Australians at War Film Archive

Dennis Mitchell (Mitch) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 9th July 2004

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/2128

Tape 1

00:41 **To begin with, thanks very much for doing this, we couldn't do without you generously donating your time so thanks very much for taking part. The first question I have and I mentioned this just before, we need a summary of your life so without going in to any detail**

01:00 **can you just take us through from where you were born and grew up. As I said, a summary of your life starting with where you were born and grew up.**

I was born in December 1946. I was the epitome of the war baby. Dad came home from the war and married Mum and I duly appeared. We lived in Regatta Road, Fivedock in Sydney at the time

01:30 and don't have strong memories of that. I can remember a pre-school and a kindergarten about halfway down Regatta Road. Dad and Mum organized to buy a block of land at a place called George's Hall which was a very rural sort of area out the back of Bankstown. Now it's almost the epicenter of Sydney and very densely occupied. At the time it was just wide open fields. Our road had cobbles that had been laid by convicts.

02:00 Dad built a house out there with the aid of a builder. It was a two bedroom and sleep-out fibro cottage as was typical of the time and we moved to George's Hall. That was a great period. It was an area where many of the then displaced people from Europe and migrants were arriving so we were multicultural in 1950

02:30 long before the term had been invented. I went to school there, George's Hall Primary School and that was all quite typical of the period. I enjoyed it. I had at that stage two brothers and towards the end three sisters, there are six kids in our family. Very normal growing up, running amok round all the forests and trails and riding bikes.

03:00 All the usual stuff that kids up to the age of twelve did. Developed some good strong friendships most of which were from a non-English speaking background although there were plenty of English people and Scots, but also people from Mediterranean countries and the Baltic states and Germany. You really got a,

03:30 I did develop some interesting appetites for strange foods which I still enjoy. My parents were concerned about the level of education that would be available to me in high school at the local high school where all of my classmates went so they had me sit an examination for a selective high school called Fort Street Boys High School. One way and another I slipped through that so I traipsed

04:00 off to Fort Street Boys High school. That was both good and bad. The bad of it was I left all the people I knew who went off to Bass Hill High School behind, the good part of it was that it was an academically demanding regime and so I was able to achieve better than I think I would have had I followed all the mates. The other difficult thing about it was it required an hour and a half's travel to get there and an hour and a half's

04:30 travel to get home. I caught a bus from George's Hall to Bankstown to the train station at ten to seven in the morning and I arrived home at half past five in the afternoon. That also removed other contact that I might have had with those old friends but I made good new friends at Fort Street. Did all the typical things, played rugby union, played in the first fifteen in my final year there. Surprised myself

05:00 with my academic results. I remember driving down to the Herald building where they would post the results in the window and you could pore over them and there was a crowd of a couple of hundred students down there and when I saw the results I was surprised, I thought they must have made a mistake. I didn't think they should be as good as they were. By the time I'd sat for the leaving certificate I'd already organized work as was easy to do in those days, we're talking 1964.

05:30 I went to work for a mob called Australian Abrasives in a clerical type role without any clear ambition of what I wanted to do. That continued for the next couple of years and I had fun as an eighteen, nineteen

year old kid. Motorcars were a pretty big focus, girls too. I had money in the pocket, relatively well paid

06:00 compared to my peers so it was a good time. Lo and behold along came a call up notice [for National service] and I duly reported to the Addison Road Marrickville Depot in July 1967. My father recalls, he took me down and he recalls me walking through the gates with the little bakelite suitcase in the hand

06:30 and also walking through the gate at the same time was another fellow, slightly taller than me, fair hair and we said g'day as we walked through the gate, "Called up?" "Yeah, yeah", and off we went. That fellow was Dave Fisher and we became very, very good friends and did most of the rest of it together. Off to Kapooka and the usual 1RTB [Recruit Training Branch] training. I quite enjoyed that but I made the call

07:00 when I knew that I was called up that I was going to give it a really good shot. That it was a rather pointless exercise to be a dog in a manger about it. If I'm in, I'm in and I'm going to be in a hundred per cent. So I threw myself in to that and I enjoyed all of that, not the cold mornings or some of the junior NCO [Non-commissioned Officer] bastardry but you roll with that. At the end of that, close to the end of recruit training

07:30 the entire training platoon was told it was going to artillery. I didn't enjoy that prospect, I'd heard that artillery at North Head was a lot about what's bad about the army, regimentation and a lot of marching and blankoing[?] and that sort of stuff. So David and I made a pact that were that the case we would resist that and try and go to infantry because it seemed to me that infantry

08:00 was the epitome of what the army was really all about, if you wanted the full experienced that's where you needed to be. So when we were told that both David and I objected and said we wanted to go to infantry and the response was, "Well if you're that crazy, we're not going to stop you". So we had to have another interview with the psychs and that seemed to be okay and off he and I went to battle wing at Ingleburn for infantry corps training.

08:30 Towards the end of that period it was clear that we would probably end up in reinforcement wing and be sent to Vietnam as a replacement for somebody who had been killed or injured or medivaced [medical evacuation]. That wasn't as pleasant a prospect as perhaps joining a battalion and going away as a unit. Coincidentally Reg Beasley and Ross Bishop respectively

09:00 the OC [Officer in Charge] and 2IC [Second in Command] of 3 Squadron SAS [Special Air Service] came through Ingleburn recruiting for SAS or inviting applications to contest the carder [early training] course. It was called carder course in those days, now called selection. I didn't really know very much about what SAS was about and nor did Dave but it seemed better than going to reinforcement wing so we stuck our hand up and had interviews and no doubt they perused our records

09:30 and on the proviso that we were prepared to sign on for a year and become the equivalent of a regular soldier they allowed us to contest for carder. We had Christmas in Sydney and traveled to Perth by train. Fantastic trips those, very fond memories of some of those. The carder was

10:00 one of sixty eight carder and there were about fifty or sixty on it I suppose. We both got through that. The carder course was designed to not test you physically although some people did fail because of the physical stuff but really it was designed to determine whether you had the mental toughness and the commitment and also the tenacity

10:30 to keep going when things got a bit tough. Low and behold we got through. I think it was a pretty good carder because I think about fifteen or sixteen were accepted out of the fifty or sixty and that was a relatively high proportion. Then came working up with 3 Squadron for its deployment to Vietnam which would have been due in February 1969.

11:00 That was a series of courses, para [parachuting] course, med [medical] course, patrol course, sig [signals] course and an awful lot of bush time. A typical week was Saturday and Sunday playing larry doodle round the town at the Ocean Beach Hotel or the ABH or the Swanny and into the nightclubs, the Zanzibar in Perth. On the trucks on Monday morning and out in the bush until Friday lunch time. Come back, get your gear, cleaned up and then go and do it all again.

11:30 However, 2 Squadron which was then deployed to Vietnam was suffering a lot of losses, not KIAs [killed in action]. The only KIAs we had in Vietnam were accidental and most of them we killed ourselves. There were a number of med-evacs and cas-evacs [casualty evacuation] back to Australia and they

12:00 needed reinforcements to be able to continue to operate. So those of us that were short timers were wormed out to go to Vietnam and join 2 Squadron as reinforcements. That duly happened. I arrived in country late November 1968 and Dave followed mid-December 1968. Then came

12:30 the normal SAS operational activity in country. 3 Squadron which was my squadron duly replaced 2 at the beginning of March 1969 and I soldiered on with 3 Squadron until I came home later in the year after the tour. Coming home was a very difficult period. I had a number of events

13:00 occurred which made those first few weeks quite a difficult period to the stage where I put all that away and tried to get on with a normal civilian type life. Went back to work through a strange set of circumstances which I'll tell you about if we get into the detail. I was very lonely at the time because as

you can imagine you are

13:30 extremely close, the bond between SAS soldiers is very, very close and I just didn't have that. I was in Sydney, my squadron was still in Vietnam finishing their tour and the rest of them were in Perth. So it was a lonely period. I met a girl, married her. I think now, I know now out of loneliness, not out of love. Although we both played the game for the next seven years, that relationship failed.

14:00 I think because I married her for the wrong reasons and I regret to this day the pain I delivered to her over all that. We had three daughters and they are wonderful, grown up now, one in Canada, one in the States, one in Port Fairy in Victoria. They're good kids. They've come through it all very well and we're very close. After that break up I was in Canberra at this time

14:30 and I met my now wife. We were marred in 1982. We have two children from that marriage and she is the love of my life. I've been very lucky. The kids are great too, seventeen year old daughter and twenty one year old son, they're really good kids. Concurrently I built a career in commercial property and I've been quite successful in that and that's delivered

15:00 us a very comfortable lifestyle. All of the Vietnam stuff I put away for a very long time until Chris, my wife in 1987 when the welcome home parade was on got all the detail and created the circumstances in which I could go. I had that stuff put away in a cupboard for a long time. With her

15:30 encouragement and perhaps even prodding, very perceptive, women, I went. That was a cathartic experience. I got right out of the cupboard, recreated those bonds, joined the SAS association, become an office holder in that. I was president of the association here for ten years in Canberra and recreated those very close bonds that now are

16:00 a very important part of my life. In fact I'm off to Perth with Chris at the end of August where I'll catch up with some people including a fella called Lou Kennedy I haven't seen since a very difficult day we had on New Years Day 1969 when Lou said to me, "Mitch, if we get out of this, we both go to church on Sunday," and I readily agreed. I haven't seen him since those days so I'm looking very forward to that and catching up with a lot of people over there that I still know and the patrol

16:30 commander from that particular patrol, Mick Ruffin, we'll probably stay with him for a while. It's a bond that we're able to put down and walk away from years at a time and then just pick it up again as if there had been no intervening period. I really enjoy that. So that's the story. I'm into the twilight of commercial life. The next few years will see me out. My wife Chris works for defence and she'll probably go on for a little bit longer, she enjoys all of that.

17:00 We'll be empty nesters pretty soon, the seventeen year old is already making noises about going to England in a year's time. I look back on my life so far and think that's been a pretty fortunate one.

All right, that's been a fantastic summary and we'll come back to just about all those things in as much detail as we can especially the time in country. To begin with though we want to find out a bit about who you are and where you came from. So I want to know a little bit more about your childhood.

17:30 **To start with maybe you could tell us a bit about your parents, your mother and father.**

Yep. Dad was the son of a tailor, David Mitchell who spent a lot of time in the hinter land of south east Queensland. Childers was where Dad grew up, sugar cane farming etc. Mum was the daughter of very Sydney urbanite

18:00 parents and they met during the war when Dad was on leave. He was staff sergeant in a supply platoon and spent most of the war in the islands to the north of Australia. My memory of those years is that it was quite a nurturing family but not overtly.

18:30 Mum and Dad were not given to open displays of affection as very few people were in those days. But there was no doubt in my mind about the love and nurture that was in the family. With a large family of six kids there was always people about to knock about with. My younger brother and I spent most of our time together. My elder brother is

19:00 five years older than me so there was a bit of a gap there that didn't allow us to knock around together quite as much as we could have though we did play tennis together. It was a single bread winner family and there was never enough money to go round with six kids and one income and not a high income at that. Mum occasionally got some casual work working in the counter at woolies or something like that. Basically she was

19:30 the home maker and how she managed to do all the things she did including create a very comfortable home with most that we would want, feed us all and educate us all on that salary. It's just amazing. I'm not saying that it was affluent, on the contrary we often went without things that other kids had but we had other compensations. I look

20:00 back on that period from the years that I can really remember which from about five onwards through to when I left school at seventeen as broadly a really good part of my life. My Mum and Dad were ambitious for me which is just as well because I wasn't. They created the circumstances in which I was

able to convert into a relatively good

20:30 lifestyle later in life. They were and my Mum in particular, not, they didn't cope easily with failure or failure to achieve all that you could and certainly there was plenty of push and discipline was tight. There were certainly limits beyond which you went, you knew you were going to get in to trouble and that was often

21:00 physical but it was never that part of it was only ever delivered with my good in mind, I'm quite certain of that. I love my Mum and Dad, who are both still alive, very, very much. I admire them immensely.

Who was in charge of that discipline in your household, your mother or your father?

Mum.

How did she mete it out?

It's, Mum was

21:30 a flash of anger or frustration. A bit of a slapping around, occasionally the back end of a broom, never, ever physically damaging. In terms of my contemporaries of the time, that was the norm. That's how it was done. Now of course there's an entirely different attitude to corporal punishment. At the time you knew if you stuffed

22:00 up you were going to get a kick in the bum.

What did you get in trouble for as a kid?

Mostly failing to meet Mum's time deadlines. Having too good a time off with my mates and saying I'd be home by five o'clock and turning up at quarter to six. Mum's worried, where am I, is anything wrong with him, and that manifested itself not only for me but for my siblings.

22:30 A clip around the ears for being late and a lecture.

Is there any one occasion that stands out as a time where you were spectacularly in trouble for something?

No, I actually can't recall any one particular incident. I do recall one with my younger sister but the eldest of the three girls who was taking piano lessons with

23:00 the nuns in Bankstown. I was on my way home from work, I would have been eighteen and money was always short and I ran out of petrol. So we were expected home at a certain time but we didn't make it and I sent Margaret on ahead of me and said, "You keep walking and go home so Mum doesn't worry too much. I'll go and organize some petrol and I'll be home shortly", which I did. By this time Margaret was getting into trouble

23:30 a lot and I do remember putting myself between she and Mum and saying, "Whoa, this is my fault. If you're going to have a go at somebody have a go at me". Mum's reaction was really about worry and her response was the relief was also whap bang.

Earlier on when you couldn't make it home by your mum's deadlines, what were you generally off doing, what did you like to do?

Having fun. We had a group of mates,

24:00 a very cosmopolitan, I should say multicultural group of mates. There'd be four or five of us and we'd be chucking rocks at each other across at cutting on Henry Lawson Drive or we'd be with the billy carts on a thing called billy cart hill seeing who could do three hundred and sixty degree wheelies at the bottom and looping over. Nobody wore watches, a watch was a luxury that children didn't have

24:30 and the mind just got focused on having fun and slipped away. Then pulling the billy cart home up the hill on which the house sat you'd go, "Oh boy, this is not going to be good. I'm going to be late. Oh dear". I do remember those moments of trepidation.

You've mentioned it a couple of times, can you tell us a bit more about George's Hall and the kind of nature of the area?

You wouldn't, if you go there now

25:00 it's totally different. In those days it was a plain with a few hills so to the, I suppose it would be the north west of Bankstown airport which was there at the time. The need for blocks of land for the war service homes people, for soldiers that had

25:30 returned was great so they carved it up into all of these quarter acre blocks on a big grid. It had quite a history, George Bass was the George in George's Hall and he had a place down by the river, it's right on Georges River. There's a place there called Battery Point where the old New South Wales regiment had a muzzle loaded cannon. So it had quite a history going right back

26:00 to the settlement of Australia in the seventeen hundreds. It was relatively sparsely populated. In our

street, Rex Road, of the, in our part, a hundred blocks there were maybe ten, fifteen houses. So there were huge areas of bushland which in those days was called green belt. We could just run anywhere

26:30 and in those days there was no concern about stranger danger or those sorts of things. So we just wandered through these tens of square miles of bushland and vacant blocks and played in building sites and down, a tip down near the creek. Tips were always fun for kids, see what's going on. It was always as well a bit of

27:00 a lover's lane and there's nothing like a few pebbles chucked on to the roof of a car and then a scoot away for ten year olds for a bit of a giggle. It was a really good time. Also I learnt such a lot about other parts of the world, the way kids were in other parts of the world and that bought with it a tolerance for other nationalities and other races

27:30 that we've really only started, it certainly wasn't prevalent in Australia at the time and we've really only seen in Australia over the last twenty years or so.

What were the backgrounds of some of these multicultural friends?

Baltic states, white Russian area, the western part of Russia. German, some Mediterranean countries, the northern Mediterranean countries

28:00 and I've developed a taste for their foods ever since, some real treats. Some of the stories the Kazonkas who lived across the road from us escaped the iron curtain by hanging underneath a railway carriage and you just shake your head at that sort of stuff. What they had to do to escape and try and build a better life for themselves and their kids,

28:30 some amazing stories.

What about the fact that the area was a soldier settlement area, did that have any noticeable aspect to you?

I may have misrepresented it by saying it was only soldier settlement but there were certainly a number of people who used their defence housing loan to acquire blocks there. The majority of the then residents were not from Australia.

29:00 There were also English and Scottish as well I must say. A good friend of mine, Dave Stuart lived just down the road. There was nothing overt about the fact that there were a number of returned soldier's families there at all that I could see anyway. Rather the strongest influence was on the ethnicity and the varied ethnicity of the friends

29:30 and family. I should also mention that my Mum and Dad made very, very close friends with a great many of them and are friends with them to this day with those that are still alive.

What did you knows about the Second World War as a kid?

Very little. I was cognizant I suppose from history classes in primary school although there was funnily enough a greater focus on the First World War when I was going through primary school,

30:00 the Emden, the Sydney, Gallipoli and that sort of thing. So I didn't have much of a view about the Second World War at all. Dad was not forthcoming about that. Dad didn't march on Anzac day, didn't frequent the RSL [Returned and Services League]. I was aware he had a couple of friends from those days but I didn't see them as being army friends, I just saw them as being family type friends and

30:30 we played with their kids. I had an uncle, Colin Hines who was captured in Singapore. I was quite close to Uncle Col, he was a really good bloke, and Auntie Fran. He was captured in Singapore and spent time in Changi and then was shipped to Japan as slave labour. I vaguely became more and more aware of that story perhaps as I got into

31:00 the teen years. I didn't hear it from Col, I heard it from Dad.

Can you describe your house at George's Hall?

It was built on foundations of concrete bricks because you couldn't get clay bricks, they just weren't available in the shortages after the war. It was hardwood framed and Dad and the builder he engaged built all that themselves.

31:30 It was internally and externally lined with AC sheet, fibro sheeting and belted in with galvanized flathead nails over which one had to put a splotch of white paint to prevent corrosion. There were many houses in George's Hall where the owners couldn't afford to finish them off and paint them so you had all these white houses with polka dots all over them where they'd slapped the paint on the head of the nail. It was

32:00 cement tile pitched roof. It had two bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen and an amazingly small bathroom. I don't know how we managed that. There was no sewerage so the dunny was up the back in a little outhouse and there was a septic system. And to accommodate the size of the family it had a back verandah which designs in those days did but Dad filled that in and we boys slept out there and the two girls and

32:30 then three slept in the smaller bedroom of the house and Mum and Dad the bigger one. I've driven past it a few times since and I don't know how eight of us managed, I really don't.

Where did you fit in in this group of six?

I was the second child. I have an elder brother John who is five years older than me. Then there was myself, my younger brother

33:00 David, there's three years difference between us. Margaret, the eldest of the three girls, Leonie and Kathy. They were quite a bit younger than me. Indeed I can remember my sister Leonie getting in to some trouble at school when the teacher's were putting something of a spin on Australia's involvement in Vietnam at the time and I was there at the time. I do remember Leonie who can be a touch headstrong,

33:30 bless her heart, being sent home from school one day for dissension because she didn't agree with the view that the teachers were putting forward on the matter.

We might come back to that. So who were you closest to then?

My younger brother.

Can you tell us a bit about him?

Yeah. We had, as close brothers do, a love/hate relationship. We'd be biffing each other one minute and wrestling and asking Mum to intervene

34:00 in arguments one minute and then having a terrific time the next. He's a good friend, David. He lives in Sydney now so we don't see him as much as we might like or any of the family for that matter but certainly we see them six or eight times a year. Most of them are clustered around the central coast. Davie missed call out but he followed me through

34:30 Fort Street and I think call up had finished by the time he got to twenty, I believe that's the case but I'd have to take that on notice. He did similar things to me. He mucked about after school in various jobs and found a career path and ventured on it. He lived in Canberra here for quite a while. In those days we, he used to tag alone as the little brother

35:00 of the group and sometimes he was bullied as little brothers are. Actually he stood up for himself pretty well, David. He wouldn't cop too much before he'd stand up.

What about your elder brother, did you have a good relationship with him?

It was a good relationship but there was a large gap between us so he was far more mature than I ever was. He was going off to work, his first job was at the Commonwealth Bank when I was just starting high school

35:30 so that was the sort of gap that we had. While we were friends, good and friendly, there wasn't as close a bond formed as there might have been had we been of a closer age.

Was he a role model in some respects for you or did you reject that?

No to both. No, he wasn't a role model and it wasn't because of rejection. It was that

36:00 he was not in my sphere to become a role model. John was off doing other things. He went to Homebush Boys High School. He had the same travel problem and I was at primary school at that time so I left for school at nine o'clock and came home at three o'clock and he left for school at seven and came home at half past five and then was studying hard. So we just didn't interact because of that age group and because of the circumstances

36:30 that his stage of life created whereas my younger brother and I were in the same stage. We were both at primary school together and of an age where we could muck about.

Are there any older people who you can point to in your childhood who acted as a sort of role model for you?

Certainly my Dad.

How did that work?

I just looked at the way he conducted his life and

37:00 and I thought that he did that extremely well. He's a very honest man. He and Mum made tremendous sacrifices to make sure that we as kids got as much as we could. Strong work ethic and not to say he didn't have a view about discipline either. I can remember I copped a wooden rule from Dad once, it was the most shocking thing in my life, I'd never had that before, so it must have been

37:30 a really big deal. He and I shared a common interest in cars and things mechanical. I've inherited his mechanical aptitude. I found Dad quite easy to talk to. He could talk to me as a parent but also he could talk to me as an equal as well. I must also say that I admire my mother

38:00 very much as well. The work that she did which was sheer drudging work for fifteen hours a day she didn't stop trying to keep a very large family together on a small amount of money and doing everything she could herself. Growing her own veggies, we ran our own WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK yard so we had eggs. Later in life it became my job to lop the head off the Christmas WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK so we ate from the block

38:30 and supplemented income. I can remember Mum and Dad going and gathering wild flowers when Dad was out of work for a while and selling them on the side of the road to try and supplement income so we could have as best a lifestyle as we could under the circumstances. So I admire them both absolutely immensely. In terms of a life model, I think my Dad.

39:00 I think when I look at my memory of what he was like then, that's what I wanted to be like.

You mentioned Christmas, can you describe what happened in your house at Christmas time?

Sheer bedlam basically. We didn't have quite the traditional Christmas. Chris, my wife brought other traditions to our household here, the stocking

39:30 at the end of the bed and other more traditional Christmas type things. For us there was a bit of a build up. We'd be out on school holidays and we'd be out playing up, not playing up but playing hard all day. Christmas tree would go up so there'd be a sense of anticipation there. I don't remember Christmas lists but somehow or other Mum and Dad discerned what would be a welcome gift

40:00 for each of us and that was generally one main gift. Those gifts would end up under the Christmas tree in the living room in front of the fire place a few days before and there'd be peeking and rattling and trying to check out what it might possibly be. Other gifts would arrive from the close family. They usually took the form of small toys or socks or underwear or something or other like that. Christmas

40:30 morning we were out of bed by daylight basically. We would gather round the tree. It was Dad's job to be Father Christmas and hand out the presents and still does to this day for a much larger family now. He would call the name and hand out the present and you'd rip the paper off and be delighted, invariably delighted

41:00 by what you found. Some of the rellies' [relatives] presents, you know, more socks, but in fairness those rellies gave those things because it would then be money that Mum and Dad didn't have to find to provide those things themselves. I recognize that now but at the time of course a toy was what you wanted. I can remember one particular present which I thought was absolutely wonderful, it was

41:30 a battery powered car, had a lead and you could steer it with the wheels and make it go backwards and forwards. Very crude technology by today's standards but I just thought that was absolutely wonderful, Christmas on a stick.

Tape 2

00:47 **Was there any religious influence in your family growing up?**

Yes there was, my Mum was a devout Catholic. Dad was,

01:00 agnostic's probably too strong but he was ambivalent but he was happy enough for the kids to be bought up in the Catholic faith. There was a Catholic church that was within the parish of Bass Hill which the parishioners built only behind our house so we could walk to it within five minutes. I attended service on Sunday morning and later during my childhood was trained as and became

01:30 an altar boy. Served mass with various fathers. I particularly remember Father Corrigan who was a crusty old traditional catholic priest and there was some younger ones too whose company I quite enjoyed. Interestingly when we look today at the stories that are coming out about the difficulties some in the clergy have had with

02:00 their dealings with young people, I never saw any of that, not a bit of it. I suppose when I was about fifteen or sixteen I started to question all of that and dropped it which I'm sure my mother didn't enjoy although she allowed me to do so. The religion, it wasn't all pervading

02:30 but certainly there was a recognition of the religion and attendance at church on Sundays. It was also a good social outlet too. I knew many of the parishioners who were my contemporaries and by sixteen I was starting to think about girls as well and there were a couple there whose company I quite enjoyed.

03:00 At that stage of life also I was playing footy on the weekends. I played for Petersham rugby union, played with some other friends with Shamrocks which is the rugby league team, often on the same day. I was playing first fifteen with the school and studying, nowhere near enough my mother says but apparently enough.

