was more likely what it was all about, but where's it going to end now? You know, give them their own sovereignty but they don't have the troops. They won't be able to control it. It'll go on and on and it'll be another Middle East blood bath forever.

16:30 But again, like Palestine and Israel. It's just frightening, and I haven't got the answers. And I listen a lot and try to fathom it all, but I'm not smart enough to work it out.

In general, how do you reflect back on your war experience now? What sort of emotions and feeling does it bring forth to you?

17:00 At times the feeling is … it's a dream. Did I go through that? It brings back lots of good memories of comradeship. It brings back some bad memories with the mayhem and injuries and bloodshed. But you know, after thirty five years you look back and think, "Did it really happen? Was it a bad dream? Will I wake out of that dream?"

17:30 And you know damn well it's not, but what can you do about it? But I got back a lot more unscathed than most, or a lot. I'm really thankful for that, and thankful that I was in the Medical Corps, and thankful for the fact that I learnt something. I'm thankful for the fact that I thought that I helped people, whether it be

18:00 our own soldiers, or Vietnamese children and orphans, or Vietnam in general. I have no qualms about going back because I think I may, for some people's lives, have made a little bit of a difference. I wasn't on the end of a rifle, but I still think I made a little bit of a difference to people's lives. As far as a soldier might think,

18:30 as far as you know, I repelled the enemy. I looked after Vietnamese children and North Vietnamese soldiers as well as our own blokes with the same deal of passion. I believe that and that's the way I look at it, and those thoughts will die with me.

19:00 **These tapes are going to be around for a long time. I just wanted to offer you the opportunity to pass on a final message or a final comment. Is there anything you want to pass on at this point to future generations, to your family – any final message you want to get across about your involvement in war and how you feel about war?**

19:30 I'm rather offended by war. I was at war because my country virtually ordered me to go. I was conscripted. I had to go, or go to jail. I could have had that option, but it wasn't an option I was willing to take. We did the best we could with the training we were given, we felt we made a difference, and I still believe to this day that we made a difference. We made a big difference. In the scheme of things, whether we did,

20:00 well that's up to the younger generation to work out. It's a process – you'd have to talk and whoever's looking at this, not only get my story, but get someone from the front line. Try to get someone who was on the Vietnamese side. If you're that more interested, go over to Vietnam and go to the museums. Look at it from their side. Go to the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh. Read some of his books.

20:30 There are some good books around. Make up your own opinion. Don't be influenced by just one interview. Make up your own mind. But war is absolutely futile, absolutely futile.

Good on you John, thanks mate.

INTERVIEW ENDS