03:30 Life became too full to continue to pay lip service to an activity, the Catholic church to which I did not have a strong commitment.

Another big social event that happened in your childhood was the coming of television. What do you remember about that?

Yes, I do remember it. I remember

04:00 the first time I saw it was in a store window, a tiny little black and white screen with lots of curves in it. It was an amazing phenomenon and subsequently permanently changed Australian way of life. It was 1954 or '56, something like that and some of our neighbours got television sets well before we did.

04:30 And I remember asking if I could go and watch television, watch the 'Cisco Kid, Lone Ranger and some American sitcoms which had this candy view on life, My Three Sons and that sort of thing. We got a television set I think in about 1959 or so. I remember Mum bought it on the never never from

05:00 Waltons. A fellow from Waltons who wore a hat, my Dad wore a hat in those days too, would come and knock on the front door once a week and collect the money for the never never on the television set. Viewing of television was pretty strictly controlled by Mum and Dad. We were allowed certain programs at certain times but come half past eight

05:30 it was study time and it didn't go on before dinner. We ate at the kitchen table and we ate together as a family and then the TV could go on. So it was probably only on three hours a night I suppose and come half past eight we all had to go off and do other things and get ourselves ready for bed. In terms of an influence though in forming what I am, it had I think very little

06:00 because the content was invariably American. Mum and Dad didn't watch the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] very much so I didn't see very much of that although now our television set for Chris and I anyway spends most of its time there. I don't think what I saw on the television set had any real influence on my formative years because I could see that it just didn't relate to me or my lifestyle and was largely fantasy. It certainly had

06:30 a profound influence on Australia during the Vietnam War.

How far afield had you travelled as a boy? Where did you go on holidays?

We had an annual holiday and that was usually in a caravan. I remember Dad bought a second hand plywood caravan and refitted it, it had to be a very big one to cater for us all. Roundabout Christmas time

07:00 we'd hook the van on the back of the, would have been the 1954 Dodge in those days and subsequently a Chrysler Royal and put as many kids as were going. My memory is John didn't come on those too much because he was at school or work. The rest of us all piled into this great big old yank tank with this huge van on the back and we would go to rellies. We would go to my Aunt Judy

07:30 and Uncle Pres's farm on Oxley Island, a dairy farm on Oxley Island near Taree, on the Manning River. We'd have a couple of weeks there including Christmas sometimes. We'd just run amok on the farm, run through the cornfields, drive the tractors, milk the cows and do all those wonderful things you can do on farms that become less wonderful when you're doing it on a daily basis. Or we would go to my Uncle Col and Auntie Fran's place at Young. They had

08:00 about five or ten acres I suppose with a cherry orchard on it and a great big old house. Once again we'd just run around as free as you like, run through the orchards, drive tractors again and Mum and Dad would spend that time socializing with their peers. Later on when I was from about the time I was fourteen I suppose we did a number of trips one that encompassed Canberra

08:30 and places south. We did a big trip up to Queensland, the first time I'd straddled the border and all that sort of stuff. Still go the photos around somewhere or other. So that was holidays. We did that once a year. I remember them fondly, they were good times.

Living on the fringes of Sydney, do you think you were a city kid or a bush kid or something in between?

I don't think I'd label myself one way or the other

09:00 but if I think back on it now, I was a city kid because I was going in to Petersham every day to go to High School. I was friends with city kids. I suppose yeah, I was really a city kid.

How difficult was it for you to start up at Fort Street High given the travel?

That was tough and particularly knowing absolutely no one and thirteen year old

09:30 boys are pretty much the cruelest people in the world but within three or four months I was settled in to that, had made a group of friends and started to play sport and started to settle in to it. It took a little while but it was fine.

What were your academic interests?

Probably reflected in the results I got, economics and English. Both Ron and Lauren

10:00 share that passion for the English language and literature and they're both excelling at that level. I also liked things commercial and that's why economics, it enables you to take some maths which I'm not very strong at although I've become much stronger in my life because I've had to and to combine that with the written word and some theory and ultimately that's what economics is about. They were the

10:30 areas of strength for me. I enjoyed out of interest things like geography and history but I wasn't passionate about them.

Are there any books that you remember being particularly impressed by?

The ones with the dirty bits in it. A book we had to study called Onion Head and I remember it had a particularly salacious dirty bit in it. We really enjoyed that. No, my reading

11:00 was boy's own adventure type stuff, Biggles, I love Biggles. I've always been interested in aviation and currently I'm involved in that. Not yippy westerns so much but certainly English authors of boy's own adventure type stuff. That's what I enjoyed reading. We got those books from a travelling library. The Bankstown city council had a big van that would come to the school

11:30 and other places in the area and you could borrow books from the van. I was an avid reader and still am.

What outlandish dreams or ambitions did you have about what you wanted to be when you grew up?

In terms of dreams, I wanted to be an airline pilot but I had my feet on the ground well enough to know I'd never get the maths for it. I did not consider a military career

12:00 to achieve that although I was a member of the air training corps, the air force cadets but I did that for the interest in aviation rather than as some way that I might achieve that goal of an airline pilot. To some degree I suppose I regret that I didn't push harder for that, that I did settle both during the latter years of school and after school I did settle for

12:30 mediocrity to a degree. Where I was was pretty good and why rock the boat, why chase the dream. In retrospect I think being an airline pilot is a rotten job. I know quite a number of them now and I probably wouldn't thank you for it but at the time it was an exciting dream.

Was that about aviation, about travel?

It was about aviation. I've always been fascinated by aeroplanes

13:00 and I suppose the sophisticated life that I imagined these people must lead. I now know quite different, it's drudgery. As all fourteen, fifteen, sixteen year olds do I suppose, got absolutely no information, I imagined that the life must be very grand but indeed it's not.

Where do you think your interest in planes came from?

I really

13:30 can't put a finger on it. I don't know, perhaps I over read Biggles too much but it's certainly been a passion all my life and it's really only in the last twenty odd years that I've been able to afford to indulge that passion. I can recall getting in to trouble in primary school for not paying attention to what the teacher was doing up on the blackboard but rather drawing Spitfires in the back of my exercise book and

14:00 if it wasn't a Spitfire it was a car. So I've always been interested in things mechanical and why things work, the physics of why things work the way they do. Aeroplanes are where all of that comes together, more so than cars because there are a whole lot of laws that require an aeroplane to actually fly that all have to work together and I find that a very interesting combination to consider.

Were you inspired as a

14:30 **teenager by the space race?**

No. I do remember the sputnik launch, well the sputnik period but it was so remote from us as to not really register on my radar. Oh, that's nice, you know.

Are there any international events or political things that you knew about and were interested in?

I do recall

15:00 the concern about Indonesia's intentions at the time. I do vaguely recall that there was a level of disquiet about this huge neighbour to our north. I do recall the Cold War issues but only a fleeting acknowledgment of the fact because again it was all so remote.

15:30 I'd be hard put to put my finger on Russia on a map up until the time I was eleven or twelve. I recall

that the tensions in, vaguely recall the tensions in Malaya and that Australia had some forces there but it was a very peripheral acknowledgement.

16:00 If it meant something to me I don't remember it all I just can vaguely recall being aware of it.

What about the Cuban missile crisis?

Yes, I certainly do remember that. That was a very important, important is the wrong phrase, that really did intrude on the consciousness because the press at the time

16:30 and as we subsequently read, quite rightly, were concerned that that was going to be the trigger for a third world war which would be nuclear. I also recall I was at high school at the time that it was a topic of conversation by those teachers that were teaching modern type subjects. The Latin teacher didn't go near it but the geography teacher did and I do recall discussing it in class.

17:00 Was I fearful of it? No. I don't remember feeling any sort of concern about what it might mean to me but it certainly was a subject of some interest to the whole population I think at the time.

Were you ever given any information about nuclear war or was that something that was taught in class?

No, never. We lived

17:30 in a paradise in those days and I don't think it was a fool's paradise, that would be a misnomer. We were so remote from the rest of the world and we were so inwardly focused ourselves that we thought the world ended at Manly Beach. I don't recall having any concern about the threat of a global nuclear holocaust.

The other big international event was the Kennedy assassination. Where were you?

Yes, I remember.

18:00 I would have been seventeen when that occurred and I do remember that vividly. I had an old Morris A 40 that I inherited from my elder brother. I remember standing at the counter in Larke Hoskins spare parts department in Bankstown waiting to buy a part for this Morris and they had the radio on and over the radio came this news and it may well have been on earlier but it wasn't

18:30 in my conscious. I remember listening to it and I remember the very moment where I was when that occurred. I also remember Kennedy, I was conscious of Kennedy prior to his assassination and he seemed to me to be quite an ideal man. I don't know whether that was the machinery behind him but I thought his speeches were just brilliant and his presence was quite imposing. I admired the man

19:00 and I was very sad when he was assassinated.

He was a good catholic too. He would have been popular in your family.

Indeed he was although as it all turns out later and more and more information has come out about President Kennedy perhaps not quite that good, like many of us.

What about broader social trends, a lot of young teenagers were getting swept up in rock and roll and stuff at that time.

Yeah, I did all that. I went to the Beatles concert in White City in Rushcutters Bay in Sydney.

19:30 My interest in music was Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, certainly the Beatles and we went to dances at Hurstville which were still being called fifty fifty dances. We tried to impress the young ladies there. They were always much more mature than we and I'm sure we must have sounded like absolute fools but we thought we were pretty good

20:00 at the time. In terms of the music I was a modern, for the era, modern pop kid, really interested in pop music, Yard Birds and all that sort of stuff.

Tell us about that Beatles concert, that's become a historical event of note.

Well I had a part time job when I got home from school I'd deliver medicines for the local chemist. I think

20:30 I got a couple of quid a week for it or something. I saved to buy the ticket and a couple of friends of mine with me and Bob Morgan and I went. You would not recall the old White City stadium but it was an old timber stadium that was originally built as a boxing venue I think with wooden pews. A terrible fire trap, I hate to think how anybody could have got out of there if somebody had

21:00 dropped a cigarette butt or something. The seats we could afford meant that the Beatles were these little people down on a stage far away. In the end it was a rather unsatisfying experience because we were surrounded by post-pubescent girls who spent the entire concert screaming their heads off so not only could we vaguely see these

21:30 four smallish people way down there on this square stage perhaps I'm overstating this, they were

perhaps a hundred metres away, so you could see them but you certainly couldn't hear anything over the screaming. I recall a rather bruised back because the girl behind me used my back as a way of relieving her tensions at the event. But I was there.

22:00 I suppose there's only a couple of thousand people that could say that. Perhaps that was the real attraction, that I could say I was there.

What about girls yourself, when did you get your first serious girlfriend?

Probably not until I was eighteen. Certainly we had school dances at Fort Street Boys High. Once a year the Fort Street

22:30 Girls High would come. They were very proper ladies and that was all very proper, very supervised and the dancing was traditional. Also once a year the Burwood Girls High would come and that was a lot more fun except they used to bring supper and that was the experiments that they had in Home Economics so the food was terrible but the company was good fun. We did dancing and there was the odd occasion to slip away for a bit of necking

23:00 which always stopped at the neckline. Stopped above the neckline I hasten to add. So that was going on. There were the dances at Hurstville. There were some social events through the Catholic church. I was quite keen on a couple of my contemporaries in the neighbourhood. Robin Spiller, Karen Faulkiner,

23:30 I hope they never read this. So we would take opportunities to be together. Karen and I used to go, she had a big paddock opposite her place and we'd just go and talk for hours on end. She was a real soul mate. We subsequently dated a few times. But the first serious girlfriend was a girl named Marian Almer who I met at work.

24:00 That was a boyfriend girlfriend thing. We went places together, we had proper dates. That lasted up until I went in to the army.

What sort of things would young couples try and do in the early sixties together?

Very rarely involved alcohol interestingly enough. Most of it was driving.

24:30 There were lots of picnics. In those days driving to the Central Coast from Sydney was a really big deal. So you'd drive up to Avoca, so there was a lot of beach culture. We used to go over the Spit Bridge to Manly quite a bit. It was largely beach but sometimes Blue Mountains, go up the Blue Mountains. This is when we had cars and could drive.

25:00 Certainly the drive in, that was an almost weekly ritual, Friday nights, see who you could smuggle in in the boot and all that sort of stuff. I don't recall going to the pictures. We certainly did when we were younger, that was a Saturday ritual when I was in primary school and start of high school was we would go to the Jewel picture theatre in Bankstown, go in in a bus and sometimes

25:30 Dad would pick us up afterwards. We got a shilling. It was ten pence in to the movies and you had tuppence [two pence] for lollies. In the era we're talking about it was beach, picnics and drive-in. Perhaps when we turned eighteen and nineteen a bit more of a pub culture came in to it but it was rather incidental rather than

26:00 driven by the pubs. There was some good music being played, it was just the start of the Sydney pub band and there was a place called the Sundowner in Punchbowl which we used to go to on Thursday nights. It was all pretty good clean fun really although there were plenty of attempts to force one's attentions on various young ladies who had

26:30 greater or lesser degrees of, restrictions the wrong word, but they were more or less prepared to go so far.

You talked before about throwing stones on cars at lover's lane, did you ever end up there yourself?

Oh yeah, absolutely, my word.

What went on down there?

A bit of necking and

27:00 petting. It was almost a ritual on the way home from the drive-in. You'd find a spot along Henry Lawson Drive and it was I suppose looking back on it now it was probably pay back by the young lady for taking them out, you were allowed to kiss them and perhaps get a little bit more intimate, but not very.

How well informed were you about sex?

Terribly. It was

27:30 not a subject that was ever discussed in our household. I never got the birds and bees talk. I think because Mum and Dad figured out I had some sort of a view on it already, I don't think they deliberately avoided it. I learnt about sex from my fourteen year old contemporaries at high school which is not a

good place to learn it from.

Were they exercising

28:00 **their opinions or was that all just talk?**

All just talk. I'm sure we were all virgins until we were, certainly sixteen.

Your first job, can you tell us a bit more about that, you said it was quite boring, what did you actually do?

I worked in the supply office at Australian Abrasives and I purchased materials that were necessary for the operation, the manufacture

28:30 of abrasive products and/or the machinery that produced them and particularly machine tooled type stuff. That continued an interest in things mechanical. I knew what it was that I was being asked to buy. That was basically placing purchase orders and going through the administrative process that meant they ended up in the right place and got paid for. It certainly wasn't exciting work but I was paid

29:00 eleven pounds a week which was quite a good salary by my contemporary's standard. For me work was just a means to the money. I didn't find it a driver of itself.

What did you spend your first pay packet on?

Paying back Mum and Dad the money I'd borrowed from them I think. I think I paid two pounds ten board and I had to pay Dad back

29:30 for the money he lent me to buy my car which cost fifty quid so I think I was paying him back at a quid a week. The rest of it I spent on fun, going out, putting petrol in the car of course but going out and having fun.

What was that first car you had?

I had a hand me down from my brother which was a 1948 Morris A 40 but it proved unable to be registerable by the time

30:00 I had a licence. So it was a 1954 Hillman Minx with a little one litre or less side valve engine and four speed gear box column shift, bucket seats, a dinky little English car which used oil at prodigious rates. Such that I had to find a place called Marefine which

30:30 re-refined used oil because I couldn't afford anything else to pour into it. I had that car for a year and then I had a Simca which was just another kettle of fish. I've always had the best car I could afford, it's always been something of a passion.

The Vietnam War was on at this time, it'd been on for a long time but Australia was into it in 1965,

31:00 **what did you know?**

'62 really because we had the W00B[?] then.

Sorry, you're right. What did you know about all that, what was coming through to you as a young man?

I suppose it was the consciousness of the Vietnam War was a slope. You became aware of it and you became more and more aware of it as the issue of conscription got closer to where you were at the time. My first recollection

31:30 of that and I can actually remember us committing advisers to Vietnam, I can remember the W00B and I thought nothing of it. I thought it's a small group and that's what we're doing. I didn't think about the motives of why we might be doing that or not. It wasn't until '65 when we made a commitment for regular troops who would take a combat role that

32:00 it really started to become in the front of my consciousness but at the time I and I think almost every other Australian thought this was a good thing, that this was a country that wished not to fall under the yoke of communism and that had sought help from the free world and that as a member of that

32:30 free world we'd agreed to help and most of us thought that was right and proper and that we should be there to help. I think really that was the consensus right up until '68, '69 when the tide really started to turn against our involvement. That's my consciousness of it anyway.

You did mention the Cold War before but what did communism mean to you?

I had a number of views about it, some of them driven by the Catholic church's view which as

33:00 you can imagine is pretty rabid. Also by the incident of the Cuban missiles. My view of it was that it was a totalitarian state which imposed ruthlessly its will on its citizens. I think that's probably still pretty close to the mark.

What about when conscription started, how did

33:30 **that change things?**

Initially because at that stage it was still some years away for me I was aware that there was that possibility but sixteen and seventeen year olds have a horizon of perhaps the next two weeks not the next three or four years. So it wasn't until I really got to eighteen and further on that I started to think about it, this thing's getting hotter and

34:00 I'm getting closer to the date when I might be conscripted.

Did you know anyone, your brother's friends or did anyone you know get called up?

In the early days, no, but certainly in the last twelve months, yes. A number of them did in fact one of the friends of that group I was talking about, that multicultural group where we used to run amok all over the George's Hall was a fellow

34:30 called Michael Mook who lived four or five doors down the street from me and he must have been older than me. He was called up perhaps in the intake before mine and when I was, where was I, I was in Sydney but I was in the regiment so I might have been on a bit of leave after para course or something like that, he was killed in a

35:00 contact in Vietnam. I went to the funeral. That made it pretty real.

Just trying to cast your mind back to before you were involved personally, what sort of media coverage did you watch about the war and what came through to you as a young man?

The news was not required watching in those days for me.

35:30 Mostly what I got was from newspapers and my consciousness of it was we were doing the right thing and that there was almost a fight between the black hats and the white hats was the sort of view that I had at the time. The black hats were starting to push this thing very hard and the white hats were having to put more

36:00 effort and resources into it. I can remember the decision to go from two battalions to three battalions in the task force and thinking at the time, this is starting to really get pretty hot. Hot's the wrong word but it's starting to escalate. My overall impression was that we were doing the right thing in Vietnam and that

36:30 I didn't actually see it at the time as being in support of the alliance that we had with the US which effectively it was. I saw it at the time as Australia doing it's bit and it was right and proper that we should. I started to become aware of the cost because I do recall the press and TV on Long Tan and

37:00 to lose that many people in one day took it out of the realms of a minor police action and into the hot war sort of territory. I do recall becoming conscious that there was an escalation in the commitment and indeed the cost.

So maybe you could take us back to the very moment where you first heard about getting called up

37:30 **and how that happened. Tell us what happened.**

One had to register for national service and that was a piece of paper you got from the Post Office and filled it out and put it in. Then low and behold that piece of paper there arrived in the mail. It simply says you've been called up for national service, you will report to Major HG Moran at Addison Road Marrickville Depot at such and such a time on such and such a date.

38:00 That was it. It was as simple as that. Your number fell and out you go.

What were you emotions on receiving that letter?

They were twofold and let's deal with the negative one first. The negative one was, Mum's going to hate this. My first thought was this is really going to knock Mum about, she's really going to hate this.

38:30 The positive one was I was looking forward to it. I didn't have strong career ambitions, I was working for a purpose and that was to earn money, really as simple as that. I didn't derive any great pleasure from going in to the office, it was simply a means to an end. So I saw it as an adventure and I was quite looking forward to it but at the same time being

39:00 unable to let my mother know that.

What was your parent's reaction?

Mum was devastated. Dad was a bit more sanguine but Mum, she really hated it because it was clear that, certainly to her, that conscription was for the purposes of filling the ranks for Vietnam deployment. She had already decided when the letter arrived that that's where I'd end up and as mother's do went through

39:30 all the possible outcomes of that, some of which weren't too good.

What did she say and do when she heard?

She opened the letter first as I recall and when I came home she had had her tears and had got to solid Catholic stoicism. She was

40:00 quite blunt about it, "You've been called up," and I went through a range of emotions too including, "Oh boy, what are you going to think about this Mum," and to the other extreme, "Oh good, this actually might be a bit of fun". I approached it with no trepidation and no reluctance, none at all.

Tape 3

00:45 **We're up to the point of being called up and you turned up at Marrickville. Can you tell me what happened? Talk me through that morning.**

Okay, I haven't got very vivid memories of it.

01:00 Dad drove me down, Mum wouldn't come and there was a tearful farewell at home. Mum's not one given to open displays of emotion so it was traumatic for her. Dad drove me down and sort of parked opposite, I can remember seeing these two columns and iron gates between them. I had a little pressed cardboard suitcase thing with some personal effects in it.

01:30 Dad shook me by the hand, wished me luck and off I walked between the gates. As I mentioned earlier almost at the same time another fellow walked in beside me and we started talking and his name was Dave Fisher, He came from the northern suburbs of Sydney, called up in the same intake and we probably gravitated towards each other because

02:00 the unknown was something I'd prefer to face with somebody else. I had no idea what was going to go on. Then there was a process of administration. I think we got there mid morning but I'm not certain about that, yeah, it would have been mid-morning. There was a process of administration, a medical. Then we got on a bus and went to Central station in Sydney. We got

02:30 a feed in the railway refreshment rooms and got on a train in the early evening to go to Wagga. That train arrived in Wagga in the early hours of the morning, two o'clock, three o'clock or something or other. Another bus out to Kapooka, 1RTB at Kapooka. There was, I can't remember

03:00 whether we got a sleep or not, but the following day was more issuing blankets, finding barracks and administration sort of stuff. I think that took the next day, issued with uniforms. Then there was another day of putting all that together and finding out where things were, polishing boots, all of that kit type stuff and then the

03:30 young lieutenant who was a national service lieutenant, I can't remember his name, he was the training platoon commander introduced himself and his staff and we got in to recruit training which as I say, I quite enjoyed, most of it anyway. It was, some of it I could have done without. The weather as you can imagine in July in Wagga it's pretty cold and

04:00 I didn't enjoy some of the unnecessary bullshit by the junior NCOs but I took it as being part of the deal.

Just a few questions on what you've shared, personal belongings, what had you packed?

I was in civilian clothes and I think I packed another set of civvies and just the ablutions tackle, shaving kit, toothbrush, I don't think I took anything personal other than that.

04:30 **When you got to Marrickville was there anyone that had been called up didn't want to be there and was trying to fail medicals?**

No, I don't recall that at all. I do recall there was a group called SOS, Save Our Sons of women who were peacefully protesting on the same side of the road as Dad pulled up. They had some placards up, with the SOS, Save Our Sons symbol. That's the only

05:00 memory I have of anybody who was against it all. Everybody I ended up there with as I recall just went through the process. I don't recall anybody trying to avoid it. By the time it gets to that it's probably too late anyway.

The Save Our Sons protest, what did you think of them going in?

I thought they were honorable people. I thought they were mothers who had sons who were serving overseas

05:30 and I thought they had a right to make the point as long as it was done properly, it is a peaceful protest. Part of Australia is you're entitled to do that. I didn't think ill of them. I don't recall thinking very much of it at all, I just said, "Oh yeah, there's the Save Our Sons," and moved on.

And this first medical at Marrickville, what did they take you through?

06:00 My recollection is it was pretty thorough, not to the stage of blood tests. I think there was a urine sample but not blood tests and that sort of thing. It was mostly about the physical inspection, touch toes, examination of the body. It was designed I suppose to confirm the previous medical because you'd already had one. As part of this process you had to go in

06:30 to Kent Street and have a medical. That would be where if anybody wanted to get out of it, they would attempt to do so. And many did by a variety of means that have become notorious ever since, eating strange things, a pack of aspirins or something. I had the opportunity to get out at that time when I did the medical in Kent Street before this letter arrived and the inspecting medical officer said

07:00 "You've got some acne on your back and that is cause for me to fail you on the medical but it certainly wouldn't stop you from going if you wanted to, what do you want to do?" and I said, "I want to go," so by the time I got to Marrickville I was well and truly committed as would most others have been.

The acne on the back, did that point to some medical thing?

No, it's a teenage

07:30 thing. Had a couple of pimples or something.

Okay. The journey down to Kapooka, I can imagine that everyone's probably a bit nervous about the coming events, do you remember that and how people were?

I don't think I was nervous at that stage. I wasn't apprehensive. I was looking forward to it with some anticipation. I spoke with Dave,

08:00 we talked to each other all the way down. We didn't sleep very much. Pretty hard to in those old railway carriages anyway. He had a similar view to me that we were going to make the best of it and that we were quite looking forward to it.

This initial training at Kapooka, what sort of things was the army trying to train you in?

I think that they were going through basic

08:30 army type skills so that you learnt some of the weaponry that would subsequently be used. You were tested on the range to see whether you could actually hit what you were actually aiming at. An introduction to the M26 grenade. Didn't see claymores [mines] there. To the rifle propelled grenade which is an anti-armour weapon.

09:00 Little old F1, the little sub-machine gun, useless thing it was. And the SLR [self-loading rifle]. There was that sort of weaponry training and range training and there was a lot of physical stuff. There was stuff to build up because you had to pass a physical fitness test at the completion of training. I haven't got strong upper body and the big one I had trouble with was climbing up the rope.

09:30 I don't know how high it would have been, twenty feet or something. I did a lot of work on that to make sure I passed that okay. There was stuff about being in the army, military law. One I remember was the when we first started they took us to the movie theatre and showed us the movie Zulu and the purpose of that was to show what a small group of people who had discipline and who followed the rules could do.

10:00 That was quite a good introduction, great movie too. So admin, military law, the structure of the army, how the ranks work, weaponry and fitness I suppose would be the three things you would say. There was also some focus on learning to live within a military environment as well. You know, keeping the lines in first class shape, getting the bed folds just right, all the creases

10:30 on the clothes in the cupboard perfect. Nonsense when you look back on it now but what it was about was getting you ready so you could live comfortably closely with other people in a military type environment.

Any fellas not cope with this dramatic change in their lives?

Yes, there were a number that I can recall. One in particular that had some difficulty with that. He did get through although I think he failed

11:00 the physical but he did get posted somewhere or other. I imagined he did go off to be blanket counter somewhere or other. There were a couple who struggled with the, were not used to being spoken to harshly or yelled at and just standing there and copping it, a couple who struggled with that and there were also a couple who struggled with

11:30 the offensive part of it, the weaponry part. Who really didn't want to have anything to do with the guns. All of them, I can't remember anybody who wasn't there at the end who didn't start. The army took them all and during that process would have figured who could cut the mustard in what sort of a unit.

12:00 In the training platoon I was in there were only a couple of minor incidents that were rebellious against the circumstances and my memory is we all paraded at the end of that and went on somewhere and the

vast majority went to artillery.

Just a couple of those examples can you remember what they were that were rebellious against?

Yes. There was an awful lot of

12:30 clothing and bed linen ended up chucked out a window one night when there was a surprise inspection and it didn't pass muster for this particular person. He was a bit of a grub anyway and any group of thirty people is going to have a continuum of where you sit there and the inspecting officer chucked it all out the window and this fella did the cruet and lost it for a moment. It was momentary

13:00 lapses of control.

Did the army also try and set up a system of internal discipline where they disciplined the whole platoon rather than the actual individual?

That was the norm. If one person stuffed up the entire platoon paid the consequences. Therefore there was peer pressure on those that had stuffed up to get it right next time. That was the normal

13:30 way that they disciplined people. As a result there was quite strong peer pressure on them to perform. If one person in the room of four didn't get the bed folds just right that whole room of four would be sent for five laps of the parade ground with rifles above the head. That was a necessary thing to learn because later on in operations you had to pull your weight and if anybody's

14:00 not pulling their weight and not doing the right thing then it will drag the rest of them down. So I can see why that was done. At the time I did think it was unfair but subsequently I can see why they did it that way.

So accommodation wise you were in rooms of four?

Yeah, they were brick barracks and with probably twenty rooms each containing four people, small divider down the centre

14:30 and an ablution block which we were responsible for keeping cleaning and tidy, the whole thing.

Do you remember occasions where you were disciplined for your room mates?

Yeah. I can recall those. I can recall having to double around the parade ground with rifles at the high port a few times. I recall one occasion when I caused it too.

What happened there?

Little problem with the brass on a dress belt.

15:00 The front was polished but the back wasn't. Who'd think he'd look.

So in respect to disciplining one another, what did you do to pull someone in to line so that next time they learnt their lesson?

It sort of escalated although not with the group I was in. I was in a room, Dave was in the room, a bloke called Smith, I can't think of his first name now and

15:30 another, Kerry Mongan and we got along pretty well together. If it's an incident like not polishing the back of the brass belt everybody just said, "Oh yeah, dickhead Mitch," and went and did it. But some other groups had higher problems because we'd all come from very different walks of life. Some people didn't have quite as high a standard of hygiene as perhaps some other people

16:00 and I'm aware of one incident where that room had to be broken up and indeed the grub so to speak had some, call it contact counseling, if you know what I mean.

Could you explain what you mean?

He got a thumping. "Get yourself into gear, you're pulling the rest of us down".

16:30 The talking and the increasing level of pressure didn't work so he got a flogging.

Did that change his behaviour?

They split the room up after the flogging because the training staff became aware of it but my recollection is yes, it did change. Perhaps not to the extent that everybody would have liked but there was a real effort then to conform.

Initially with Chris [interviewer] you used the phrase NCO

17:00 **bastardization, what sort of thing, what did you mean by that?**

Doing nonsense type things because you're told to. Junior NCOs and I'm sure it was designed deliberately anyway, would have you do things that were absolutely pointless but only done because they wanted to demonstrate

17:30 that they had the power to make you do that and the much easier way forward was to do it rather than to resist. That was all part of building the automatic reaction, if you get an order you follow it and not think too much about what the order was. Strangely enough that was a totally different concept to the way SAS operates but in the rest of the Australian Army you get the order you don't question it, you do it. So

18:00 from this perspective I see what the bastardization was attempting to do but at the time I just used to shake my head and say, "Silly pricks". I'd go and do it anyway.

What sort of things are we talking about?

To clean the bathroom floor by the least expedient means. Clean the ablution block floor the best thing was a

18:30 brush on a long handle and some suds and then mop it out. They would take that away and require you to get down on your hands and knees and do it with a scrubbing brush. Dumb way to do it. If you look at it, it's the most inefficient way to do it but it was about developing an automatic reaction to just follow the order.

It sounds like the army's trying to conform you obviously to be disciplined, to be like one but

19:00 **did fellas show their individual characters in certain circumstances?**

I think most people and certainly I did operated on two levels. When you're in the uniform and you're doing the army thing, you conform. That was not only the least painful way but also I think we could all see that that was what was necessary if we were actually going to be effective. The other level was when knock off time came and

19:30 after a while we were allowed to go up to the digger's boozer then you could be yourself and just relax. We tended to operate on two planes, okay we play the game when the game's got to be played but we can be ourselves when it doesn't have to be played.

Australian's are often thought of as a bit of a larrikin side, part of our culture and part of us as individuals, how did that sort of demonstrate itself at Kapooka?

Probably less so at Kapooka. Certainly manifested itself magnificently

20:00 in later postings but Kapooka was relatively, a very disciplined environment. There wasn't a lot of skylarking going on at all. I can't recall any incident that you would describe as larrikinism but the humour was pretty raw and we all had a good laugh from time to time.

You mentioned earlier just coming to the armament side

20:30 **a couple of fellas that initially didn't want to have any part of it, how was that policed as far as the security and safety of all that, of using weapons?**

Australian Army is a magnificent training organization, was then, is now and it has this step by step process that you will go through to get you to the level of proficiency that they want. It is very much really small steps at a time and

21:00 certainly when I did parachute training they didn't strap a chute on you, take you up and say, "Jump". You spent two weeks getting to that stage by little incremental steps, one step at a time so when the time came for the first jump, you just went, didn't even think about it. That was the way that they dealt with people who were a bit recalcitrant about the weaponry. It just became initially handling the weapon, learning how to pull it down, learning how dangerous it could be

21:30 if it wasn't treated with utmost respect and by these little incremental steps just one step at a time, by the time it came to go and shoot the weapon on the range, it was fine.

Leadership as far as the NCO's and officers at Kapooka, what was that like?

I didn't pay that any respect. I might have a different definition of leadership than you.

22:00 They were the bosses and you did what they said. Leadership to me is an innate quality in a person that makes you want to follow them not because of what they say or what they order but rather because of what they are and who they are. I didn't see anybody in Kapooka that I would call a leader.

How did you feel as a young fella, saying, "I'll give this a go, this military side

22:30 **of things," yet those in charge you'd look upon them and don't really regard them as leaders?**

I don't think it concerned me at the time because I recognized that Kapooka was recruit training, it was a sausage machine. I thought, in fact I knew that it would be much different when you got into an actual unit itself and you started to bond with those around you. I saw

23:00 Kapooka as a bit of penance you had to get over and done with before you got in to the real stuff.

You were doing basic training there but were they doing anything in particular to prepare the

men for Vietnam?

Vietnam was a subject that was often mentioned particularly in terms of weapons training. The platoon sergeant had done a tour of Vietnam with a battalion. I did

23:30 pay him some respect. We didn't get to see him very much, I don't quite know why, most of it was done by corporals. The subject of Vietnam was a relative constant during weapons training along the lines of, "You'd better learn this because it won't be long before you're going to need it," sort of stuff.

Excellent. Could you share with us how you realized that the platoon you were in was going to be posted to the artillery

24:00 **and your decision and discussion with David that that's not the direction you wanted to take?**

Yes. The rumour mill in a little close community like that works pretty well. One had to do duties, you had to go bash dixies [wash dishes] in the mess and one of the duties was also working in the training battalions orderly room so that was a magnificent source of all the rumours

24:30 and I don't remember how it became known but it did become known that our platoon and one other platoon would be posted en masse to artillery. David and I had a chat about that and I expressed my view that wasn't really what I wanted to do. I was resistant to artillery because I'd heard this bullshit castle story which subsequently I think was true. They did have an excessive focus on the bullshit part of military life. More importantly

25:00 if I was going to have the complete experience and that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to give it my best shot, give it my all, that infantry was where you ought to be. So Dave and I made this little pact that if it was artillery we were going to try and resist that. When the announcement was made the lieutenant stood out the front and told us we were all being posted

25:30 to artillery and I think the question was, "Are there any questions?" or "Anybody got any complaints?" or something or other like that and both Dave and I came to attention, you know the way you do it and said almost like a Dickens novel, "Please sir, we want to go to infantry". I think shortly thereafter the rest of the platoon was dismissed

26:00 but we were asked to stay behind. We spoke with the lieutenant, I can't remember his name and his view was, "Well if you two silly bastards want to do that, I'm not going to stop you". So that was good. They let us do what we wanted to do. We had to have another interview with the psychologist, they wanted to make sure we weren't rabid Rambos and were duly posted to Ingleburn to Battle Wing which is the infantry

26:30 corps training centre.

This initial training at Kapooka was it infantry training or was it artillery training?

It was general training. It was designed to enable you to fit in to the army anywhere, to give you enough knowledge to be able to go into any corps with a basic level of knowledge and skill. So it was the big overarching stuff of the whole army. Certainly any unit would still

27:00 require some weapons skills, still need to know about all the admin stuff, how you actually work within this environment and would need to be reasonably fit. So it was a generic if you like training regime that equipped you to move on to further training that was more of a specialist nature for the corps you were assigned to. The training we had in Kapooka was not focused on any one corps at all.

So in that you

27:30 **actually had done some artillery training at Kapooka?**

No, never saw a gun. All of that training came after in corps training.

The psych test, you mentioned you had to do that again, can you actually talk us through what the army does in respect of psych tests?

Well Michael [interviewer] I don't actually remember it all that clearly. It wasn't about looking at ink dots and trying to imagine what they

28:00 might look like. My recollection was rather a conversation, sitting down with I think it was a captain and he asking why I wanted to go to infantry and had I thought through what that meant and why was it important to me. It was rather a conversation rather than some clinical test.

Had you had an initial psych test before you actually got to Kapooka?

Not before we got to Kapooka but we did have

28:30 an interview with the psych somewhere through that process, early in the process too.

And that was the same sort of thing or was there any sort of test?

No, that was much more general. I don't remember if there were any tests on that either, can't remember.

You also used the phrase the bullshit side of the army, what is the bullshit side of the army?

The polishing, the spit polished boots

29:00 and the brass being absolutely perfect, the creases in the uniform just so, the folding of the cover on the bed so you can bounce a coin off it. At the end of the day, what's it matter in terms of ability to fight, it doesn't matter at all. Those things were designed about engendering conformity rather

29:30 than bullshit. I can see that now but at the time I just thought, you know, "This is bullshit". Artillery had a reputation second to none for it. Whether it was deserved or not, I'm not absolutely sure but I understand it was deserved.

In the army just in overall respect do certain areas draw certain characters so artillery is a certain type of person, infantry is a certain type of person?

Generally

30:00 within the fighting arms no, I wouldn't discern different characters for different corps of the fighting corps but I suppose and it's probably a cruel thing to say but in the service type corps, catering, service corps itself, transport, one tended to see less robust individuals. Not all the time and

30:30 in fact not most of the time but certainly you tended to see more of the less robust individuals in those service type corps than you saw in the fighting type corps. That's a terrible generalization.

You finally got to move on to Ingleburn, what did you find there?

I found a World War II army base, cold showers, Nissan huts, corrugated iron ablution blocks, bare concrete. It was archaic.

31:00 Quite amazing when you look back on it, it was 1967 so I dare say it hadn't changed in any way, shape or form since 1945. That was infantry corps training and there became a much sharper focus on war fighting skills from that moment on. That was about learning how to operate as a rifleman in an infantry section, within an infantry platoon within an infantry

31:30 battalion. The tempo of training and the focus of that training became very much Vietnam operations. The tempo was fast. They were chucking plenty at us and we were working quite hard at learning how to operate as an effective member of a rifle section.

If we can just look at that in parts specifically, what was

32:00 **their major aim in respect to survival techniques that they were teaching you there?**

I don't know if survival is quite the right word, rather they were teaching you how to be an effective member and that includes survival but it also includes being effective in terms of getting the job done and so there was a lot of small unit tactics work, contact drills, ambush drills

32:30 harboring drills, working in larger formations of a section, working in a platoon, a lot of weapons work, a lot of range work and a lot less focus and in fact I can't remember much focus at all on the way the army operates and military law and military admin and that sort of stuff. Getting in and out of helicopters, patrolling, it was just full on infantry

33:00 small unit tactics training.

When we talk about small unit, how many people are we talking about?

Typically a rifle section, ten men operating in that size and then operating again as a platoon as part of that formation. No bigger than that and constant contact drills, constant ambush drills. Awful lot of bush time. We spent a lot of time in the hinter land behind the south coast

33:30 beaches. Even a lot of time just around Ingleburn itself, they had a few acres of bush down there, probably a hundred acres of bush down there that we spent a lot of time in. Learning about more advanced weaponry, the M60, the laws rocket. We didn't go near the Armalite and the M16 in those days. How to operate with helicopters, with aircraft and

34:00 at the same time pretty strong bonding together as the sectional team and learning how to work together and live together as a relatively small group even though ultimately we were all going to be broken up.

Again look at each piece of that of what you shared, the ten men, what would be their role in a particular unit?

In a rifle section and I've never operated in a rifle section in a battalion

34:30 so I can only say what my memory of it is that I learnt. That was that a section consisted of a gun group, M60 number one and number two on the gun. Consisted of people trained in a couple of skills, it was basically about getting the ability to bring fire to bear on a target in the best possible way. We had a contact

35:00 front, the gun group would go to the high ground, the balance would form up in an assault line and we'd assault under cover of the gun. That was the theory way of doing it and that's the way we learnt it. I never ever had to put that in to practice because I never operated in a battalion.

That's good. We're just looking at Ingleburn at the moment so when you went out and played some of these things, do you use real ammunition, were you using blanks,

35:30 **what was the situation?**

Most of the time we were saying, "bang, bang, bang," but we did have the little plastic blanks and they were in short supply but towards the end of the corps training for realism we did start to use those little plastic blanks. There was no shortage of ammo for use on the range, plenty of that but the blanks, only towards the end did we use those very much and most of the time we were just going, "bang, bang".

36:00 **So you actually played war games as such at Ingleburn?**

Yeah. It was cowboys and Indians.

How would you determine when you shot someone versus when you didn't shoot someone?

We exercised against nobody in front of us. It was only very late in the piece where we started to get an enemy group and started to use blanks but mostly in that period working up to that we assaulted against nothing, just going through the motions.

36:30 **Since you were obviously using weaponry and for many of these guys even training they've had training, it's quite new, were there accidents or incidents where people got hurt?**

No, never in those days. Later on I can recall a couple of ADs [accidental deaths] but no, as I say, the Australian Army is a magnificent training operation, was then, still is. The step by step incremental process got you to the stage where you'd have to be a raving

37:00 idiot to do something stupid and the instructors had eyes like hawks. Any attempt to even turn your head around the range away from your front would bring a very swift response. You learnt weapons safety very, very thoroughly.

What were the NCOs like at Ingleburn?

Much better class of NCO. Didn't see much of the officer ranks there. The NCOs generally were experienced, they'd generally done a tour

37:30 of Vietnam or of Borneo. They were very focused on teaching us the skills to a) be effective and b) stay alive in that environment. Been there, done that. Patient, less focused on the bullshit part of it, much more focused on the efficiency part of it and it was really starting to, that was what I would hope would happen and indeed did happen. It

38:00 fulfilled what I expected would happen and therefore I was feeling quite comfortable about it. They did a great job.

Any forms of bastardization while at Ingleburn?

No. I must say the only incident I can recall that particularly upset us and which might have led to some form of retaliation was that we thought the rations we were eating weren't all that great

38:30 and you had a massive appetite for calories because you're just burning it up so much and one Sunday afternoon we noticed a sergeant cook loading sides of beef into the boot of his car and we jumped to the obvious conclusion, which I believe to this day was true, was that they were our rations he was about to drive out the front gate with.

39:00 There was some sort of sorting that out but it never went anywhere. That's about the only incident I could recall. Everybody else, by the time people got to infantry and they were starting to focus themselves on learning their survival skills and their efficiency skills, it was a pretty tight ship.

Any disciplinary problems during that time?

Oh, it's the Australian Army! Only those associated with

39:30 a bit of high jinx or a bit of excess alcohol from time to time. Coming home late, breaking curfew or giving a bit of lip to the guard as you walk past. Just normal, natural stuff. Nothing at all that you would describe as nasty.

Breaking curfew or coming home late, what did you get for doing that?

If you were caught the usual punishment was a period confined to barracks which

40:00 would probably be a weekend. You got stuck for a weekend probably doing picket or guard duty. It was hardly a life ending moment.

Tape 4

00:42 **Still at Ingleburn, you described the area as sort of a World War II type, the remnants of World War II, the actual accommodation where you stayed and who you stayed with, can you describe that for me?**

It was a Nissan hut. I don't know if you know what I mean by that but

01:00 if you imagine a pipe cut in half and put on the ground, that's what it was. A big convex shed. It would have been maybe fifty, sixty feet long, wide enough for beds to stick out from either wall with a corridor up the middle. There were no individual areas other than there was a small room at the front entrance in which a corporal

01:30 would normally sleep and be in charge of that hut. The rest of it was just a great big barn into which you put a pressed green steel wardrobe, a bit of a desk and a bed. You had a bed space, you didn't have a separate area and it was just this great big long line with all these beds sticking out. It was lined up to the top of the window height, it had windows

02:00 you pushed open on steel bars. There was no heating of any sort. The floor had, if I remember rightly it had a covering of some sort. It wasn't bare concrete it had a sort of horse hair, matty carpety type thing. The toilet and showers were external. They were in again corrugated iron,

02:30 timber frame and they were bare concrete floors and they were cold water. There was no hot water service to Battle Wing. By this stage we were coming in to summer so it wasn't quite as much of a hardship as it might otherwise had been.

How did you and Dave Fisher cope coming from Kapooka just knowing each other?

Fine, we made friends very quickly.

03:00 We fitted in quite well. In Ingleburn there was a much greater mixture of regular soldiers and national servicemen. In Kapooka our platoon was almost entirely made up of national servicemen but there was a much greater mix of the two in Ingleburn. Not that there was any difference in attitude or responses

03:30 to either. I suppose we could all see that we were going to relatively shortly be together in this little adventure and there was a real willingness to get along and to fit in and to make it work and it worked very well. We made good friends there. I'm not in touch with any of them any more although I did meet one

04:00 a little while later but almost all of my friends now and mates and people I bonded with were from the regiment not from Ingleburn days. We were only there for three months so it's not surprising. We fitted in well. Not a problem.

Just before we go on to SAS, in respect to Kapooka and also Ingleburn, time off, where did you go and what did you do outside your army time?

04:30 Well Ingleburn was relatively close to my home, George's Hall. I did spend a bit of time at home and I had my twenty first birthday at home. That was on the sixth of December 1967. Quite a lot of the boys from the platoon came to that plus locals. Otherwise we would go to pubs.

05:00 The Sundowner at Punchbowl was popular although there was an incident there that I could have done without and the Crossroads Hotel just up the road and there as plenty of beer drinking and skylarking and leg pulling and generally carrying on as young men do particularly under those circumstances.

What was the incident that happened there?

05:30 Well the Sundowner hotel at Punchbowl was a bit of a rough pub in those days frequented by a group of bikies that hung out at Bankstown. We turned up there relatively early in the night because they had a band on and we were drinking during the night. There were a group of girls there that were all by themselves. So I must admit that I led the charge and we were all getting along famously by

06:00 the time the pub was ready to close coming up to ten o'clock. However the group of girls turned out to be the girlfriends of Bankstown bikies who arrived at about five to ten and took one look at us obviously intent on becoming extremely friendly with their girlfriends and a little melee ensued outside the pub. We came off second best. I spent a couple of days in hospital

06:30 as a result of it. We had one fellow, I can't remember his name now, he was an aboriginal guy and he could box. He did very, very well for himself but the trouble was because he was able to take care of himself he became a focus and he got a right flogging and spent a lot longer in hospital than I did. I just got a kick in the nuts and a couple of days in there wondering how I was going to tell my parents

07:00 what was really wrong with me, a kick in the nuts from the Bankstown bikies. I could have done without that incident, ruined the weekend. That was a Friday night by the way and I had to go back and keep training on the Monday.

Just a question on all that, you're doing this training at Kapooka and then Ingleburn which is military training, had they actually taught you anything in respect to hand to hand physical fighting?

No. They did not. We did some later

07:30 when I got to SAS but no at neither of those establishments was there anything done with unarmed combat. She was just a good old stoush, fist and boots, hit as much as you could as often as you could and hope you got away with it.

You mentioned earlier with Chris that you had a girlfriend at the time?

Yes I did, Marian.

What was the deal with the relationship with respect to you might be heading to Vietnam?

08:00 We had not discussed anything beyond our current relationship. She was very keen to sustain the relationship and indeed a good friend of mine Geoff Brakesby had drove her down to Wagga to visit me on the first visiting day which is about six weeks in to the course. A big surprise, Geoff came down to say g'day and out of the back of the car leaps Marian.

08:30 That was all good but I, to my chagrin and I'm sure Marian's regret, she subsequently told me quite strongly about her regret, I just got focused on what I was doing in the army and I didn't want to have that tie. It was great fun while it was on

09:00 but it was a distraction. I had an entirely different focus. So I saw Marian a few times while at Ingleburn, it would have been half a dozen times or something or other and that was good and comfortable but it just fell away when I went to Perth.

How did this opportunity to go to Perth?

We were basically

09:30 told that the national servicemen amongst us or most of us would be going to reinforcement wing. Reinforcement wing was a part of Ingleburn in which you sat and continued to keep your skills current until such time as you were sent to Vietnam to replace somebody who had to come home for some reason. That wasn't appealing to either Dave or myself because you would be moving into

10:00 what would be a group that had already trained together and bonded together. You'd be replacing somebody who was their mate and you would probably have to go through that twice because you would go through it with one battalion and then some time in the next twelve months as they're already there they would have to come home and another one would arrive so you'd have to go and slot in to that as well. While it wasn't a big no-no, we didn't say we absolutely won't do that.

10:30 If that was the deal, that was the deal and we would have done it willingly enough but it wasn't ideal. I can't remember whether it was on a notice board or read out at a morning prayers meeting, it's just a little group you have before you start work for the day when you've patrolled and the NCOs will tell you what's going on. There was somehow or other we heard

11:00 that if you wanted to apply for to attend the SAS carder course, then you put your name down. I knew pretty much nothing about SAS. I didn't know what they did, it was only subsequently I found out they were based in Perth but it sounded okay. It sounded better than reinforcement wing. I had a quite erroneous view that it might be something like commandos which it's not

11:30 but it sounded better than reo [reinforcement] wing. So Dave and I talked about it and said we'd give it a shot. So we put our names down and not all that put their names down were asked to be interviewed but we were and I think that was because the regiment seeks people of some intelligence as well. You've got to have

12:00 the brain power if you like to be able to rationalize some of the things you've got to do and are going to do and to be able to think outside the square about other ways of doing things. I think Dave and I got there on the basis of the academic results if you like and what we'd done to date, that is, got to the interview stage. The interviews were conducted by Reg Beasley who was the OC of 3 Squadron and Ross Bishop who was

12:30 the 2IC. In fact just the Friday before last Anzac day I had a beer and a laugh with Reg Beasley. It's been a bond that's come on for a long, long time. I must say at the time we were in Vietnam I'm sure Reg was trying to kill me but that's another story. So we had the interview and it went along almost predictable lines, what do you know about SAS,

13:00 why do you want to join, what do you think you'd do if you got there, do you see the army as a career and what they were trying to find out was what commitment you had for this and while we had to sign on for the other year and do three years the ideal circumstances would be you'd make it a career and become a career special forces soldier. Apparently we got through with it because

13:30 we were selected to attempt the carder. Ingleburn finished I think we marched out of there mid-December, something like that and we had Christmas at home, that's right and then after Christmas we

were off to Perth on the rattly train and one of sixty eight carder course.

Just a few questions about that, firstly do you remember what was said to you about the SAS

14:00 **which interested you and many others to actually apply?**

To me it was an absence of information probably. I didn't know but it sounded better than what the alternative was. I knew it was a relatively small, I came to find out it was relatively small, that it undertook small team operations and that

14:30 they were of an adventurous nature. I knew they were para qualified. I didn't know what their role was in Vietnam in fact I don't even know, well I must have known that they had a squadron there, I must have assumed so. I had very scanty information. In those days Michael, the

15:00 regiment had hardly any profile at all in the Australian Army. It was the other side of the country to start with. Its role was ill-defined in terms of where it sat in the order of battle and it really wasn't until Vietnam came towards the height of activity that the taskforce commander started to figure out the best way to use the resource that the regiment represented. So information about it was scant. There was no printed material at all.

15:30 Not like today, go on the web. What appealed was it sounded adventurous. If you were parachuting it had to be adventurous and it was different and it was a town I'd never been in, Perth. The signing on didn't concern me at all because I was enjoying the life up to that stage. It was good. For the first time I think

16:00 the work that I was doing I was enjoying where before the army the work I was doing I wasn't, it was just a means to an end. So it was an appealing alternative. When the names went up and Dave's and mine were there, I was a very pleased boy.

Just in respect of signing on, you were signing on in respect of joining the actual army rather than being national service is that what you mean?

No, it was an extension to your national service. You still kept your

16:30 national service number and it was simply a way that the regiment could get sufficient service out of you to warrant the investment in training.

Bishop and Beasley asked you about your level of commitment, what it might be, what was your level of commitment?

I would have said at the time much as I said to you now, I was enjoying army life so far and I thought I'd like to continue

17:00 with that and I'd like to do it in the best place possible. I wanted to be at the, sharp end is wrong because that's got a different connotation but I wanted in as good a place as I could get and that's why I wanted to be in infantry and then that's why I wanted to be in SAS. They must have copped that bullshit because there I was.

17:30 **So you were given leave and had Christmas at home.**

Yeah, had Christmas at home and then some time I think it was actually after New Year the trip to Perth, it's something of a ritual. You almost always left on a Saturday night on the Spirit of Progress from Central station in Sydney and so that was an overnight train supposedly an express but it took all night. You'd drive there in half the time today.

18:00 That lobbed you in to Melbourne on a Sunday morning. In 1968, '67 pubs in Melbourne didn't open on Sunday and the only place you could get a drink of which we were aware anyway, not being members of social clubs, was the white ensign club which was the navy's OR [other ranks] club. You knew if you were going to stay there all day you would have to have at least one fight, that was just a given. It was a good day if you didn't have

18:30 to have two. But you could get a beer. So we'd spend all Sunday there. Not drinking heavily, walking round the place just yarning and carrying on, pulling the matelots' [sailors] legs and giving them a bit of curry and occasionally having to defend something. From there there was a train from Melbourne called the Overlander I think which went to Adelaide again overnight and then from

19:00 Adelaide there was another train to Port Pirie and at Port Pirie you joined the train which crossed the Nullabor. In Port Pirie you would buy a slab of whatever beer you could get which was usually Southwark or West End or something or other, terrible stuff and then you spent two or three days crossing the Nullabor in an old rattler to Kalgoorlie and then another train from Kalgoorlie to Perth which was an old rattler. It looked like it came out of a western.

19:30 It lobbed in Perth basically four days after you started. It was a big trip in those days.

Just two questions. Christmas time with your family and your mum and dad did you tell them what you were up to?

No I lied to them. I didn't tell them what I knew about SAS I just said there was this operation over in

the west and I think I might be able to do driving or something or other. I didn't tell them what it was about.

20:00 I subsequently had to of course but at the time I was not telling them the whole truth to make it a bit easier on them.

The pub in Melbourne, the fight, did you fare any better than with the bikies?

No. I'm no good at that stuff.

What happened when you arrived in Perth, what did you find?

I found a little country town to start with. Perth in 1968 was

20:30 quite parochial and relatively small. A delightful place, just a wonderful place. I think we arrived late in the week. We would have done because we left on a Saturday night so we would have arrived sometime on a Wednesday I think and started to get settled in. There were people trickling in from all over the place and over a period of days preparatory to the start of the carder course. On the Saturday Dave and I

21:00 thought we'd go into Perth, the city and have a look around because at this stage we hadn't made any real mates. So we walked to Swanbourne railway station. We were waiting on the platform for a train and trying to read the train timetable and wondering when it's coming and there was a young woman with a baby in a stroller and we read the timetable as the train being overdue and I remember saying to her, "We're trying to get the train into Perth is this

21:30 the right place to be and is it running late?" and she said, "Yeah it's a bit late. It'll be along but isn't it a lovely day". That was Perth. Nobody got fussed about the time. They were just very warm and outgoing people. It was just like a big country town. So that's Perth itself. Campbell Barracks at Swanbourne, it was a real eye opening. The Australian government had committed to spending some money there relatively recently and it was the best army base I've ever seen in my life.

22:00 The accommodation was fabulous comparatively speaking. It had a great OR's mess, a good boozer, club. It had plenty of training facilities, pool, gyms, the pool we used for diving as much as for swimming, for scuba diving. It had its own range. It was perched on the sand hills leading down to Swanbourne Beach so you had the beach right at the back door

22:30 and it was just, I looked at it and though, "Wow. This is a bit of okay. If this is the army, I'm in". It was also rather deserted of people funnily enough because there were three Saber squadrons and at any one time you had one saber squadron, sorry saber squadron is one of the fighting squadrons. There was also a base squadron and headquarters. The three saber squadrons at any one time you had one in Vietnam, you had one training

23:00 to go and you had one just back all broken up. I went through my period in SAS and I don't think I ever met anybody from 1 Squadron because the paths just didn't cross and I really only knew 2 Squadron blokes because I got posted there as a reo. The squadrons became during that period quite secular. The other impression I got was there weren't very many people around. But we were accommodated in fantastic, it was still four to a room

23:30 the same sort of room as at Kapooka. Big mess right outside. The food was sensational. We got extra rations because of the work we did and the cooks actually took some pride in what they did. If they didn't there was a bit of contact counseling there too, often necessary when a new cook marched in. I looked at it and thought, "Whoa, this is great. I'm going to enjoy this".

You mentioned initially there was about fifty or sixty

24:00 **fellas that had come along for this initial training. What were the type of characters among men or the differences amongst you?**

Most of the applicants had been in the army for a while. A few of them, by no means the majority but perhaps ten out of the fifty or sixty had some operational service in either Vietnam or Borneo.

24:30 We were similar in a lot of ways. Not very many big men, my stature and size was about the norm or smaller. There were a couple of tall blokes in there. Relatively reserved, is the wrong word but not boisterous outgoing extroverts.

25:00 People who could keep to themselves and be comfortable with that and yet still enjoy company and have fun. People who were at least to look at them were physically fit, had good shaped bodies and muscle where it was needed. I suppose those were the common characteristics but then they were all

25:30 different personalities. There were those that were more outgoing than others and the larrikins and all of that but still within that constraint if you like. I don't know if that is as a result of the selection process that was undertaken. I suspect it was. I suspect that's the sort of people they were initially looking for that had a well developed personality in themselves but were

26:00 able to control that and have a degree of reserve and be comfortable within themselves.

What age group are we talking about?

I was twenty one up to about twenty five I suppose. We had, I can't remember whether it was one or two officers but certainly Chris Roberts was in one of sixty eight carder and there were some lower ranked NCOs

26:30 who had agreed to forgo their rank if they were selected. They were all treated the same. Dave Fisher and I were the only two national servicemen and the second and third ever to attempt. The first was a bloke called Tony Leman who had already passed and he was moving on.

How were you greeted when you actually finally got there?

Quite efficiently.

27:00 It wasn't warm welcome and all that sort of stuff it was just, "Righto you blokes, this is where you sleep. Go and draw your kit. Here's what we want you to do today and tomorrow. Here's where the mess is and get on with life and we'll start next Monday". It was my first experience of an operational unit and there is a lower emphasis on the bullshit part of the army in an operational unit and whilst certainly it wasn't slack by any means,

27:30 everybody looked great and people didn't slouch from place to place, they marched. People looked good and there was an air of quiet efficiency about the place I suppose you would say but it was and that was what was different from the previous training establishments, this place you could see had a real purpose.

Uniform and equipment, did it remain the same to what you had at Ingleburn?

Yep you took it with you.

28:00 There was some stuff you drew in Swanbourne but that was about blankets and sheets and that sort of stuff. We didn't take field webbing or basic webbing or packs with us from Ingleburn, that was issued in Swanbourne and weapons were issued in Swanbourne.

We'd like to go through your training bit by bit. Where did your training actually begin on the Monday, what were they taking you through?

28:30 We went straight to Rottnest Island which is a small island off the coast of Perth and the army at that time had an establishment there in an old barracks probably a hundred years old but quite modernized and quite efficient. That was I think a part of just getting us out of our normal situation and putting us in somewhere where there was no influence from the outside world about it and seeing how we all went. We spent the first week there and a lot of that was physical

29:00 toughening, lots of runs. A lot of it was theory and that was about I suppose the capacity of our brains to take in new ideas. A lot of it was about map reading for example and how to interpret aerial photographs. Necessary later on but certainly not necessary to do in the first week of the carder so therefore what it was about I presume was figuring out whether you had the brain capacity to take that sort of stuff

29:30 in and everybody did. So a lot of physical stuff, a lot of classroom stuff. A few exercises in small team tactics and very close examination that the training staff, the carder staff were large in number. I don't know what the ratio would be but there'd probably be one carder staff for every five or six attempting it. So no matter

30:00 what you did you had a pair of eyes on you somewhere or other. They were looking at how you conducted yourself personally and that sort of stuff. So the first week, Rottnest.

Just on that, the small group training exercises you did, what was?

One I can particularly remember was we ambushed a vehicle, an army Land Rover that deliberately drove along the road and we were told how we were going to do it and who was going to do what

30:30 and allowed to just run through the process. We did have actually blank rounds. SAS obviously had a few more than anyone else.

What was said to you from the very beginning about the selection process and being watched by some of the monitors?

What was said to us is largely what I've said to you that it wasn't, the men that they were looking for were not those that were physically strong and

31:00 who were not those that had a capacity to endure physically for a long time. They were rather looking for people who had the ability to control their nervous and emotional responses even under trying circumstances including when you're dog tired and wet and cold and hungry and all those other things that drive the spirit down. They were looking for a level

31:30 of physical fitness and that had to be achieved but that wasn't the prime motivator. They were looking for people who were self sufficient, who had personality development such that they were comfortable with themselves but they were also looking for people that could work very well together in small

teams. That is one of the great skills of the regiment, the ability to create

32:00 a synergy, a sum greater than the individual parts because of the way the team works together. There was a strong focus on that, the ability to get along, to pull your weight, to pull more than your weight, to be prepared to help somebody who was falling behind a bit, a big emphasis on that. They told us straight up that's what they were looking for, there was no secrets about it. It wasn't, they weren't telling us one thing and looking at us for another.

This initial training at Rottnest Island seemed reasonably straight forward, it wasn't too difficult I take it?

32:30 I found the very long runs. I could handle all of the physical stuff except I couldn't, the very long runs, nine miles, I struggled to make them in the time and that became a bit of a focus of mine to make sure I could do it by the end of the course.

What time are we talking about finishing in?

The criteria was nine miles in ninety minutes carrying full pack and rifle.

33:00 So it's a mile every ten minutes and the first mile's easy but the last three aren't.

How much weight are we talking in respect of pack?

Normally your fighting belt would weigh twenty pounds, twenty five pounds and your pack would weigh fifty pounds. Your weapon weighed twenty five pounds. You're getting up towards an operational load. Operational load when we were in Vietnam I carried my own weight around on my back. We weren't quite there but we were starting

33:30 to work up to it. But at Rottnest we weren't running with full kit we were just running in PE [physical education] gear but even so I knew I had to do a lot more work on the nine miler if I was going to get there.

After Rottnest what happened then?

We went back to Swanbourne and spent two or three days. No, it was longer than that where we did some range work, we did some rope work, there were facilities there

34:00 for climbing and rappelling [abseiling] and stuff and again that wasn't about teaching the skill so much as to see how you handled the fact of dangling thirty feet in the air off a little bit of rope you just tied round your waist. From there and that was also getting settled in to where we were going to live for the next six weeks.

This initial rope work and also with the guns sounds similar to what you'd already been doing at Ingleburn?

34:30 No we didn't do any rope work at Ingleburn and we were starting to use more advanced weaponry, the M60, I got one go at the M60 at Ingleburn but they were often used on the range during this period. Introduction to the M16 and continuing familiarity with the SLR. Introduction to the

35:00 M79 which is a forty mil [millimetre] grenade launcher. Pistols, browning 9 mil pistol, so they were starting to introduce a much greater range of weaponry and that was fun. 'Boys Own' stuff playing around with all that.

Did they actually say what each weapon was better for?

Yep went through all of that and ultimately the choice was yours as to what you carried subject to

35:30 it fitting in with the fire power of the rest of the patrol.

Could you just explain the difference of what each weapon was actually unique or better for?

Well I suppose the issued weapon in the Australian Army was the SLR which is a large calibre 7.62 or thirty cal high velocity semi-automatic weapon.

36:00 It's a heavy weapon. The ammunition is heavy, the magazines are heavy particularly the load of ammo we used to carry but its advantage was it had real knock over power. Hit somebody with a 762 from an SLR the fight went out of them, might not die straight away but the fight certainly went out of them. Subsequently when we got to Vietnam we quite highly modified those weapons, changed them to thirty round magazines, they'd

36:30 fire on full automatic, cut holes in them everywhere, painted them green. They didn't look anything like a standard issue SLR. The M16 value I suppose was it was a much lighter weapon, easier to handle in thick bush and jungle because it was shorter. It fired a 556 which is a two two calibre, high velocity and its ammunition was therefore much lighter, the mags [ammunition magazines] were much lighter.

37:00 The reason I didn't like that weapon was it didn't have knock over power. You could shoot somebody with a . 556 and unless you hit them in the right spot perhaps not all the fight would go out of them, perhaps they'd still want to have a go and that happened a couple of times. The other thing wrong with

it was it was more prone to stoppage than the SLR. So I never trusted the weapon but we did use them extensively in Vietnam particularly with

37:30 an M79 grenade launcher slung underneath the XM203. So it became an under and over, a 79 grenade launcher underneath and the M16 on top. The M60s, GPMP, general purpose machine gun, it's a belt-fed, fires the 762 same as the SLR and it's a useful weapon for assaults or defence against assaults but heavy. The ammo is heavy, you've got to carry a lot of it and not normally a weapon we used unless

38:00 we were going out on a deliberate offensive job.

Okay that's excellent. After the ropes course and the initial weapons course.

Yeah, they weren't courses as such, they were just activities.

What happened after the activities?

Then we went bush. That's pretty well how we spent the rest of the carder. That was generally to the south west

38:30 of Perth places like Collie, the names don't come to mind right now, there's some maps there from it. We did work along the Avon River, crossing rivers, that sort of stuff, a lot of patrol work just patrol, patrol, patrol. Springing plenty of surprises so late at night, you're cold, you're wet

39:00 going to some place where you expected there to be a meal and no the meal's not there, it's another ten miles up the road, start walking. That sort of stuff and starting to push people to find out if they had a limit of endurance. Not so much physically but mentally and when incidents occurred, those people just disappeared. You'd roll out of the sleeping silk the next morning and they were gone, you just didn't see them again.

39:30 They were just spirited away out of those of us that were left. Every morning you'd wake up if you were in the large group and look around and say, "Who's not here this morning". So there was a lot of bush work and a lot of pushing to see where the limits were. They were interspersed with periods back in Swanbourne when we started to train for the final physical tests which were

40:00 five mile run, nine mile run, ropes, swimming, that sort of stuff. We did a lot of that then back out to bush, a lot of bush work and then back in to Swanbourne.

We're right at the end of this tape but just one quick question, had anyone been dropped off at Rottnest or after the initial ropes course?

Yes they did start to disappear. In fact not at Rottnest but when we got back from Rottnest there were some people that weren't there the next morning.

Tape 5

01:11 **I'll come back to SAS training in just a minute, there's just one question I wanted to pick up that comes well out of order, right back to when you first got called up and went in for your medical, the doctor said you had acne on your back and was that a deliberate thing**

01:30 **to give you an option out do you think when you look back on it now?**

Yes. If I'd wanted to I could have put my hand up and he would have let me out.

So was there some sympathy towards conscientious objectors within the army?

I don't think you could make a generalisation on the basis of one doctor's offer.

02:00 I think it's probably fair to say though that the army didn't really want people that weren't prepared to be there and their preference would have been not to take those who would go to such extremes as to avoid their national service. That would be the army view, that would not be the political view. So I think that there was a preparedness to

02:30 provide an out if it was a genuine out so that the army didn't end up with people that really, really, really didn't want to be there because they're not a lot of use.

So you mentioned before there were some quite famous methods used, can you tell us what some of them were?

I think they're probably old wives tales but one of them I heard was eat a pack of Aspro just before you go in.

03:00 That's one of them I heard. Another one, something to do with fouling up the urine test and it again was eating some substance, I can't remember what it was.

So during your time in the army perhaps because of that you didn't ever come across any nashos that were not there by some sort of choice?

During Kapooka there were a couple of recalcitrants in my

03:30 training platoon but they went through the motions. I didn't see anybody who laid on their back and kicked their heels.

When you went over to SAS was the fact that you were a nasho a point of some pride for you and Dave, did it not matter at all?

It was a matter of pride for us in that we were selected although we were national servicemen and we were amongst the first three.

04:00 Subsequently the regiment found that that experiment worked and they took a larger proportion of national servicemen who were prepared to sign on and indeed some of them made the army their career as a result. So for us it was a matter of pride but from our treatment from those within the regiment it made not one iota of difference to them. If you passed the carder and your para course and you got bereted you were SAS

04:30 and there was no scale within that.

Did it ever come up for you in your time in the army, the differences between national servicemen and regular army?

No, not for me and that was because all of my real experience was within the regiment. But my understanding is it only rarely came up elsewhere as well. It really was a one army and the Australian Army was very, very good at integrating both of them together.

05:00 **You were telling Michael about how people disappeared. You started with a group of sixty?**

Fifty or sixty, I don't know the exact number.

And it went down?

I think at the end there were fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, something like that.

That's a fairly big cull rate.

Actually that was a lower cull rate than normal. There was a larger number got through on that one than some others, than many others.

05:30 **I imagine there was a fair amount of pressure on everyone not to disappear at it were. It must have put you in an interesting emotional situation?**

No, it was a strong driver, a strong spur. It wasn't, I didn't feel it emotionally. The attitude of just about everybody I think, certainly mine was, "It's not going to be me, I'm going to do this".

And what happened when people you'd become friendly with

06:00 **did disappear?**

There was a bit of fatalism about it, "Oh well, didn't make it, too bad".

Was there any resistance to that or do you simply not know what happened to them?

We knew what had happened to them, we knew they'd been RTU'd and returned to unit. They had failed to meet the carder instructors' expectations in some way. Some of whom

06:30 and my memory of that is vague but some of whom you could see they were going to struggle anyway and some others that were a total, absolute surprise. I remember one fellow who was country boy, laconic, dry, very self contained, physically strong man and he didn't turn up one day. I've got absolutely no idea

07:00 to this day in what way he didn't meet muster.

How competitive was it within yourselves?

It was individually competitive but it wasn't competitive between ourselves because if we all passed muster we would all go in. As was explained to us and as logic would tell you that the process is designed to ensure that the person

07:30 whose professionalism might mean the difference between you living and dying has been tested and found not wanting. Nevertheless it was not a perfect system and I'm sure that some who would have been good were RTU'd and there were some who did get through who were not perfect SAS soldiers either. No system is going to be perfect but to the extent that it could be it was as good as I could imagine it.

08:00 **The interesting thing about that system to me is that obviously they're trying to bond you**

together because that's how the SAS has to work but also if someone's going to disappear the next day there must be sort of a slight resistance to forming really close relationships if they're about to disappear.

I don't recall thinking that way, no. Mind you

08:30 the tempo was such during the carder course that you didn't have a lot of time to bond strongly, to form close relationships. Certainly Dave and I already had one and that was good because we did look out for each other and there were some people as in any human group that you naturally gravitated to because their way of doing things or saying things or acting appealed to you but no, I don't recall

09:00 deliberately thinking, "Oh, I'm not going to get too close to this person because they won't be there tomorrow", no, it didn't enter my head.

What feed back were you given about how you were going and whether you were close to getting scrubbed?

It was informal. There was no, "March in, sit down, I'm going to tell you how you're going". The staff would say, "If you don't do that better next time you're not going to be here". Or, "You're doing it wrong, you've got to do it this way,

09:30 that's the way we want it done and that's the way it's going to be done if you're going to stay". The feedback was pretty constant, you weren't left wondering.

You mentioned long runs were the things you found hardest, what was your favourite part of that training?

I loved the ropes, loved rope work and I had an interest in weapons. I could fly through the five miler, that was easy because

10:00 that was done in PE gear. I liked rope work, that was fun.

On the subject of weapons you just went through some of the guns with us but you also were introduced to claymores and to other weapons at that stage?

Not at that stage, not during the carder. Certainly we saw the M79 which we hadn't had much to do with before. We had seen it at Ingleburn a couple of times but not claymores at this stage.

10:30 Pistols we hadn't seen before but we didn't use pistols much. If we took out an M60 then usually you'd take a pistol as well because M60s were prone to jamming and not much good throwing the thing at them so a secondary weapon was the norm if you had an M60 but they were the only new ones that were introduced at that stage.

Putting aside personal relationships which were obviously formed outside

11:00 **training, how did they encourage the bond in a working situation between the platoon?**

By making the task impossible to achieve unless you all work together. It really was that simple. The only way you could have accomplished some of the tasks they set and you had to do it as a team. There were some individual exercises but very few and so you were split up in to groups of five which is a five man patrol as it would normally operate operationally

11:30 and the tasks that were set you simply had to work together to achieve them and if you didn't achieve them then you ran the risk of RTU.

Can you think of any examples of tasks like that that you had to pass?

Yeah, the carrying of a heavy load in this case it was a great big log and we had to carry it point A to point B within a certain time. Somewhere along the way

12:00 there was a fake ambush on us which we had to fight and then pick the log up again and still make it to where we had to be. When we got to where we had to be there they weren't but at the top of the next hill on a tractor you could see between the trees there they were which was another two miles away and you still had to be there where they were at the time. So unless if you're carrying

12:30 I don't know what the log would have weighed but a couple of hundred pound plus all your kit and unless the five of you work together and work well together you couldn't do it. If somebody was slacking, you wouldn't make the task.

As we talked about in your earlier training was there recrimination within yourselves if someone was slacking?

I don't remember any occasion in which somebody didn't give their all. Sometimes their all wasn't enough

13:00 and they needed to be helped as well but in terms of personal commitment to it I don't remember anybody not giving a hundred per cent.

Is that one of the main features that made the SAS different? Once you were in there was it immediately obvious that this was a different culture to the rest of the army?

I didn't have a comparison to make a judgement.

13:30 There's a lot of stuff talked about SAS but I think that what we underwent and the tasks we undertook were not all that much different to what was being undertaken within infantry battalions. It had a different focus and it was done a bit further away from support and it was done in smaller groups but ultimately

14:00 I don't think it was all that much different from a rifle section. There's a lot of bullshit talked about the regiment and certainly it does have some amazing men within it then and now but I think the tasks that we undertook could have been undertaken by a great many of those people who were simply slogging away in a rifle section in a

14:30 battalion.

There were nine rather than five, is that?

Even then they if you're in a battalion you didn't operate in section levels, you had a greater level of support, you're nearly always within artillery range and air support. The difference for us was we didn't have that level of support, ultimately our survival depended on ourselves.

So what did you do when you went out bush in the training to try and establish this?

Patrol, patrol, patrol

15:00 and SAS type patrolling which is very slow, very methodical, quite a meticulous skill, practice bush craft, taking turns in each position within the patrol. For half a day you'd be patrol commander, for half a day you'd be scout, half a day you'd be sig [signaller], half a day you'd be 2IC and half a day you'd be medic. Just practising each of those, just learning the skills of SAS patrolling which is quite different from the way the battalions do it.

15:30 It has to be slower and more stealthy because in most cases we could not afford to bump something that we didn't know was there first. There was also the other skills, field craft type skills, being able to communicate with a look or with a hand signal. We never spoke out loud in the bush. The only time we talked to each other was

16:00 at sessions slightly after we'd eaten something in the morning, the patrol commander would get us in a little group and in a matter of thirty seconds tell us what his intentions were and ask us for our views and that was done in a little whisper and other than that you wouldn't pass a word. You might not talk to anybody for ten days at a time. All communication was using the hands or expressions. That was, you needed to practice that and we were able to work together at it.

16:30 Also it was learning how to look out for each other too, seeing when somebody was flagging or when they were struggling and doing what you could to make sure that they were able to keep going.

We'll come back a bit later and talk about the ins and outs of SAS patrolling perhaps when we get to Vietnam but were there any other skills you were being taught that went above and beyond the normal?

Certainly the level of

17:00 weapons training was higher. We needed to have or the regiment expected a higher level of skills than perhaps might be expected in a battalion but again I say I don't really have a real comparison because I wasn't there. Our ability to navigate was at a much higher level than would be required by battalion infantry. To read maps, to be able to pace, to be

17:30 able to pick where you were , to be able to retrace to an RV [rendez-vous, meeting place] in the event that that was necessary. You're also learning about the self sufficiency of what you carried because there was no re-supply or very rarely was there a re-supply only if you were in more than ten or twelve days so you were starting to learn what it was worthwhile carrying and what wasn't. Of course every pound you could ditch you would.

18:00 So there was learning about the field craft of a personal nature as well.

You mentioned hand to hand combat before, was that an extra bit of training?

I think I called it unarmed combat and that was a series of instruction that we underwent. Not a great deal of emphasis was placed on it because the circumstances in which it would be used did not exist really in Vietnam.

18:30 The actions fought there were certainly fought over relatively short distances but it always involved weapons. So it was probably more a self confidence thing than anything else. I don't remember how many sessions there were, maybe half a dozen or something. Entirely useless outside because it was designed, the skills we learnt were designed to permanently maim or kill. Go down the pub and use that and you'd get in a bit of trouble.

19:00 **Did that ever give you any cause for thinking about what you were being trained to do, the fact that you were being trained as killers in a sense?**

No, I fully expected it. I'd be disappointed and concerned if the training wasn't aimed at killing the enemy, if it was some softer form. At the end of the day that's what we were going to do.

Were there any particular

19:30 **characters that inspired you during that training, any instructors that stand out?**

Carder commander was a bloke called Mick Deak whose real name I think was Ron Burg. I have seen him once since. He commanded recce [reconnaissance] platoon in Vietnam about a year before he joined SAS and he had a reputation as a very good soldier. Tough bloke,

20:00 tough but fair I'd call him. He brooked no nonsense. I thought he was a magnificent man. He did a great job on the caders and as I say by and large the processes worked. There might have been one or two got sent home that shouldn't have been and there might have been one or two got in who shouldn't have. By and large it worked very, very well. I've got a lot of time for Mick. Also the carder instructors were usually corporal or sergeant level who had served with SAS

20:30 in Borneo or Vietnam or both. Very experienced soldiers, a wealth of information, happy to share it and you should understand that there was no reticence on the part of carder staff about us getting through, they wanted every one of us to get through if we could but nor was there any lack of ruthlessness. If it became apparent to them that you wouldn't make it you were RTU'd. I thought the carder staff did

21:00 a really great job.

What particular bits of good advice did they give you about what to expect in Vietnam?

They weren't doing a lot of that in the carder, the carder wasn't designed to do that, that all came later. So it wasn't about learning Vietnam specific skills at this stage, that came later. Later, yeah, there was an immense amount of useful information. Such that my first patrol was something

21:30 of an anti-climax.

That information came before you got over there?

Yeah.

During this time it was 1968, 69?

This is the period January, February 1968.

That was the time of the Tet offensive in Vietnam and things were beginning to change a little bit on the political and social upheaval, did that get to Perth?

The level of resistance in the eastern states did not come to Perth.

22:00 We were aware that there was a growing level of resistance to our involvement in the Vietnam War. By and large at that stage though we thought of it by what we'd call today the ferals. Uninformed people looking for something to protest against and didn't really matter what it was. My views on that subsequently changed and it became clear that people were very passionate about their opposition to the war and

22:30 in the circumstances we subsequently found out about, reasonably so. But at that stage early in 1968 we were aware, didn't see it in Perth but we were aware of the growing resistance. We thought it was the feral pack. Certainly Tet which came along a little bit after the carder had a pretty big focus for us and we were briefed on the circumstances of all of that and what was happening. That was common throughout that year leading up to deployment to Vietnam

23:00 the level of intelligence briefings was very high. Very little was held back from us in terms of how it was going.

How did the SAS and the Perth civilian population get on?

Famously. Perth population was very proud of the regiment and the regiment was very proud to be in Perth. Perth people saw it as Perth's own. There was a very good relationship. We used to hitchhike everywhere

23:30 until Adrian Jones, Candy Jones bought a motor scooter and we used to run around on that with three on the back of it. We used to hitch everywhere and we were obviously soldiers and therefore almost always SAS because there were very few other people over there and people were warm, they were kind. We were befriended on one of the train trips back to Perth from the east Dave Fisher

24:00 and I and Arch Woolrich befriended three young ladies who were going over to Perth as well, two of whom lived in Perth in Aurelian Street Palmyra, I still remember to it this day, the Ridleys and their friend Pat Feeley who I subsequently got very close to. The Ridleys, he was a stevedore at Fremantle docks just made us one of the family. We spent weekends there, they lent us

24:30 their cars, we could sleep overnight, they fed us. They were just magnificent to us and they did that out of just being very genuine people but also who were proud of having the regiment in Perth.

Did the SAS have one particular pub?

Yep. Depending on the time of day, Ocean Beach Hotel, the OBH was our pub. Saturday afternoons and Saturday nights

25:00 the Swanbourne Hotel, the Swanny had jazz there on Saturday arvos but the OBH, that was the watering hole. Funny incidents happened down there.

I've heard that they might have controlled that pub to a certain degree, was that how it was when you were there?

We owned it, yeah.

How did you establish your ownership as it were?

There were enough of us around at any one time to make it obvious that it was our watering hole. Not to

25:30 the resistance of anybody else coming in but we owned the pub and the publican quite liked that idea. The officers didn't come down very often unless it was to spring us but for the ORs it was our pub. But not to the exclusion of anybody else but our pub.

You had problems in the navy's pub in Melbourne, did they have problems in yours?

Didn't come near us. Never saw them.

There is always

26:00 **a fair, were they down in Fremantle, were they in different parts of Perth?**

Yeah, they were in Lewin. We went down to Lewin from time to time. I did the introductory diving course out at Lewin and they were certainly down in Freo [Fremantle]. Our paths didn't cross very much. It wasn't as though we were looking for blues with each other all the time, quite the contrary but things occasionally happened as they did in Melbourne but I don't recall any angst in Perth with the navy at all.

Moving on to the end of that

26:30 **course, how did you get the news that you were part of the final contingent, that you'd passed?**

I was concerned I wouldn't be interestingly. The final test was the nine mile run in full kit and in the last mile or two which was uphill up to the back gate at Campbell Barracks I was struggling and starting to fall behind a little bit and my mates, including Dave, "C'mon Mitch,

27:00 c'mon Mitch". Mick Deak ran up alongside me and he's in PE gear, "How're you going Mitchell?" "I'll make it sir, I'll make it sir," and he said, "That's good," and as he moved away he ankle tapped me and I went down like a bag of shit. Rifle went. You had two responses to that, three I suppose, you could stay there and say, "bugger this"

27:30 or come up swinging or pick your kit up and keep going which I did. It meant that I'd failed the ninety minutes, missed it by a minute or two and got back behind the rest of the people but took my place in the ranks, we were standing at ease and waiting for some more stragglers to come in and I fainted, just went backwards, thankfully into the rank that was behind me. So they carried me inside

28:00 and I was a bit woozy and I thought, "That's buggered it, I've blown it now," but I think it was the next day all of those that remained and attempted that last nine miler were passed the carder and I think we were told the next day, just paraded in the morning and told, "You're all through, congratulations. Now you'll be going to para course at Williamtown. Go and get your kid ready. Pass all of that and

28:30 you'll get bereted when you get back".

So you first emotion was one of relief?

Relief, exactly right. And I was chuffed too, real chuffed.

After the relief passed what were the other emotions that you felt?

Pride, absolutely and a great deal of pleasure that I got there.

29:00 A sense of anticipation, I was looking forward to the parachute course and the rest of it. Indeed by this stage the Australian Army being what it is with its training, you actually start to get to look forward to operation.

So take us through the next step, you came back east to Williamtown?

Yeah went back to Williamtown, did the basic parachute course which was a basic eight static line jumps.

29:30 I didn't like parachuting, or I didn't like military parachuting. Quite enjoyed the first few jumps which was just straight out the back of a caribou, straight off the ramp and that was fine but when we started to do double door exits out of Hercules and we had sixty four in the air at any one time and you're going out at eight hundred feet so you had bugger all time to enjoy it all and blokes swinging through your rigging lines and footprints across the top of the canopy. Sess packs which is a pack where you carry your kit strapped to your leg as you go

30:00 out the aeroplane and you release it and drop on a rope and it drops down thirty feet and you've got all these sess packs coming down bouncing round your ears and all these people in the air at the same time saying, "Pull away, pull away". I thought, "Hmm, I don't actually like this all that much," but it was necessary so I completed that. Back to Swanbourne, there was no actual ceremony about being bereted, just went up to the Q store and drew the sandy beret, put the badge on it and started wearing it.

30:30 Sewed the wings, the moth wings on. SAS wear a particular type of parachute wing, different to the rest of the army. Next was there's a whole series of courses that happened then but interspersed with periods of bush time, again starting to learn the real bush skills for work in Vietnam. There was a med course at Healesville, a patrol signallers course

31:00 and everybody was supposed to be able to use the Morse key in a patrol but it rarely happened and particularly towards the end of a squadron's tour, patrol sigs were really hard to come by. Ropes and patrol course which was, that was a big course about really learning what it was like to patrol in Vietnam. So in between all those courses there were periods of bush time and there was plenty of fun.

31:30 We did get weekends off and we didn't have to pull too much in the way of duties. The OBH, the Swanbourne Hotel, the Zanzibar nightclub at four o'clock in the morning, four am on Sunday morning. Racing around on Jonesy's motor scooter, scaring all the nurses at the two hospitals in the town. All the usual things that twenty one years olds will get up to when they're ten foot tall, bulletproof

32:00 and actually had a bit of money in their pocket because there was little opportunity to spend it Monday to Friday.

Just a little bit more on each of those courses you mentioned, meds course?

Basic medical course. It was a course run at Healesville designed to give you the skills to deal with trauma, combat type wound. Each patrol had to be self sufficient and somebody had to be medically qualified.

32:30 Help was a long way away so you had to be able to deal with the casualty yourself in the event of that. Also basic medical stuff. In that sort of environment coughs were a common complaint and you couldn't afford to cough, you'd be jamming your sweat rag into your mouth to avoid the noise. Dealing with little abrasions that always festered, being able to deal with that so that there was somebody in the patrol that had the skill to sustain the five members

33:00 over the period of a patrol.

The other one you mentioned, the signals?

Patrol sig. The regiment has an attached signal squadron, 152 Sig Squadron. They are corps of signals albeit they are basically SAS qualified, they have a basic qualification and they generally operated the base stations back at Nui Dat or we had a relay station at Xuyen Moc but

33:30 the patrol sig had to be a grunt. You were a normal member of the patrol fully SAS trained but you carried the Morse, no actually generally the sig carried the twenty five set which was voice capable but which you rarely used, you only used it for ground to air really because you were too far out for it to work otherwise. The mainstay of the patrol coms [communication] was a sixty four set which was Morse so you had to be able to encode a message, send and receive Morse and I think the standard was five words a minute

34:00 but most of the patrol sigs could do ten words a minute or quicker if the shit hit the fan.

Did you have any trouble with that yourself?

No, no. I did the patrol sig course and I went in at the end of 2 Squadron's tour and they were short a patrol sig so for that part of my Vietnam service I was a patrol sig in Mick Ruffin's patrol. When 3 Squadron

34:30 came up because I had some bush time I converted to scout then.

Just for the archive Dennis, how big is the sixty four set and what did it look like?

Sixty four set is about the size of a shoebox. About the size and shape of a shoebox. You open up the lid and it's got all the paraphernalia inside, the tuning apparatus. It uses crystals for tuning. You plug in a Morse key, it's on a little lead and you just tap away

35:00 on your leg with a little ear phone in the ear. You used one time letter pad codes which are an unbreakable code basically because they're random number generated and there are only two ever the same. Basically got a book and you got a book so you transposed your message into the one time letter pad, that gives you a result which is a five letter group and you send that by Morse and you have to run an antenna out too by the way

35:30 which I should have mentioned. To get coms from where we were it was a dipole antenna. It's a green covered wire. So you had to connect that up and walk out on a compass bearing either side of where you sat and hook this green wire up over the trees to become a dipole antenna.

Again we'll come back to that when you went to 2 Squadron, during this time with the patrol courses that followed, this is where you were getting information about what to expect so what

36:00 **were you being told about what you'd be doing?**

Well we were practising exactly what we were doing, that is patrolling in four and five man patrols silently and very tactically, leaving no sign behind either where we stopped or where we'd been. Practising what would happen in the event of sightings, practising what would happen in the event of contact and all the various sorts of contacts

36:30 that there could be. Practised a lot with 9 Squadron helicopters. Practised enplaning, deplaning, practised hot extractions which is where the helicopter if it can't get you out, hasn't got a place to land, just chucks ropes over, you hook onto the ropes on a carabineer and it just lifts you up and out. We did a lot of practice at that but all the time sucking in the information that these NCOs that had been there, done that, were telling you what the jungle was really like,

37:00 what the give aways were. Stuff like the Vietnamese like to smoke menthol cigarettes and that's often the first sign that you would get that you were getting close to something. If there's monkeys around you're safe because the monkeys don't like the Vietnamese, they eat them. If you hear or see monkeys you can relax. What typical contact drills the VC [Viet Cong] and NVA [North Vietnamese Army] used, how they would respond

37:30 to being bumped, how they would respond to ambushes. There were a number of camps that were laid out that were typical Vietnamese VC camps, how to do close recce on those which is one of the jobs we had to do, probably the worst job we had to do. So just gathering all this data from these people who had been there, done that. We were also reading all the patrol reports that were coming back from 2 Squadron who were there at the time, and seeing what was happening with them and noticing

38:00 an escalation in the level of contacts and also the distance from Nui Dat that we were starting to operate. You were just a great big sponge soaking it all up.

At that time was the SAS operating outside the province, outside Phuoc Tuy?

No, most of the work was within Phuoc Tuy. Occasionally you'd cross a border for a particular purpose but no, generally speaking. You might go into Long Khanh, 2 Squadron did

38:30 go into Long Khanh. It was 3 Squadron that really pushed the boundary there and pushed up in to Nui MayTaos during the time I was there and that was well out of the province into what was real booney country.

Are there any other bits of advice about what to expect, apart from those ones you've given us?

I think that's pretty complete. The picture you got was what normal

39:00 was like, what happened in contacts and what could happen, how you got out of them, what the response from the enemy would be. By the time we were going away there were few surprises. Certainly I don't remember, well, I do remember once being very surprised but I don't remember many surprises because I'd sucked all this stuff up

39:30 and so had all of us.

Was there a period of leave before you went, how did that progress?

After all that and at this stage we were still presuming we were going away with 3 Squadron in February '69 but a group of us, I suppose there were about fifteen or sixteen over a period of two weeks went over to reinforce 2 Squadron. Tony Leman was over there in Vietnam when I got there and I think John Cousins and I

40:00 and two or three others went over next and then a group with Dave Fisher followed after that. We were warned out for that. SAS does its jungle training in New Guinea and we were warned out for that but then those of us who didn't have the real long time, six years and that sort of thing, we were warned out that we were going to 2 Squadron as reo. So I had pre-embarkation leave in Sydney

40:30 early in November, a week early in November. So I came back to Sydney and saw the family and all that sort of stuff.

Only a minute left before we break for lunch but just one question on that, how was your mother coping at the prospect of you going?

Stoic, strong Catholic Irish background, the world brings problems

41:00 and she just copes. She was not visibly upset. I know she was very worried but she wasn't visibly upset.

Tape 6

00:48 **Before lunch we came up to the point of you preparing to leave to go to Vietnam, did you get any leave before you actually left?**

Yeah, there was a week's pre-embarkation leave

01:00 which I came back to Sydney for and my girlfriend I suppose, Pat Feeley who I mentioned I'd met on the way over to the west, I drove down to where she then lived in the Latrobe Valley and visited with her. We had this little parting thing, "Don't do anything serious while I'm away if you can avoid it and we'll see what happens when I get back". Then some

01:30 family time. Not mates because they'd all sort of drifted off into other things. I'd been away nearly two years by this stage and so they were all gone off doing other things and my mates were all back over west really. Dave was on that pre-embarkation leave so we knocked around a bit together during the day when other people were off doing other stuff. I still had a car over east that my younger brother was using.

02:00 The only attendant at Fort Street with an MG 'A' [motor car], driven around with the top down. So I knocked that back off him and we had a good time. A bit of probably overdid a bit but under the circumstances I can't blame myself.

Overdid it in respect to celebration?

Hearty, yeah.

Just this relationship with Pat, was it your decision to wait and see what happens?

02:30 Yeah it was. We became very close and when we were doing the training period in Perth she was living with the Ridleys who I mentioned were our family away from family. She was on basically a working holiday and she went back to Morwell perhaps a month before I was on pre-embarkation leave. We weren't at the stage of declarations of love but certainly we thought there was

03:00 potential for something. So I said to her, "I can't ask you to wait around. You can't put your life on hold for twelve months. See if you can avoid making a serious commitment 'til I get back and let's see if there's something in this," and she was content with that.

Any passing advice from your Uncle Colin or your dad?

Didn't see Uncle Col. Dad's advice was as any father would give his son going overseas and that's keep your head down and

03:30 don't do anything stupid. All that sort of stuff. But by this stage the army's training machine had me pretty well keyed up and I was looking forward to getting away and putting in to practice what I'd learnt.

Could you describe the trip over to Vietnam?

Yep. The last night in country I had to spend at eastern command personnel depot at Watson's Bay and we boarded buses there at sparrow to

04:00 go out to Richmond where we joined a C130 which flew to Tan Son Nhut via Darwin and Singapore. Mum and Dad and my sisters, I don't think my younger brother was there but my sisters saw me at Richmond, said goodbye and all that sort of stuff and it was fine. It wasn't all that teary or anything. It wasn't celebratory either but it was

04:30 relatively relaxed. At least that's my recollection, my parents might have a different view. And then walked through the RAAF base, jumped on the C130 and off we went. It wasn't Singapore sorry, it was Butterworth we staged. We landed at Darwin, refueled, kept going, landed at Butterworth. We were going to overnight there so the boys and I, it was Couso, I can't remember who the third was,

05:00 went in to Penang and played up, sort of last night of freedom so to speak and back on the Herc [Hercules transport plane] the next morning, flew into Tan Son Nhut. Hung around Tan Son Nhut for an hour then on a wallaby flight, a caribou, in to Nui Dat and we were met by the SAS duty driver on Luscombe field and driven up SAS Hill to the camp.

What were your

05:30 **first impressions of firstly Vietnam/Nui Dat?**

I think everybody will tell you that the moment they opened the door and the external air comes in the exotic smells of that country and exotic's putting too kind a word on it really, some of them were pretty rotten and the heat and humidity, they were the two things that struck me. I didn't get to see anything of Saigon because we stayed on Tan Son Nhut but the

06:00 amount of logistics that the Americans had coming in and taking off, it was just a constant stream of military aircraft and Pan American aircraft. Busiest place I think I've ever seen. It was huge. Then Nui Dat, much as I expected. We flew over and landed on Luscombe Field and I had a layout in my mind's eye anyway because we'd been working with the layout there already

06:30 and what it was like. Our lines themselves, they were in good shape. They were pretty comfortable. In fact they were more comfortable than the infantry training centre at Ingleburn. Mind you, you had different needs. We lived in tents but they had floor boards. You had a stretcher, mosquito net, the ablution block was, we had a

07:00 petrol fired heater so you could get some hot water. There's a couple of old light burn washing machines. Didn't wash much in the way of clothing but certainly your cam gear when you came out of the J you had to wash and hope it didn't fall to bits. Had a good boozer, the ORs mess was really good. The cooks did some pretty good things with the tucker that they could get. The actual base camp side of it we did very well.

Can you just describe for the archive

07:30 **the actual layout of Nui Dat, so SAS Hill in respect to everything else?**

Nui Dat is the hill feature and most of the task force were accommodated in the rubber plantations that surrounded the base of the hill. Route two which runs due north up through the province, runs past the front gates in fact it was realigned to accommodate the camp. Our lines were almost on the shoulder of the hill, right on top of the hill with an American coms unit that

08:00 were on the shoulder of that and the value I suppose of putting us there was that we didn't have to man a perimeter as the battalions down in the rubber plantations did. That meant that when not on operations there was not a constant requirement nevertheless for waking nights. We did have one post that we manned which was an OP [observation post] and had a fifty cal in there

08:30 when we first arrived but somebody decided that we should test fire it and in cocking it the cocking handle came off in the hand so it was promptly replaced with an M60. If you're in camp you might expect to get one night on that in the week you might be in. Other than that we had little in the way of duties.

In respect to where SAS Hill is were you still in danger of being under mortar attack and those sort of things?

Yes, we had

09:00 a couple of rocket attacks while I was there, one of which quite severely wounded Buff Lorimer, a lump of shrapnel through the roof of his tent and he was lying on the bed. That was the only injury that I can recall but yeah, they chucked stuff at us from time to time and being on the hill you were a relatively obvious target. By this time we'd been operated there for many years and I think the enemy well knew the layout of the camp and who was where.

09:30 Perhaps the most dangerous incident like that was when the ammunition dump which was in an old quarry immediately below our place on the hill blew up and we had white phosphorous grenades and M26 grenades and rockets shooting down between tents. That was probably the most dangerous time I think we had in camp.

Blew up because of an attack?

No it was accidental in some way. I never heard ultimately the reason why but

10:00 it was about lunchtime and I was just about to stand up from eating a meal in the mess and bangs and pops and whizzes and I spent the next twenty minutes cowering under the trestle table occasionally sticking my head up over the wooden parapet to see stuff still flying about. It was an interesting time. Terrible to be injured or killed by an accidental ammunitions dump explosion.

Just for the time line

10:30 **where was that in your tour?**

About three parts of the way through I suppose. The mortar attacks or rocket attacks came earlier.

Just coming back now to the story, you were greeted at Nui Dat?

Yeah and driven up to the lines. Reported to the 2IC I think it was, it might have been Brian White, I can't remember. Assigned a troop, it was Ron Dempsey's troop. Ron's still a very good friend of mine

11:00 lives here in Canberra, I had lunch with him last week and started to acclimatize. You basically had four or five days to get your kit together because you didn't take basic webbing away so draw your weapons, modify them the way you wanted to, put your basic webbing together the way you wanted, get a pack, get that organized the way you wanted and generally get used to the weather and the heat and the humidity.

Firstly, what equipment had you actually

11:30 **taken with you to this point?**

We simply went in polyester uniform and I took a few civvies, that was it, just in a big green canvas bag, that was all we took. All of the fighting paraphernalia was issued in Vietnam.

Modifying weapons, what sort of things did you modify and how did you do it?

We had Tiger Lines was the armourer and the

12:00 SLR, a very good infantry weapon but very heavy and it was semi-automatic, very long barrel, twenty round magazine. Typical modifications were to shorten the barrel, remove the flash eliminator and that had a twofold effect. It made it shorter and easier to handle, easier to swing but also it changed the sound so it sounded more like a fifty cal than a thirty cal. So when Charlie heard two of these things

12:30 going off plus three M16s in a contact he didn't know what he'd bumped. If the other side's got fifty cal, boy it must be something really big. An SAS contact is like nothing you've ever heard before in your life, it is an extremely noisy affair with five automatic weapons, white phos [phosphorous] and claymores and M26s and that was done deliberately to try and keep their heads down and make them wonder about what they'd bumped so we could slip away if we wanted to.

13:00 So shortened the barrel, remove the flash eliminator, get more cooling holes into the woodwork, change the seer which would allow fully automatic fire as opposed to semi-automatic fire, fit a thirty round magazine, usually with one or two tracer rounds towards the bottom of the mag to let you know if you're starting to run low although we stopped doing that after a while because we figured out that Charlie might figure out that that's what the tracer

13:30 meant too and he'd know you were about to change magazines. Get some cam onto it, some green and brown paint and some removed the rear sight, I didn't. I liked to site the weapon rather than shoot instinctively. That's the sort of modification. The Armalites, they weren't touched other than to fit grenade launchers underneath them.

14:00 **Just in respect of the SLR, to remove them, was that a good or bad thing to do?**

It made the weapon longer and in the jungle conditions we were working in a longer weapon was a distraction. Also it had this effect of changing the sound of the thing so that it was not a distinctive SLR type bark.

Then the cooling holes

14:30 **you put in the woodwork, what's that mean?**

We were just getting more air through because we were using a barrel designed for semi-automatic fire only using it in full automatic. It wasn't unusual to let all thirty rounds in the magazine go within the first five seconds of the contact so you needed to get as much air around that barrel as you could.

So in respect to weaponry you were free to do what you wanted to it?

Yeah, subject to it continuing to be reliable and accurate,

15:00 yeah. The armourers were very willing to experiment as well and those weapons stayed in country, they didn't come back to Australia. Some of them were brought back for museum purposes. And we also had quite a choice. There was the M16 but also there was the stoner weapon system which we could use we also had the silent sterling which you'd use in an ambush situation if one or two walked down the track, try and bowl them over with the silent sterling

15:30 so that you would not alert a larger group that that's what you'd done and still keep the ambush in place. Pistols of varying sorts including old German World War II Lugers and also enemy weaponry which we used to go and fire down on the range so we'd have some idea of what the other side were carrying and what they were good at and what they were bad at. There's many an Australian life today that's still being lived because the AK47 which was the most common

16:00 weapon used by NVA and some of the VC climbed on automatic fire, you had to really hold it down and being a relatively slight people the Vietnamese had difficulty doing that so often in a contact the first couple of rounds would go round your ears and the rest of it would go over your head which is a good thing.

What weapons from the NVA's point of view were actually quite good ones?

The AK47 was a very good weapon. So robust. Stoppages were rare, it was a very simple weapon.

16:30 Fired a 762 short so it still had a sizable calibre. Had good stopping power. Its only disadvantage was it tended to climb on automatic fire and the Vietnamese had trouble holding it down.

You mentioned earlier when we were discussing Ingleburn is in the layout of an actual platoon and the weaponry and stuff but it's obviously different in respect to SAS, what was the deal with

17:00 **taking guns you wanted? So you chose the SLR say but you had to have a spread of weapons throughout the five?**

You did and there was a fairly typical mix. Usually the scout carried just a straight M16 and that's because it was light, ammo was light and allowed quick movement and the scout was usually the first one in to and out of a contact.

17:30 The patrol commander usually carried an M16 with an XM203 grenade launcher underneath. The sig would carry an SLR, medic an automatic SLR and the 2IC one or the other. What you were looking for was a mix of weaponry that would give a rapid rate of fire. The whole point of what we did was to concentrate an immense amount of firepower into a very small area and that

18:00 often saved us. You would, if a patrol commander saw every member of the patrol carrying M16s he would probably say, "Hey boys, we need something a bit heavier here, let's think about the whole lot," but other than that, nope. The stoner weapon system was interesting, it was sort of an interchangeable system, you could build a rifle or pistol or almost anything out of it. We also had old World War II grease guns,

18:30 fired a forty five calibre pistol bullet, tremendous stopping power at short range. A very simple weapon. M60s too of course. Depending on what the job was you had a choice of what you could take out. The most common patrol was a recce ambush patrol and normally that would be at least two SLRs on full automatic and at least two M16s one of which would have a grenade launcher with it. The fifth one

19:00 would be one or the other.

Excellent. So you've arrived and the first five days or so were to settle in?

Yeah, getting shit together and settling in and the first patrol I did I think we went out early in December some time and it was a completely uneventful affair which was good actually, it lets you practice at bush craft in the real world and learn about working with a new group of people

19:30 and it was pretty much as it was in Australia. The training was very, very good.

Before we actually discuss a bit about that first patrol, when we were actually discussing your time back at Ingleburn, you didn't really want to be a reinforcement yet this is what you are.

Ultimately that's what I ended up being, exactly right, although there was a much closer bonding I think between, a squadron's a bit over a hundred people or a battalion's

20:00 a bit over six hundred people, a bit of a difference, and so I was accepted immediately.

How did you get to know the other fellows in those four to five days breaking in, what did you do?

I asked a lot of questions basically. How should I set up my kit, what's the water situation, how much should I carry, how do we sleep at night, are you guys taking out ponchos or just sleeping in a sheet. Just asking a whole heap of questions. There was no shortage of willingness to help

20:30 and that's how you sort of got to know people. I was in Ron's troop and there were two tents on either side and they were the people I sort of asked a heap of questions of and got to know them that way.

I'm going to cheat a little now, can I ask you those questions, what did they say in respect to how do you set up your kit?

Just told it as it was. In those days we were carrying around about a hundred and sixty rounds or a hundred and seventy with a thirty round mag involved.

21:00 So you set up ammunition pouches for that. How much water to carry. Rare to put up a poncho at night time even in the wet season because they shine so usually you just roll up in a thing called a poncho liner. SOPs[?] for LUPs, lying up place, where you stop at night time, how all that worked. And that was pretty much how it worked in Australia. I spent a bit of time up with the sigs because I was going to be a patrol sig

21:30 for 2 Squadron. I went up to the sig centre and talked to those guys up there, had a look at their set up so I knew what it looked like and how they worked for when I was sending back in. The information was everything I wanted to know was willingly said.

So in respect of setting up where you're going to stay at night, similar to Australia, what was the actual set up?

For night harbor and night LUP, well

22:00 we'd be moving along in normal patrol order and pace which is very slow. It would not have been unusual for an SAS patrol in those days to cover as little as three hundred metres in a day if they were dense and we were close to an enemy, further if we were starting to feel more secure. So one would normally do a hook so you'd move along and do a big one eighty degree turn and come back on your own

22:30 track but parallel to it and that's so if anybody's tracking you they have to walk past you before they figured out you've doubled back. Then you'd settle down, packs off, settle down, all five facing outwards. Patrol commander would walk around and have a whisper in the ear of each member, "How are you going? What did you see during the day?" Just words of a few syllables. Then we'd eat while it was still light.

23:00 That was the only meal we really cooked. We used dehydrated rations that the lerps, long range patrol US developed, they were very light to carry and very low in volume but they used a lot of water so it was a bit of a trade off. So that was a cooked meal and usually we only ate half a one, that's all we wanted or needed. So you'd eat and by then it's starting to get to dusk so then you'd just sit there very, very quietly

23:30 while dusk settled until it was fully dark. If the patrol felt secure and no follow up, couldn't hear signal shots round the place, we'd very gently move aside the debris on the jungle floor, very quietly until you came to the base dirt, we had these poncho liners which were basically the size of a double sheet. Lay that down, you've already got your pack off, take the

24:00 basic webbing off but put one arm through one of the shoulder straps so if you had to run, you didn't have to find it, it was already hooked over your shoulder. I used it as a pillow. I had two ordinary water bottles and an M26 grenade between them and if I folded my sweat rag up and put it on top that was a lovely pillow. Just lie down and drift off into what was usually a relatively disturbed and uneasy sleep. You didn't sleep through the night or anything like that. We didn't

24:30 post sentries because somebody would always be awake during the night anyway and anybody approaching us would be making a lot of noise because we always found a fairly dense thicket in which to do this, bamboo often so you'd just drift in and out of sleep until just before first light.

Was that SAS policy that you wouldn't post a sentry?

Yep, that was SOP, a) because it was unnecessary and b) because

25:00 it would mean a diminution in alertness the next day and in a five man patrol in bad country you can't afford to have one person who's not a hundred per cent switched on.

The next thing is types of patrols that you could actually go on, what types of patrols were there?

They were developing by the time I got there. SAS's original role was pure reconnaissance, it was said to be the eyes

25:30 and the ears of the task force. In the early days the task force was two battalions so often the task force commander had to operate his battalions with open flanks and often he'd place SAS patrols into those open flanks so he'd be warned if there was the approach of large formation. Gradually our role changed to becoming one of pure reconnaissance to becoming one of offensive. The purpose of that was to deny

26:00 Charlie safe haven in his backyard. So that no matter where he was he could never feel safe from a sudden and violent death at the hands of these five guys all dressed up who then just sort of disappeared back into the jungle. That worked a treat because increasingly we found the targets harder to find in terms of the people we could take on. They took to

26:30 sending two or three down a track before the main body as decoys. They had very, very well developed counter ambush drills that they developed as a result of what we'd been doing. So the most common patrol became the recce ambush where you would get four grid squares which you can see there and around those all the other grid squares all the way around those were all free fire zone, nobody else in there but us so anything in there that moved were bad guys. We would look at that

27:00 to decide where the most likely place would be that we would find enemy activity and that usually involved water, a confluence of tracks, that sort of thing. So when we got a warning order to go out we'd have a look at all the past intelligence, look at the maps, go out and have a look at it from the air, do a recce from the air of the area we were going to operate in. Then the patrol commander together with the rest of us would

27:30 all sit around and say, "Well this is what I reckon, we should this, we go in here then we'll go that way". There was the ability for anybody to dissent and that was encouraged not discouraged. If you had a different view you should put it forward. So a rough plan of action was determined from the moment you hit the ground on insertion. Then we'd follow the plan but modify it on the ground as we found different things because often you'd come across a very well worn

28:00 foot pad that nobody knew was there and obviously being used and it went somewhere so you'd follow that. That usually led to somewhere within if it was within the grid squares it would be a camp and then

if it was unoccupied that was relatively simple. We'd locate it, reconnoiter it, see what was in there, were they well formed bunkers, last time it'd been used, that sort of thing. If it was occupied that was the more difficult task

28:30 because we still had to recce it, called a close recce on a camp. For that the patrol commander and the scout would, the whole patrol would move around the camp, prop, the patrol commander with scout would push inside the camp, inside its perimeter, see what they could see, see how many people were there, what they were doing, switched on, switched off, NVA, regional force or just VC. Back out, move around again, back in again, very nerve wracking time. It could take two days to do it properly

29:00 because you just had to move so slowly and stealthily. And particularly dangerous time because walking around virtually in their living room and the patrol split as well, two there and three back here. They were nerve wracking those things.

The point on those particular things was to gather information?

It was. Not only for the task force purposes though but also so that we might use it offensively a little bit later. For example and

29:30 I remember one particular patrol where it was Johnny Jewel's patrol in 3 Squadron, I was scout and in the Hut Sik[?] we found a camp just exactly like this in fact probably the most enduring memory I have of those days occurred on that particular episode but anyway we located the camp, it was occupied, we could smell the wood smoke, we could hear the chitter chatter. We had to do a close recce

30:00 on it. We did. They looked like regional force, they weren't NVA although there might have been an NVA carter there, I don't know. The reason we'd found the camp was we'd found a footpad and with all of that information and looking at the people that were within the camp we thought, okay at the last two or three days with the patrol, we'll ambush at the track. We did. We bowled over half a dozen or something or other and then got extracted. So you could use the information

30:30 you gathered during the period of the patrol to do the ambush part of the recce ambush patrol to do the ambush part in the last three or four days. That had that effect of making them feel unsafe in a place that they'd always felt safe before.

In respect of this camp that you had a look at, how many NVA would actually be there at any one time?

They varied in size. In this particular case there was twenty or thirty but they were regional force, they weren't NVA.

31:00 One camp we bumped which was partially unoccupied. We bumped that on New Years Day '69. It could hold probably regiment size. It would have covered acres. Very well made up bunkers, big timber structural members, plenty of overhead protection. It was a pretty serious camp this one.

And in respect to the camp that you saw, there was no thinking that you'd

31:30 **actually hit the camp rather than hit one of the tracks?**

Good heavens no. There was five of us taking on thirty of them. One thing you learnt in SAS was never take on a fight you couldn't win. It didn't always happen that way and sometimes you got into fights that accidentally by just bumping people as we did on that New Years Day in 1969 where no way in the world you'd take it on if you could

32:00 avoid it but having taken it on you just have to fight it as hard as you can.

You've used several terms, regional force, NVA, VC, Charlie, could you just explain for the archive the differences?

There was a hierarchy. There was the local VC which operated out of villages. They were mostly guides or they gathered and transported stores, that sort of thing. They didn't take part in large scale

32:30 attacks, they were rather a support force. Nevertheless they could be quite aggressive if you bumped them. They were combatants, they were certainly armed. Next was the regional force which weren't the guerilla type people, they were full time soldiers but they were not North Vietnamese. They were things like D445 which was the area of Phuoc Tuy was where they operated. It was about battalion size. We bumped

33:00 their heavy weapons company one day. They were pretty good soldiers. Not as committed as the NVA and probably broadly not as well equipped they were a middle tier and they were the people that we bumped most often early in my tour anyway. Then you had NVA proper, North Vietnamese Army and they were very well trained, they were well equipped and they were very committed soldiers, very brave soldiers too. They were a formidable enemy.

Was there a difference in what they'd wear, their uniform?

Yes. Generally

33:30 you could tell by looking at them what they were. You'd move all the way from the Ho Chi Minh sandals

and black pyjamas and the conical straw hat through to proper khaki uniforms with the star insignia and the forage hat and proper webbing and various stages in between. Also their weaponry, the VC, the lower level often armed with World War II relics or M1 carbines

34:00 or old SKSs. The regional force, the middle ranking, some spattering of early model weapons but a majority of AK47 and a lot of RPGs [rocket propelled grenades] and RPDs Russian light machine gun]. RPGs are a rocket propelled grenade launcher, you still see them on the TV in Iraq and an RPD was their equivalent machine gun to our M60. It was drum fed. When you bumped NVA they were all armed with well maintained AK47s

34:30 They had grenades on these wooden sticks, RPDs, RPGs as well. They were just much better equipped and trained and much more committed.

Coming back now to your first patrol where we were up to. What was your feelings once you heard you were going out on your first patrol?

I was looking forward to it. Keen and filled with anticipation. And that dissipated over the rest

35:00 of the tour until eventually by the time you got to the end you'd certainly had enough. I was keen to get into it and as it was it was a pretty good introduction because it was a walk in the park but it was good to practice the field craft and practice with guys that had been there before, practice signaling in circumstances that were not stressed by contact.

Could you talk us through the first operation just from the point of receiving the orders and what the operation's about and

35:30 **what you did through to the end?**

You got a warning order two or three days beforehand, started to prepare your kit. 2IC of the patrol started to draw stores, ammo, food, maps. Patrol commander would gather the intelligence, we'd all do an aerial recce of the area we were patrolling. We would have a couple of pow-wows. We'd test fire weapons and start to pull the kit together.

36:00 Usually we were inserted in the afternoon so that in the event we did have a contact and couldn't be got back out again we'd have a night to hide. So we'd go in half past three, half past four in the afternoon, that sort of thing. So the day of the insertion we would usually leave our camp at Nui Dat midday-ish, one o'clock. We'd go down to the chopper pad where a 9th Squadron flight would be waiting for us. It took five helicopters to insert

36:30 one SAS patrol. We'd have a briefing with the raffies [RAAF, Royal Australian Air Force]. Albatross leader would tell us what his intentions were. Albatross leader would be in a helicopter on height and he would direct the insertion. There'd be two gunships in the event that we got into contact on insertion. There'd be the slick that contained the patrol and there'd be a spare slick. The flight would

37:00 depart and we would climb up above shooting height which was above five hundred feet basically up to about a thousand feet above the canopy. As we approached the LZ which we've already done a recce on from the air the slick would do what's called go down the mine. So she'd drop down to treetop height and she'd zoom along at about eighty knots right at the top of the canopy. The purpose of that was that the enemy might hear the helicopter but they couldn't see it and therefore judge its direction

37:30 and where it intended to go. Although later in the tour when they heard the typical signature of an SAS insertion they used to send little teams to every LZ [landing zone] in the area and see if they could spring us. But early in this particular patrol that wasn't happening. We would be ready to deplane. The helicopter would come into the LZ, do this great big massive flare, stand itself on its tail and then hover just above the ground. Usually the LZs were covered

38:00 in grass a metre high so we'd hover about a metre, metre and a half high and we'd all just jump out. That wasn't very pretty because when you're carrying around a hundred and fifty pounds of kit you usually ended up sprawling face down in the grass. As soon as we were all deplaned she'd uptail and get out of there and we would go for the, get into the jungle, get under the trees as quickly as we could and then it'd just go quiet. We'd listen to see if there was going to be any reaction to the insertion.

38:30 That was a trying time, particularly getting off the helicopter because you didn't know what you were going to get off and get into. In the mean time the albatross flight would wait to the extent of their fuel capacity and that could be as little as five minutes or up to twenty minutes just in case we got hit on the insertion and at the end of that period we'd give them a call on an erk ten which is a little UHF [ultra high frequency] radio and say, "We're clear," and they'd bug out and we'd start the job.

39:00 **And the job for this first actual?**

Pure recce. Can't even remember the region it was in now. Can't remember where but we had our grid squares, we had a walk around in the jungle, saw bugger all and came out I think it was only about five or six days later, it wasn't a very long one. Extraction was find an LZ say five helicopters come to get you out and there's a whole process you go through about making sure that's safe

39:30 for them to actually come in and land and that involves chucking smoke and paddle and getting them to

identify that it's actually you that they're coming to get. In those early days too the gunships used to shoot up the extraction LZ as well just in case there was anybody there but we stopped doing that after a while.

Tape 7

00:43 **I'll just finish off what you were just telling Michael and then we'll go back and start over some other things. You were getting picked up by the helicopters.**

Extraction was just the process of getting back out again. The day before we would send a signal

01:00 that indicated that we were ready to come out and where we were going to come out, where the LZ was. It would be an LZ that had already been reccied as part of the original recce from the air that we'd done earlier. That would be 9th Squadron RAAF would be informed and we'd get an agreement to the extraction. We would position ourselves within the jungle canopy but close to the LZ. When we heard the Hueys coming and it's the most distinctive sound in the world as I'm sure many other people have told you

01:30 we would bring them up on the radio and identify ourselves, "Albatross leader this is bravo nine sierra two four". They would need to establish that it was us that they were actually coming in to so we'd signal them with a panel, a bright fluorescent panel and pinpoint them with a mirror. We had a little mirror signaling device, hole in the centre and you could flash it at them. They'd ask us to throw smoke, we'd throw a coloured

02:00 smoke and they'd say, "I see green," or "I see red," and we'd say "Yeah, green thrown," or "red thrown," just so Charlie wasn't on the other side of the LZ throwing some smoke too and the slicks ended up in the wrong spot. Then the slick'd come in. Usually it would try and put the skids down if it could for an extraction, not for insertion but not always. We'd clamber on board and away we'd go.

You mentioned hot extractions before, were you involved in one of those?

02:30 I've had a couple of hot extractions, yeah. They are used when there is no other way to get a patrol out, there are no LZs available. There is one other way and that's to winch but you could only winch up two at a time so it takes upwards of ten minutes to extract a patrol by winch. In the mean time you've got this great big green target sitting up there above the canopy drawing fire so it's not particularly happy for the RAAF crews or

03:00 for those matters, those blokes on the ropes. The hot extraction technique was developed to avoid that winching situation where an LZ wasn't available. So that process was and it was usually in an emergency situation so you've sent some sort of contact word, you were in trouble and albatross leader would come over, we'd try and get coms if that was possible and pinpoint where we were and

03:30 the slick would hover overhead and toss out five ropes that were hooked up to a quick connect device in the middle of chopper floor. We would put a swiss seat on which is just a piece of manila rope and just wrap it around, double knot, carabineer, rope would come down, hook on to another carabineer, thumbs up, the helicopter would rise and take us away as a sling load. It's not something you would do lightly.

04:00 The thought of staying where you were needs to be, the thought of going out on the ropes needs to be only slightly better than staying where you are for you to consider it because it's bloody dangerous and very uncomfortable and the chopper pilots didn't like it either because Hueys with a heavy sling load underneath didn't fly all that well. But it's no doubt it saved a number of patrols. I had a number of hot extractions

04:30 in fact my last patrol was a hot extraction.

We'll talk a bit more about that in a particular patrol as you were coming out though, you were hanging above the canopy as targets yourself?

Yeah, but they couldn't see us then because you've got tertiary jungle and we're flying along at fifty knots of something or other. If you got up through the canopy you were all right.

Getting through the canopy was the most difficult thing?

No, generally you could find a clearing of some sort somewhere and you would deliberately look for it if you were in a running contact, trying to break contact,

05:00 trying to find a place to get hot extracted out, you would look for a place where there was a hole in the canopy and patrol commander would say, "Right, prop, this is it".

All right. I want to come back. We'll go through a few patrols obviously in a lot of detail. Just to set it up though, I just want to go over some of the things you've been already bringing up and get a few more details about them because the more details we get the better for the archive. That I guess is just about SAS patrolling in general and how it worked.

05:30 **You've mentioned a few times that they went out in groups of five.**

Four or five.

Can you explain the different roles of the people in that group?

Yep. The scout led the patrol. He had the patrol commander immediately behind him although separated by some six or seven metres and the scout took his directions from the patrol commander. So when I was scouting the patrol commander would go, that's the direction in which he wanted me to move.

06:00 I'd take a compass bearing on that with a watch type compass and I would head off in that direction as quietly as I could. My role or the scout's role was to not walk the patrol into something stupid so you had eyeballs on stalks looking for sign of recent disturbance, of the environment, on the floor of the jungle, broken twigs,

06:30 you were looking for smells, mostly you were looking for movement. Movement was the thing that gave away your presence more than anything else in those conditions. So you had the thousand yard stare, you were looking through things rather than at things. That was a scout's big job, to take the patrol in the direction that the patrol commander wanted it to take but not walk it into anything silly. Patrol commander came next because he was in a position to react quickly and the most common contact was

07:00 contact front. He, as the name obviously suggests, commanded the patrol. It was his responsibility to achieve the mission whatever that might be and to look after his men.

Was he always a ranking person or did that not matter?

Didn't matter at all. They were mostly sergeants but the troop commanders had their own patrols as well,

07:30 they were either second of first lieutenants. Some patrols were taken out by corporals. It didn't matter what rank they carried really, it's whether they were afforded the right to lead a patrol not only by the squadron commander but by the patrol members. It was possible within SAS to say, "No, I don't want to go". There was no rancor or shame in doing that. If you had had a tough time or if you had a bad feeling or something like that

08:00 you were entitled to say, "Look, leave me out of this one". There was no questions asked and no rancor about that. So if you were concerned about a patrol commander you could pass. Mind you, within two or three days you'd get another warning order for some other patrol and you'd be expected to take that one up but it was possible to say, "I want to pass on this one". So their rank didn't matter. It was whether or not they were afforded the right to lead a patrol by the patrol members and the OC.

08:30 **Once they had been afforded that right, did they have ultimate power on the ground?**

Ultimate power I suppose but an SAS patrol is a reasonably collegiate lot. Patrol commander would put forward his intention, he'd put it forward, put it on the table for the rest of the patrol members to either assent or to say, "Listen boss, what about we do this," or "Skipper maybe

09:00 if we did this and this," and patrol commanders in my experience were quite willing to change their mind if they heard a better idea. Quite a collegiate experience but ultimately once a patrol commander says, "Okay I've listened to all of that but this is what we're going to do", that's what we did.

Next came?

Next came the sig he was a full patrol member, a patrol sig. He usually carried the heavier radio set, the twenty five set. The sixty four set which was the mainstay of patrol communications, that's

09:30 the Morse set was carried by 2IC usually. So the sig would carry the big radio set which we used for ground to air coms and his role was to be close to the patrol commander and to conduct the signals operations. I was a patrol sig in 2 Squadron so you got adept at using the Morse key and running the aerial out and getting coms first go and encoding a message pretty quickly.

10:00 They were the skills that they developed.

That was a twenty five set?

Twenty five set, yeah. How would you describe that? About two thirds of the size and shape of a slab of beer. Bloody heavy too. Pain of a thing but we had to carry it to get ground to air coms.

Different from the sixty four you described before in what way?

It was a VHF [very high frequency]

10:30 set which operated on voice mainly where the sixty four set was an HF set which operated on Morse so the twenty five set, the voice set was for short range stuff, the sixty four set, the Morse set was for long range stuff. We could get coms back to Swanbourne with those things if you had the aerial out right.

Did you have aerials as well with twenty five?

Yeah. It had a whip aerial, one you unfolded and stuck in but you had the little plastic covered

11:00 wire dipole aerial for the sixty four set.

It's a fair chunk of gear, where does it fit?

Sigs got adept at getting it in the pack, you carried it in the pack. There were, you carried a fighting belt which carried your ammo, water, basic survival stuff, basic medicinal stuff, shell dressings, that sort of stuff, knife, spare compass, stuff that

11:30 you needed to survive in the event you lost the big pack. Also two of the patrol members carried UHF radios. They were a little cigarette pack size, a bit bigger than cigarette pack size which you carried on the fighting belt. The purpose of that was if for some reason or other you had to ditch the pack which we had to on one occasion then you still had everything you needed to survive on your belt. But then on your pack you carried any of the extra radios, food, extra water, extra

12:00 medical kit. Those things that you needed to make the patrol operate but you could do without in an emergency situation.

Still on the sig, you mentioned having a helicopter home in on you, how did you do that?

No, we gave him a grid reference as to where we would be. The little erk tens had a beacon they were an emergency beacon rather like the ones you can still get today and it sent a tone on one five one decimal one I think it was,

12:30 I can't remember the frequency now but it's the international distress frequency and if we were in really deep shit you could operate that frequency and every allied aircraft should have been monitoring that frequency and could home on that signal. Very short range unfortunately, they didn't go out very far but we did use them on one patrol.

How did you carry water?

Mostly in bottles, normal plastic army issue water bottles but also at the

13:00 start of a patrol we had a large plastic bladder and that carried two American quarts, it was an American bit of kit and we'd fill that up and shove it down the front of the shirt. Most of the photographs of patrols you'll see look going out like they were obese but in fact it was the two quarts of water stuffed down the front of their shirt and you'd use that up first and then you'd start to use up the water bottle.

Just to flesh out that description, so it started with the survival belt, the pack,

13:30 **do you have anything else on your webbing or any other bits of gear hanging off you?**

No, the fighting belt which is the webbing, the absolute basic stuff for survival, then a pack, your maps in pockets, sig carried the code book in the pants pocket, maps. That's about it.

How much food could you take out with you?

We could take out heaps of food because it was all dehydrated. The quantity of food wasn't a problem, it was the water to rehydrate it was the problem in the dry season.

14:00 If a patrol was going to last more than six or seven days the water supply was really absolutely essential but in the wet season we could get water anywhere. Always running creeks and you just popped the chlorine tablet in to the water and it was right.

Were there any hygiene products apart from chlorinating the water, were you able to clean yourself at all?

14:30 No, the whole idea, we stopped shaving and showering three days before we went out. The whole idea was to smell like the jungle. We didn't clean ourselves at all. We didn't remove our boots, we didn't remove any article of clothing. The only thing we took off was our pack and the fighting belt only last thing at night and even then still slung over the shoulder. When you came back in it wasn't a pretty sight and nor did you smell all that well either. There wasn't a lot of hugging going on.

15:00 **Moving back then from the sig.**

Behind the sig came usually the medic, whoever had been designated in that patrol to carry the medical kit and to look after the health of the patrol members for the duration of the patrol and also to take care of any casualties. And behind that the 2IC who carried the sixty four set usually.

15:30 He was the logistics guy, he'd do all the stuff prior to us going out, made sure everybody was hot to trot and ready to go. In the event that the patrol commander was killed or injured he would take over the patrol. All of those, in describing those roles really it was about having all the arcs covered, all the arcs of fire covered. The purpose of the five man patrol was if one got hurt you still had two to fight and two to carry.

16:00 If one got hurt in a four man patrol, two to carry, one to fight and that's not enough. So the five man patrol was the much more often used. That was about the right size in my view. Any larger and you started to get noisier. We did do larger patrols just straight fighting patrols with a special purpose. The largest patrol I went on was three patrols, so fifteen. They were rare and they were of short duration. Five worked very well.

16:30 **You've just given me a pattern of movement in a line, was that always how you moved?**

Yes, we always moved in single file spread about six or seven metres apart and in that order.

How quickly would you move?

Very slowly. And the speed of movement was set by the scout and by how much wind the scout had up at the time. If I had a wind up for some reason or other, you start to develop a sixth

17:00 sense and the hair stands up on the back of the neck, my rate of progress slowed down considerably but if I was feeling secure and wasn't seeing any sign and if I could hear or see monkeys then you'd pace up a bit. Basically we moved at a pace that allowed us to examine the area to our front and sides thoroughly and not make any noise. That could be as slow as two or three hundred metres in a day and could be as fast as a thousand, fifteen hundred metres in a day depending on the type of terrain we

17:30 were moving through and the amount of enemy that we thought were likely to be there.

How did you maintain silence, apart from not talking what other methods were there?

Movement was very deliberate. For example you always had your eyes peeled out doing the thousand yard stare thing, looking through things and then bringing the focus back in to see if there was something you'd missed and in the mean time your feet, one foot would be slowly moving its way forward and then it would

18:00 be pushing aside the debris on the jungle floor until you found firm earth and then you would place your weight on that foot and you'd prop. If everything seemed okay then you would slowly bring your other foot forward while you're still looking, covering your arc, in my case to the front. Move the next foot forward, move aside the jungle debris on the jungle floor until you found a firm footing, put the weight on that one and prop and just so on and on it went. It was very tedious

18:30 and necessarily slow but in all of that there was only one occasion in which the bad guys knew we were there before we knew they were there and that was just bad luck, it wasn't a lack of field craft. Every other case we always knew the enemy was there long before they knew we were there or indeed if they ever knew we were there.

You mentioned everyone had an arc, can you explain how that worked?

Yeah.

19:00 Basically you had an obligation to cover a particular area of the three hundred and sixty degrees surrounding the patrol. In my case it was one hundred and eighty degrees to the front when I was scout, the 2IC covered the one hundred and eighty degrees to the rear. Then the three in between had overlapping arcs so the medic would cover to the left, sig to the right, patrol commander probably both. So you had these overlapping arcs that you were covering so that if anything occurred

19:30 within that arc probably two sets of eyes would see it.

You mentioned movement was the big thing you looked for, what other signs were you looking for as you walked?

Disturbance on the jungle floor, broken twigs, discarded flotsam from people moving through like bits of rice. The other senses came in to play, smell.

20:00 I mentioned earlier that the Vietnamese liked to smoke menthol cigarettes and we often smelt that before any other sign came. The smell of wood smoke, the sound of, particularly chopping was often a give away that we were getting close to something. The sing song voices, which were quite high frequency and therefore traveled well and the hairs on the back of the neck too I must admit. You do sometimes and sometimes

20:30 it let me down, sometimes the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and there was nothing there but I'd rather listen to those than not and make a mistake.

As far as sound is concerned, it's wrong to suggest the jungle is silent.

It's surprisingly quiet and in fact when it's noisy is when it's safe. It's when the jungle goes quiet that the hairs stand up. There's a bit of bird noise, there's not much animal noise and you don't get much wind,

21:00 rustling leaves and that sort of thing. It's surprising, particularly tertiary jungle and the light's dappled, it's a surprisingly quiet place.

When you say disturbed twigs and that sort of thing, were there particular markings that the

VC of NVA would use to mark the jungle for themselves?

They rarely moved in the jungle, they mostly always moved on tracks. In fact I can't remember bumping any in the jungle at all. The trouble is, if you're in the jungle and then there's a track

21:30 twenty metres to your front and you can't see the track then what you're looking for is movement as they moved along there. But they did leave markers, they leave stones on the side of tracks in a certain pattern indicating the direction of their movement or how far ahead the next staging post it. They used signal shots a lot to communicate each other. They used messages of that sort. But in the areas in which we operated they felt

22:00 reasonably secure, particularly in the early part of my tour. So they were pretty switched off and they were quite lax about making noise and being less tactical than we were.

How good were your maps, what did you know about where tracks were or what sort of features were noted on them?

The maps were excellent. I've shown you some. We had not only the survey maps but we had picto-maps which is basically an aerial photograph overlaid with the topographical

22:30 features so you could almost identify individual trees on those maps. However the overlay of the topographical features were from the old French days so the roads that were in existence then probably weren't when we were there and the tracks that carved their way through the jungle that the VC used were not shown. One of the things we did was to identify those tracks and over a period of years you could see from various patrol reports

23:00 where one might finish and another might start and you can marry the two up. From past intelligence we had some idea about where the major tracks were but what we were looking for were the new ones, the ones that nobody knew about and were unmarked because that's where Charlie was likely to be.

You were moving very slowly, how far would you say move in a day?

It would vary as I said between three hundred metres in some cases up to fifteen hundred metres in others. It depends on the country,

23:30 depends on enemy activity, depends on the particular courage level of the scout at the time.

When you wanted to stop what would you do?

I would just stop and what would happen is the patrol commander would move up to me or if I wanted him to come up I'd turn around and signal him forward but I wouldn't stop unless I was uncertain of something. It was the

24:00 patrol commander who called a stop for a break or something or other like that and what he'd usually do was just a little click of the fingers like that. I'd hear that and turn around and he'd go indicating time for a smoko, not that we did smoke in those circumstances. We did smoke sometimes but only when we were feeling nice and safe. But if I stopped I'd have stopped for a reason, I've seen something, I'm unsure of something, I'm not sure of which direction

24:30 in which case I can communicate with the patrol commander and go and he'll give me a direction or I could ask him to come forward so I can whisper or I could point out something that I've seen. The most common sign would be that I've propped because I can see through the jungle a track in which case I'd go back and go, indicating to him a track and then I'd go down on one knee and he'd come forward and have a look himself after telling the people behind what I've seen.

25:00 **You still seem pretty conversant in this sign language, can you give us any more of it, how much of it can you still tell us?**

A lot of it was made up. It's pretty common use within the regiment but it wasn't strictly field craft field signs, it was what we figured out would work in the circumstances. Well, they were the two big ones but yeah

25:30 the most common one was come forward or which direction do I go, or there's a track ahead or do that if I smelled something, natural stuff.

What were the implications of a thumbs up or thumbs down?

Thumbs down was I had seen and identified enemy, certain. Thumbs up was all clear, it's okay. If I wasn't certain that it was enemy but I'd seen something and I was concerned about it

26:00 I'd go, give the maybe sign.

We'll come back to what happened when you saw enemy in a moment but when you did stop for a break, what would you do then?

We'd go into all round protection. We'd move off our line of march so we'd move to the left or right ten or fifteen metres, remove the packs and usually sit on them, all faced outwards. If we were smoking we'd have a smoke, if we were going to brew up we'd brew up but always with all five

26:30 sets of eyes outside. The patrol commander would use that opportunity just to move around the other four of us and just say, “Everything okay? We’re going to continue in this direction, we should hit a creek in a hundred metres”, just keep everybody up to speed with what’s happening.

Would you be able to light a fire? How did you brew up?

We only lit fire at night time, for the evening meal, but it was during daylight to cook the meal but if

27:00 we were going to have a hot brew which we did at lunchtime used a hexamine stove which is a little fire lighter type thing, you had a metal cup and sat around the water bottle and brew it up in that.

Could you take food with you to eat on patrol or was that against the rules?

You could take anything you like. If you could carry it you could take it but generally speaking you tried to lighten the load as much, a normal day’s meal for us

27:30 would be dry biscuits and a brew of coffee with condensed milk in the morning, you put lots of sweetened condensed milk into it, lots of energy, lunchtime would be biscuits and cheese, something you didn’t have to cook but you might brew up again just on the hexamine stove and the evening meal was usually a half dehydrated food pack, spaghetti and meat balls or cream fish or chili

28:00 con carne. They were okay.

You mentioned that meal would happen in daylight, was that part of the night harboring you mentioned before?

Yes. You would eat so there was no chance of the hexamine stove being seen in the gathering gloom.

What would you do with any scraps or rubbish you had?

Take it out with us. You had a part in your pack where you would put it into what was usually a sort of plasticized

28:30 canvas bag that the lerp packs came into and you just jammed all your rubbish in them. We didn’t take tins usually, maybe for the first meal of the day of the first day, just too heavy. So everything you took was very lightweight.

What about toiletries, I mean going to the toilet?

Each of the ration packs had a little fold of toilet paper. SOPs for that was that

29:00 you would indicate to the rest of your patrol who would be in the LUP all facing outwards, you’d hold up the toilet paper and your knife and they knew exactly what you were doing, you were going out to dig a hole for shit. Then two would sort of face inwards out towards where you were going so you were under the cover of two guns the whole time you were out the front, you’d walk out in front of them ten metres, dig a hole, drop your daks, shit in the hole, to the vast amusement sometimes of those behind

29:30 because the consistency was variable, clean yourself up and come back in having buried it all.

That’s something that makes a noise, smells, all those things, you were talking about before.

All of those things. You tried to avoid that if it was at all possible.

Was burying it a particular depth or did you just scratch over it?

Oh no, just dug a hole maybe six inches deep.

What happened then on patrol when you

30:00 **saw something and you gave that signal, contact?**

Well it wouldn’t be a contact if I’d just seen something and I gave an enemy sign. I’d make sure the patrol commander got the enemy sign and he’d send it straight back down. Then everybody would go down on one knee and watch their arc and the patrol commander would slowly come forward to me and he’d ask me what I’d seen and I might say, “Three VC walking along the track, that direction,” and then we’d make a decision

30:30 about what we were going to do. Were we going to go have a look at the track, were we going to withdraw, what we’re going to do then. That’s different from a contact, a contact’s when you actually start shooting at each other.

What was your brief if you like in that situation, on a recce ambush?

If we had a contact?

Well if you’d identified that there was somebody there what would you aim to do then?

Make sure they didn’t know I was there, rule one until we decided what we were going to do and if we were going to initiate

31:00 an attack, we wanted it to be in our timing and at our place. So I'd make sure the rest of the patrol knew that there was enemy to the front and I'd get the patrol commander to sneak very slowly forward and I'd give him a briefing usually half whispered, half sign signaled about what I'd seen and what I thought was going down, what was happening, they were walking away, describe them if I could, if they were regional force, if they were NVA, if they were switched on or if they were switched off, if they were carrying loads, if they had

31:30 women or children with them. Try and give him a sit ref of just what it was I'd seen because quite possibly he hasn't, I'm six or seven metres in front of him and he would then make a call about what we were going to do. In that typical situation if I'd seen people moving along a track, we'd decide to put an OP on the track, watch it for a while, just see how many people we could see through and what sort of people they were. So we'd move to an area that was perhaps more dense than we were and we'd move an OP forward that could see the track and behind

32:00 them maybe ten metres, we'd have two up and three back and we'd just watch the track for a few days, see what we could see and what we could learn. From out of that might come a decision to ambush that track on the last few days of the patrol or the decision might be no, there's too many for us to knock over let's tell our headquarters and they might want to get a company in to do it or they might just air strike a camp, make that call themselves.

All that

32:30 **crucial information, it has to be given pretty quickly but also pretty silently, how did you do that?**

Just exactly the way I said it, a combination of hand signs and whispering. I might say, "Three, track, that way," not speaking and then I might say, "NVA," and instantly the patrol commander has got a picture of exactly what that was, these were NVA, they were well equipped, they were uniformed, they would have been moving tactically and

33:00 they've just passed from the right to the left on this track and moving away. At that stage that's what he needs to know.

Who were you most fearful of coming across?

NVA. They were very formidable opponents. They had very good contact drills. They were committed, they were brave, well equipped, well trained. They were good soldiers.

In the area you were operating at the time, were they the most likely

33:30 **people to come across?**

In the later stage of the tour yeah, certainly in the last six months because we started to move into the May Taos [elevated area] which was a real base camp for 274 regiment. Most often that would be who we would bump. In the first part no, when we were operating well within Phuoc Tuy down in the long green, up along the firestone trail, up in the north west of the province, regional force generally.

Were there any

34:00 **civilian people using these tracks at the time, women, children?**

Well they were free fire zones and any women or children we saw were part of an enemy formation. They didn't make any distinction in the combatants. Indeed I came to within a hair pull on that close recce of the camp that I was talking to Michael about

34:30 when Johnny Jewel and I were pushing in to the camp a young fellow who wouldn't have been, very hard to tell with Vietnamese but I suspect twelve or thirteen with an M1 carbine slung over the shoulder so certainly a combatant but an absolute kid and he was herding three or four water buffalo along across the front of us and I was about maybe three metres from him

35:00 and I just propped and we had very good camouflage, we were against the background of the jungle, he had no idea we were there so I was reasonably confident I'd get away. Nevertheless I lined him up and I was carrying a SLR automatic and one of the water buffalo got about opposite where I was and stopped and turned its head and looked at me.

35:30 I took up the first pressure on the trigger to bowl this kid over. He just flicked it on the bum and kept it moving and I didn't have to take up that second pressure. That's one of my most enduring memories. Of all the memories that come back to me that one was how close I came to bowling over a bloody thirteen year old.

Does that give you pause to think about war in general, that memory?

No.

36:00 The Vietnam War was a particular situation. The combatants were of both genders and of all ages. It was the way it was and I'm not beating myself up about the fact of the matter, it's just that that image comes unbidden to me every now and again. Terrible thing really. He might not even have been

thirteen, he might have been eleven or something. Three rounds

36:30 of 762 at twenty eight hundred feet a second does terrible things to the human body particularly to one as frail as that. A terrible way to die.

We will come back to more concrete examples, I'm not going to miss that but I want to go back to the general patrolling questions we were talking about. Obviously as that example brings up you were very, very well drilled about what to do in that situation. Was it more important to keep silent or if you had a chance to knock off

37:00 **some enemy.**

We only wanted to pull the fight on where and when we wanted to pull it on. So in those circumstances we didn't want them to know that we were recce-ing the camp so I didn't want to shoot him because immediately I'd done that we would have had a contact, we had the patrol split, we would have had to pull it together and get out of there and probably under some form of pursuit. So no, I didn't want to pull that fight at all, I was very glad he flicked the buffalo on the bum and kept going but as I

37:30 explained earlier what we subsequently did was moved about six hundred metres down the track that led into this camp and we put an ambush on that and that's when we chose to fight and that's when we bowled them over.

If a contact was pulled for whatever reason were there drills about what to do then?

Yeah absolutely and we practised them constantly, rehearsed them usually before every patrol. We'd go down on to the range and we'd live fire a full contact front, contact left, contact right, ambush.

38:00 We'd go through a whole day's rehearsal of just what exactly we would do so that the reaction was automatic, you didn't have to think too much about it. In that circumstance if it was a contact front I would let fly with bloody everything I had and make it sound as noisy as I could. The patrol commander would get up beside me and let fly as well, the rest of the patrol members would group on us but staggered back behind,

38:30 continue pouring fire power into the front and then when my first thirty round mag was exhausted I'd change mags and then skedaddle back through the rest of the patrol, move back twenty metres behind them, prop, turn and cover and then the rest of the patrol would singly come back under cover of the guns that had already come back behind them and we'd attempt to break contact in that way but continuing to pour all the firepower we could muster in there. Usually after the first movement we'd start chucking

39:00 M26s or white phos. Charlie hated white phos, white phosphorous grenades and that would certainly discourage pursuit. As soon as we could break visual contact and the firefight we'd go absolutely silent and move away as quickly as we could on an opposite bearing and try to break contact all together.

A fighting retreat basically.

Correct.

Only got a second or two left on the tape but white phosphorous grenades, what happened when you set one of those off?

It was

39:30 a fragmentation grenade so it actually sprayed shrapnel everywhere but what it also sprayed was little bits of burning phosphorous which you can't extinguish. Water won't put it out, nothing will put it out. It just sticks to the skin and it just burns straight through your skin. The only way to get it off is to flick it off with something or other. It's a shocking burn.

Did you have to set those off in combat very often?

We chose to because of their deterrent effect.

Tape 8

00:42 **We were talking about the drill when you made contact. What was the drill if someone was down, if someone had been shot or injured in some way?**

Individual patrols had individual views about that.

01:00 First of all a decision had to be made about whether or not you could move forward and retrieve them and when that did occur on the few occasions that did occur to us, never occurred to me, that's what happened, people went forward and pulled them back. SOPs thereafter were that that man should be left, should be hidden and the rest of the patrol should escape, break contact and then come back and get them if that was possible

01:30 but most patrols had an internal rule that was you wouldn't leave a man dead or wounded and that you would get them out. That was certainly the rule within the patrols I operated in. So if in that eventuality somebody did go down the rest of the patrol would do whatever it took to get them out.

There was a certain amount of improvising left open there.

There were

02:00 SOPs that we followed but individual patrols modified them to suit themselves. There were no hard and fast rules. Nobody slapped you on the wrist if you didn't do it exactly as the book said. You just made it work in the best Australian Army tradition really. Find out something that works and use that.

Whose call was that, the commander of the patrol?

Patrol commander. He knew what he was comfortable with and if you were doing something

02:30 that he wasn't comfortable with he'd let you know. Equally if the patrol commander was doing something that I wasn't comfortable with it was well within the realms for me to let him know.

The other drills or SOPs that you would have used often were ambushes, what was the standard ambush procedure?

Generally we used claymore ambushes. They were a lot more effective than rifle ambushes although we did use one on one occasion

03:00 and that was because it was a bit of an improvised affair but where we had the time to plan an ambush we would use claymore mines. We usually carried five claymores within the patrol. We put three in the killing ground and two, one at either end facing down the track that you were ambushing. The killing party was usually only two people and then you had two on the flanks and one at the rear.

03:30 Poor old 2IC at the rear as usual. Using claymores you didn't need anymore in the killing party. You just hit the clacker and bang, away it went, then the two in the killing party would go forward under cover of the other two guns on the flanks. If it were safe to do so they would dispatch any doubt of life left, quick body search looking for documents,

04:00 personal mementos because that could tell us where they came from and how long they'd been down here and diaries particularly were useful. Collect the weapons and bug out.

Were there different ambush patterns for say a track or a clearing?

I only ever ambushed a track so it was pretty standard because that's mostly where Charlie was. The only time he was in the jungle was if he was after us.

04:30 There was a couple of special jobs that the regiment, the squadrons undertook. One was part of a coordinated search of an island called Long Son Island. One patrol found a bridge that had been recently built to carry wheeled vehicles. They went in and blew that up and then ambushed the track against anybody that might come to see what was going on. There was a tractor that was being used on the firestone trail and a patrol went in and blew that up

05:00 with a beehive charge. There were specially tasked offensive roles but they were the minority, the majority was the standard recce ambush. Go in to an area, find out where the bad guys are, see how you can hurt them, hurt them and then get out.

Just for the archive, a claymore's a directional mine, can you describe that and how you carried them and stuff?

Yep. It is most people think mines lie on the earth but a claymore is a

05:30 device, hard to describe but it's probably yea big, I don't know if that'll come out on camera, it's slightly convex or concave depending on which side you're looking at it. It contains a whole bunch of ball bearings embedded within an explosive which is triggered by an electrical detonator or a det cord. It's designed to cut a swathe through an area to its front in a thirty degree arc.

06:00 So if you put three side by side you could usually cover a killing ground of around about twenty to thirty metres long depending how far back you could get them. They were a devastating weapon and once they were fired the damage to people on the other end was quite extreme. However they did have a drawback and that is they had a back blast. You had

06:30 to be careful not to be behind them when you fired them and often you'd tie them on to trees with a bit of wire carried particularly for that purpose and not a patrol I was on but I do remember one patrol that did exactly that, sprung the ambush, the tree was an old rotten tree, a limb fell off, fell on one of the patrol members and broke his leg.

How were they detonated?

Electrically, you had a thing called a clacker which was a thing about the size of a

07:00 cigarette packet with a handle on it and you hooked up the wires to it and to the det in the claymore

and squeezed the kit and that fired them. You hooked them up in parallel so that one squeeze would fire all of them simultaneously. The ones on the flank you didn't fire straight away just in case you needed them and they were fired by the flank protection on either side. Once the decision had been made, we'd done the body search, grabbed the weapons and we were getting out, then those claymores would be fired as well and we were just out of there.

07:30 **Were the clackers reliable, did you have any problems with them?**

No, never had a misfire.

Would they be impervious to water or any kind of?

Oh, you looked after them. Carried them wrapped in plastic with some duct tape sealing them and only broke them out when you were setting up your ambush. They weren't a weapon you could use in a running defence but when you had the time to set them up

08:00 they were a devastating weapon.

You've mentioned phosphorous grenades, what other non-gun weapons were you carrying?

M26 which is the normal fragmentation grenade. It's a smooth skin thing, it's actually made up of stuff like band saw and on detonation that sprays these little lumps of steel band saw in an area. They made a big bang, a big thump and their lethal range was sort of

08:30 ten metre radius. Their real value was their shock value. What we were really trying to do when we were trying to get out of a contact was to get the bad guys to get their heads down. When you've got five automatic weapons going, white phos grenades, M26s they are inclined to put their heads down and that lets you break the contact.

What was the safety considerations with using grenades?

We used to carry them taped. We weren't confident enough in just the pin mechanism

09:00 but you put a little tag on the tape and you could rip it off very quickly so that they were ready for firing. I didn't have any concerns about them going off. I slept on one, two water bottles and an M26 was my pillow. I had my head on them every night.

When using them though, did you need a certain amount of room to throw them?

Well Chris, under the circumstances you made

09:30 the best call you could and there was a bit of fingers crossed as well. Obviously you wouldn't throw one if you knew you had our people to the front but if you were the front and you were chucking one out you hoped it didn't bounce of a low limb.

Was there a certain radius of the explosion you had to consider?

We'd try and keep fifteen, twenty metres back. You could throw them that way easily, they were like a little cricket ball really, you could chuck them rather than

10:00 bowling them and you could usually put them into the area that you wanted them to go.

How many seconds would the charge last them?

I think it was five and that was too long. It should have been two or three really because you didn't like, strictly speaking you should have let the handle go and hung on to them for one or two seconds before you bowled them but that was a difficult thing to do under most of the circumstances so you usually let the handle go, chuck them down there and it took far

10:30 too long for the bloody thing to go off.

The other thing I think you mentioned finding a camp, did you uncover bunkers in your patrols?

Yeah.

What was the drill when you found one of those?

Well the first thing to do was to find out whether it was occupied or not. The first indication was usually that the scout stepped into an area that was a fire lane. You'd be moving through just jungle

11:00 and you'd take one step forward and you'd stop and you'd look around and you'd say, "Oh shit", it's a perfectly clear path and you've just stepped in to a fire lane sighted for a machine gun from their bunker. That was usually the way you found out. If the bunker was occupied it was followed fairly shortly thereafter by a burst of RPD fire. That never happened to me thankfully. We never bumped an occupied bunker system that we didn't know about first.

11:30 Some people did step into fire lanes. But I have stepped into a fire lane, scouting in an occupied bunker system and had that sudden realisation, "Oh shit," but unoccupied, so it was cool.

Is it incredibly difficult to resist the urge just to jump backwards or to run?

My normal reaction is to kneel slowly when something like that happens and hope that the movement won't give it away. Our camouflage was very good.

12:00 Against the background conditions if you didn't move people had a lot of trouble seeing you.

Just a question out of order, do those reactions stay with you today if you get a shock today do you find yourself falling back on SAS training?

Yeah I do and in fact it happened only twelve months after I got back from Vietnam. Yeah, the reaction of falling on the floor and all that sort of stuff's, not what I did.

12:30 What I did was to go back to the old habit and that is to freeze and then slowly see what was going on. The idea of diving for the floor and covering your head, didn't enter the head.

When you did find a bunker, how did you sort that out?

We'd talk to the patrol commander about it in sign language

13:00 and he would probably send me up on a bearing that would enable me to get close enough to see if there was anything going on in there or to hear anything that might be going on. The ones we did bump were unoccupied so we would move through the bunker system, map it out, get the grid references, draw a diagram of how it, see how many there were, whether they were connected by fire lanes and communication pits, see how many it could hold, whether it had been recently occupied.

13:30 Gather all that sort of data and the most common use of that was it would be targeted for a B52 strike at some time.

How complicated were these?

Not very complicated. They were usually circular and they had forward facing bunkers usually with earth and overhead protection, pretty well camouflaged, fire lanes cut and behind those were second line of defence, control type bunkers, usually pits dug between them

14:00 so the enemy could move between the bunkers without exposing themselves and behind that some sort of living area which was usually just shell scrapes dug in the ground and some matted banana palms for rainwater protection.

They were often booby trapped.

I never came across any booby traps and we made no attempt to enter the bunkers themselves, not our job. If somebody wanted to actually

14:30 go and have a look at them they would take the engineers and tunnel rats and they could go and do that. We were not trained nor was it our job to go and have a look at them.

Were there things you're on the lookout for outside the bunkers in terms of booby traps?

Really just how many people it could contain and how recently it had been occupied, they're the two big issues. You could tell from the sign if there'd been a company sized group there three days ago you could tell that

15:00 and the mosaic you can build up from all those little bits of information from various sources including us enabled the task force intelligence people to build up a picture of movement and who was going where.

On the subject of booby traps, when you set up a night harbour yourself would you set up claymores or any sort of perimeter defence?

No the only perimeter defence was we found the thickest bit of bush we could find so anybody that tried to approach us would have to make noise

15:30 and it's pitch black in there too so also probably have to have some form of light.

How did you get comfortable?

You get used to the sleeping conditions. And you never went into a deep rapid eye movement sleep anyway, you were always just a light sleep, you're only just a blink away from being awake and alert. Often during the night that's exactly what happened, what was that,

16:00 you'd sit up and listen for ten minutes. Comfort wasn't high on the list of priorities really.

Would you dig hip holes like they used to do in the Second World War?

No. We just very, very carefully moved the debris off the top of the earth, move it one side, lie on that and then in the morning just carefully move it all back again so by the time we left that LUP you couldn't tell anyone had been there.

Realistically on patrol how much sleep would you get?

16:30 Four or five hours a night I suppose. I never counted it.

Would tiredness pose problems?

Yeah it did but physical tiredness was the biggest burden. You were carrying an immense load and you had a high degree of mental stress at the same time and the nervous energy was pumping away. I think

17:00 probably the fact that you didn't sleep deeply or all that much got pushed into the background of the high degree of mental alertness and the sheer physical effort of carrying that load.

How does that constant mental alertness affect you after a patrol of any length?

It didn't affect me after individual patrols but the cumulative weight of doing that towards the end of the tour certainly added up.

17:30 I was, and everybody else was in the last three months very, very tired both mentally and physically. More prone to illness, more prone to injury and also shorter tempered. Towards the end of a squadron's tour the odd fight would break out in the boozer which you wouldn't have seen six months earlier. So there was a cumulative weight of tension and stress

18:00 and physical tiredness that built up over that period so that the last three months was the most difficult period and that's when the squadron started to lose people for medical reasons or casualty reasons at a far greater rate than they had in the first nine months. Twelve months was too long for SAS type operations. Should have been six months in my opinion.

You've come to the end of your patrol, you've thrown smoke, the chopper's arrived, you've gotten on to it, it starts to rise

18:30 **up, what's that feeling like?**

Fantastic, best feeling in the world, well maybe not the best but it's pretty good. Out of there. And I particularly remember it on the last patrol which was a hot extraction and when I got back into the chopper, "You beauty", one of great elation. Big smiles all around, all the patrol members were smiling at each other. Because there was a lot of coughs we usually carried at least one water bottle of rum, you'd pass that around and have a swig of rum,

19:00 thumbs up and all that sort of stuff, particularly if it had been successful and you'd done a good job. Then we would be flown direct to SAS Hill, Nadzab pad, off there, go and almost immediately have a debrief from the squadron intelligence officer and usually the 2IC or OC as well. If there was a lot found that information needed the patrol commander would

19:30 go down to task force headquarters and relay that directly with the OC. The rest of us would start the process of getting cleaned up and getting ready for the next one which usually took until four thirty when the boozer opened and then you'd have a big drink.

Was that a side effect of the mental stress you were in, the amount of drinking you'd do while you were in country?

Yeah. I suppose it was. At the time it was just relief and good fun

20:00 and camaraderie too because everybody else wanted to know how it went and that sort of thing. When you were in camp you had a thing called morning prayers which we were talking about before which was basically a sit rep on what's happening, what the battalions are doing, what the other patrols are doing, who's bumped somebody, who's been in contact and so there was always interest by the other members of the squadron when you got back in after a patrol of how did it go, what did you see, what happened

20:30 and yeah, plenty of alcohol didn't hurt either, very relaxing. The big ones were usually only the night after we came in. At other occasions while we certainly liked to drink it didn't get to binge stage.

On the subject of camaraderie did you often take the same five people on patrol?

More often than not.

Who for you were those five people?

21:00 I operated with three patrols, Mick Ruffin, Johnny Jewel and Bluey Parrington. I suppose mostly with Johnny Jewel. John was the patrol commander, I was the scout, Trevor McKenzie was the sig, Teddy Rusker was the medic and Ross McCallum was the 2IC. I still know all of them except for John

21:30 who committed suicide five or six years ago now.

Was there a particular bond between you because you'd been out on patrol together?

Absolutely, very, very close bond.

How did you think that worked?

Well you don't get much closer to people than sharing life and death experience. That's about as close as

22:00 you can get to people really and that's a bond that is very rarely broken. I'm still very good friends and very close to those people even though I might not see them for sometimes years at a time. It's just a very easy and instant feeling of rapport and togetherness. My wife remarks on it all the time. She says when she sees us at SAS association functions, she just stands back

22:30 and watches and there's just this easy melding of the groups of people that has come from that shared and life changing, life threatening experience.

That was in 3 Squadron those folks?

Yes, that was 3. 2 Squadron I worked with Mick Ruffin. I was patrol sig in that. The 2IC

23:00 was, name's just gone right out of my head, Blue Kennedy was the medic and Bad News Fred Barclay alternated between scout and 2IC. What was the 2ICs name, I've forgotten sorry, it's on the tip of my tongue.

There was an episode with Blue Kennedy where you both decided you'd go to church the next day, was that in 2 Squadron?

It was in 2 Squadron, it was

23:30 my second patrol.

Can you tell us that story from the very beginning, what happened on your second patrol, what was the objective and what were you setting out to do?

It was a straight reconnaissance patrol, it wasn't recce ambush, just straight reconnaissance. We went in to a place called Long Green which is sort of south east of Nui Dat down near the coast north of Vung Tau. It's a big long spit of primary jungle that sort of

24:00 comes in from the sea. There'd been diesel engines heard up and down the cape for quite a while and the thought was the bad guys were using the beaches there to land supplies from the sea and they were being stored in the Long Green. There were two patrols tasked and we had our own separate AOs, area of operations. The two patrols went in together in two slicks. We patrolled for a little while together

24:30 and then split up, they went to theirs and we went to ours. Uneventful first day and second day. Third day which was New Years Day 1969 I was patrol sig so I was well back in the patrol but there was an earthen, we went down in through a creek, up the other side and on the other side there was an earthen jar, quite a large one

25:00 probably hold six or seven gallons with this black plastic draped over the top, obviously a water supply for something or other. Because we were moving obliquely the other guys didn't see it and I went and pointed it to Mick and we had a look at it. Suddenly the hackles go up, there's something around here. So we became very cautious, moved forward, found a bunker system but it was unoccupied. Moved through the camp, moved out the other side

25:30 and into an area that was a bit clear and Fred Barclay saw a track, called Mick Ruffin up to go and look at the track so I was now the furthest forward of the three of us behind while they were looking at the track. Four regional force people, call them VC were coming up the track and they were about to stumble on to Mick and Fred and I had no choice, I had to shoot them. Couldn't shout, that would have helped

26:00 them as much as us. So Blue Kennedy and I bowled them over. Fred and Mick were going forward to search the bodies and up the track from the same direction came a whole bunch more. I don't know how many, fifteen, twenty or something and they were very aggressive, they assaulted us. We went in to a break contact drill, we had to move back through the camp to do that, to get away from them.

26:30 They were very aggressive, they actually charged us in assault formation. We had to bowl a few more over there and we moved back through the camp, they were following us all the time. We were trying to get away from where we knew the camp was and get back into jungle but the further we moved away from where we knew the camp was, the more of the camp there was, it was huge. Some of it had, the bunkers had concrete members for overhead protection, it was a really big deal.

27:00 Anyway we crossed the creek again and finally broke contact although we could hear them jabbering and moving to the east. I was the sig so Mick told me to get our contact code word off, no encoding for that, just a contact code word which was Mel. Melville was Mick's wife's name, lovely lady. So I chucked an N fed antenna out and punched in Mel about fifteen times in to the Morse key, closed the radio set up

27:30 because they were starting to come up again, left the aerial, we had a spare. We bugged out of there again. They followed up I suppose for about the next hour but the message had got through so Brian Wide the OC came over in a possum helicopter and Mick gave him a sit rep because I had the twenty five set so I was standing right beside Mick when Mick gave him the sit rep and both Mick and I swear to this day that what Brian Wide said was

28:00 “LUP, extraction tonight”. What Brian Wade says he says was “No extraction tonight, LUP”. There was a huge difference between those two. Anyway we closed the twenty five set up. Mick identified an LZ that was to our north because we thought we were getting out that night and off we went. We timed it, now we couldn’t hear any more signs of follow up so starting to feel okay about things,

28:30 baptism of fire, faced it okay, came through professionally and probably chopper’s already in the air to come and get us out. So we got to the LZ that we’d chosen and we moved on to the LZ because we could hear choppers, believed they were for us in fact Wade had sent them to the other patrol which was also in contact but because we’d broken our contact he’d sent them to the others, that’s fair enough, I’ve got no problem with that and that’s what he should have done

29:00 but we thought we were getting out. Anyway moved out to the LZ and there was this little dry sort of old buffalo mud wallow which was maybe about as deep as a foot below the level of the rest of ground but quite high grass around it and we piled in to there in all round defence and started to get ready with smoke and panel for the choppers. We heard, we were there for twenty minutes, starting to get later in the afternoon

29:30 now and we heard stealthy movement through the grass towards us. One of the enemy stood up maybe ten metres away from us trying to orientate himself, look around and see what was going on and they were sneaking up through the grass to come and get us. Anyway, terrific shot Fred, just shot him through the head with a single shot and there were four or five behind and they ran up and Lou Kennedy and I chucked

30:00 M26s at them. That slowed some of them down. Anyway they got back to the tree line and we’re thinking, “C’mon choppers, c’mon choppers,” because they’ll have a light fire team with them, two gunships with them and they can take these blokes out in the jungle and we can get out of here but they were never coming. Then one of them climbed a tree so he could see down into our little depression and started to shoot down into us

30:30 and we fired some M79s at him, got a tree burst and bowled him over. Then they started to fire into where we were but we were down behind the packs and it was mostly passing overhead, frightening nevertheless, the crack of passing rounds relatively close and that’s about when Blue made the suggestion about going to church. We kept up

31:00 chucking M26s into the surround grass to discourage another attempt at sneaking up on us and there was a big explosion just beyond the lip of this little dry mud wallow and Mick Ruffin turned around and said, “Chuck those fucking M26s further out”. We all looked at each and we hadn’t chucked any M26s and in fact what it was was incoming mortar. Up to the north of this cleared area was what looked like

31:30 fifty or sixty enemy had formed up and they had a mortar plate and they’d formed up on an assault line and looked like intent on assaulting us. They were firing small arms at us so we shot back at them for a while and they didn’t get any closer and we were still hoping for the choppers to arrive and take these people out and I was starting to get really worried because I was on the radio trying to call albatross leader, we had the erk ten beacons going.

32:00 Of course five against what looked like then sixty odd plus with heavy weapons wasn’t real good odds particularly as we were sitting out in the open. And this return of fire went on for a little while and then they brought up a tripod mounted medium machine gun and started to get into us with real long, bloody accurate bursts of that.

What could you see of these?

You could see them. You had to stick your

32:30 head up to make sure they weren’t getting any closer and you get a few shots off at them and get the head back down again. You could see them lined up on the assault line, they weren’t that far away, maybe couple of hundred metres, less than that, a hundred and fifty metres.

And what did you have to take cover behind?

The little bit of low dirt and our packs. By this stage ammunition is starting to be a real concern too, we’re down to second last or last magazines sort of stuff.

33:00 It was not looking good. But it was starting to get dark and we thought if we just wait a little while, it gets a little bit darker, we can hold them off for a little bit longer, we can bug out of here under dusk. We had to cover probably a hundred and fifty, two hundred metres of open ground to get to the nearest bit of jungle. Anyway they must have had the same idea because there was a sudden increase in

33:30 lobbing of mortars and the firing of RPGs and long bursts with this medium machine gun and the assault line started to move forward. They sent a pincer movement down either side, five or ten blokes down either side to surround us. We simply would not have survived had we stayed and in fact we were lucky to have survived at that stage, should have died that day. Anyway, Mick said, “Right, we’re out of here, best of luck everybody, drop the big packs,

34:00 just run”. No attempt at fire and movement but he told me to take my pack because it contained the

twenty five set and we were going to need that if we got out. I laid back down onto the, the pack was off and it was so heavy that the only way I could get on was to lay back down on it, get the straps on and then roll myself forward. While I was doing that the others stood up and a mortar round went off right on the lip of the little depression and bowled all them over

34:30 but they got up again. We had two WIA [wounded in action] out of that mortar round but they got up again. We all set sail, me bringing up the rear trying to carry the radio. Anyway a mortar round went off behind me and bowled me off my feet and when I stood up to keep running the webbing on the pack failed and the pack fell off, the left webbing pack fell off my right shoulder and knocked my rifle out of my hand and when I looked back the back of my pack was just

35:00 shredded from the shrapnel from the mortar round that went off behind me. So I'm very glad Mick told me to take that twenty five set, it saved my life. Anyway I grabbed the weapon and I fired two rounds which was all that was left of the rifle into the pack and kept running and to this day I don't know how five men covered a hundred and fifty to two hundred metres under fire from fifty plus enemy and not one gunshot wound, it's just incredible

35:30 luck, there was no skill about it, we just went for it. Anyway the others reached relatively safety, a bit of shrapnel wounded, a fallen tree at the edge of the jungle and they turned around and gave some supporting fire and I joined them and we got away with it. Got into the jungle and moved very quickly beneath the canopy it was pretty well dark by that stage so we broke contact and got away. An amazing escape,

36:00 absolutely amazing escape. We kept moving 'til pretty late, we shared around what ammo we had left and that amounted to a couple of white phos grenades and half a dozen 556, we got through all the ammo. We had no twenty five set left, the only radio coms we had were the little erk tens which had a voice range of about a hundred metres if that and the beacon. Anyway very early in the morning Brian Wade the OC came over

36:30 in possum again, Sioux helicopter and Mick heard him and then saw him and got coms on the erk ten although Mick could hear Brian Wade, Brian Wade couldn't hear Mick. Anyway Mick gave him instructions to make a right turn and directed him over the top of us. Brian dropped us a bandolier of 556 ammo with a little note that said move to an LZ

37:00 four hundred metres to your north, we did that and slicks got us out and we got back and we were too late for breakfast, bugger it. It was far from the standard SAS contact and far from a standard drill but the patrol worked pretty well together, worked very well together. It was only we had that stoush with him for forty minutes just banging away at each other and it was only the

37:30 patrol's internal discipline and firing discipline that kept them at bay really. Very close call that one.

When you look back at that entire experience you just told us what was the most frightening moment, what bit did you really think you might not make it?

I didn't think I'd survive the run to the jungle. I didn't think I'd

38:00 survive that. I didn't think any of us would really. But the odds were heavily stacked against five people making it. I thought it highly unlikely that I'd make that, particularly being the last one.

Must have reminded you of your nine mile runs?

Yeah, I would have liked to have moved as quickly then as I did at Swanbourne but

38:30 it was a very heavy load, we were very tired, plenty of stress.

When that thought goes through your mind, "I might not make it," is that a liberating thought in a way or is it frightening or you just don't have time to think about it?

Don't have time to think about it, it was actually afterwards that I thought about it, thought that through. At the time things sort of happen in slow motion. You've really got plenty

39:00 of time to think about the actions but it's really only afterwards that you look back on it and think about it. You respond automatically, you respond from your training. You respond from a desire to survive. It's afterwards that you think back and think, "That one was close".

When you say things happen in slow motion, what do you mean by that?

I seem to have a lot more time in terms of

39:30 thinking time than I should have had. Thoughts are quite clear and the logic flow was good. I was quite rational in all of that and in the circumstances it seemed to me that I shouldn't have had time to do all that. So I had a lot of time in terms of if you measured it in brain time but the actual events were happening in seconds. It was a strange sensation.

40:00 **So you came back after your first patrol you'd seen nothing after your second patrol you'd shot two men, you'd been blown up by mortars, how did that change your experience of what you were doing in Vietnam?**

It made me more aware, certainly more aware of how dangerous it was, what we were doing and I suppose therefore I became more alert than I had been on the first patrol

40:30 but that's about the extent of it. I never ever had another contact as bad as that. Every other contact I had, not that there was all that many, four or five or something or other we were on the front foot, we initiated and we got away relatively clean. Only one other one where it was a little bit iffy but nowhere near as iffy as that one. So getting the bad one over early in the piece was probably

41:00 a good thing.

Although you didn't know it would be your last bad one, you must have thought about what have I got myself in for?

No, I knew that that was an unusual circumstance. I was able to rationalize that. I didn't think that those circumstances could arise again. Made me more cautious, made me more aware that things could turn horribly wrong relatively quickly.

Tape 9

00:46 **Upon reflection of this second patrol and what happened what should you have done as you reflect back on it?**

I think we carried it off all

01:00 correctly. It was far from standard. We did improvise a solution. I guess if there was one thing all of us would have changed it would have been that we would not have moved on to the LZ as soon as we did. We would have waited until we had coms with albatross. However we believed they were in the air already on the way so I really can't take issue with the decision to move on to the LZ and any one of us could have said, "Hey stop, maybe we shouldn't

01:30 be doing this". In retrospect that's probably the only thing I would have changed about it. Everything else in terms of the patrol's cohesiveness, its discipline in terms of returning fire, its tactical movements, that was all good.

Those who got wounded, what were their wounds?

Shrapnel wounds, remained on duty, got stitched up down at the RAP [Regimental Aid Post], couple of days off and fine.

02:00 **And how did the events of this second patrol effect the next patrol you'd go on?**

It made me more aware that it was a bloody dangerous thing we were doing and that it could go wrong. After the first patrol I didn't have that feeling at all, it was rather one of this is a cakewalk. Certainly after the second one there was a very strong realization that this was not a game

02:30 for mugs and you really had to be switched on a hundred per cent of the time. That's certainly how I played the game thereafter but thereafter I never again had a situation near as dire as that.

If there was tensions amongst relationships between people for the third patrol in that respect was their any effect in there?

Not at all. That patrol, the members of that patrol were and remain

03:00 very close. Mick Holinger was the 2IC and he's the only one that we don't have contact with.

In your debrief what did you share about the circumstances and what went on, the decisions made?

I didn't attend a formal debrief but we talked about it in the boozer afterwards and we were comfortable with the decisions we made and the actions we took other than, as I say

03:30 I think all of us would think that maybe the move on to the LZ was premature.

In respect of 9 Squadron that came to pick you up and was picking up the other patrol that was out at the time, what was the reason they couldn't come back immediately and get you?

We were quite a long way out. By the time they got that patrol back and then

04:00 refueled and then come back out again we'd have been after dark. I've got nothing but good things to say about 9 Squadron, they were simply magnificent.

Just in respect to 9 Squadron, why did you believe they were so good and magnificent?

They operated under very tight SOPs that were imposed upon them

04:30 and yet would flout them if necessary to extract an SAS patrol. I'm aware of one occasion when a set of Huey rotor blades were destroyed getting a patrol out because the only way they could get the chopper in was to chop up some trees and they were on the way down. Not big heavy stuff but light stuff. If you can imagine a Huey with four crewmen on board, two pilots and

05:00 two gunnies sitting above the jungle canopy for five and six minutes at a time winching a patrol up under fire, that takes incredible courage. They put themselves and their helicopter at great risk but they did it and they would go to almost any extreme to get us out of the shit. Mind you there was pretty healthy rivalry between us too.

In what respect?

05:30 On the roof of the OR's boozer we wrote, "9 Squadron sucks," so that as the helicopters took off from Nadzab they'd all see it. Day after that they went up they came back with flour bombs and bombed the whole camp with these bags of flour. It was all good fun and leg pulling and that sort of stuff.

You've spoken a couple of times of how good your camouflage was, could you talk us through the camouflage and what you?

We used

06:00 American seal camouflage gear. It was well suited, better suited than the tiger suits which were a stripey sort and all uncovered skin was covered with a thick camouflage cream in blacks and greens and browns. That was face, back of the neck, throat, throat was covered with a sweat rag. All of our kit was mottled

06:30 and the shape was deliberately broken so it wasn't a regular shape. We wore headgear that tended to break up the shape of a head and we learnt to be absolutely still for a long period of time should any pair of eyes be looking and trying to find us. Didn't happen to me but there were a number of stories of our blokes being pissed on by people who didn't see them right there in front of them.

07:00 **In respect to ambush once you've actually ambushed a few fellas or a patrol or whatever it was what did you do upon withdrawal if you weren't under attack, did you return to a particular spot or what did you do?**

Yeah we had an RV that was probably about a hundred metres behind the ambush site just in case something went wrong in the ambush and that's where we'd all go back to. We already had normally in the ambush the sig would have

07:30 the set broken out ready to send the contact word so once the ambush was triggered he'd send the contact word. We'd already arranged extraction once that contact word was received. We'd have an LZ already designated and we'd move to the LZ and wait for the 9 Squadron choppers to come and get us if we weren't staying in. Later in the tour sometimes we'd spring an ambush and then we'd withdraw from that, get

08:00 a re-supply of claymores and then set another one. That happened more and more towards the end of the tour as helicopter hours got shorter and shorter and there was a desire to get the most value out of the cost of inserting an SAS patrol and by doing two ambushes obviously you get a lot more value out of it than one.

Also just on patrols, how long did they go for?

Depended on the season

08:30 and on the job. We started at five or six days but increasingly again because of the shortage of helicopter hours and a desire to get value for the money that insertions cost we started to stay in longer and longer. The longest job I did was fourteen days and that required a re-supply at about day eight I think from memory. They were very enervating. By the time you finished fourteen days of that you were buggered

09:00 in every way.

You mentioned off camera about underpants and socks, what was the deal with that?

I didn't wear any underwear at all it was pointless, it rotted off within a very short time and as we didn't remove our boots and we used American jungle boots which are ventilated so water can get in as well as get out, when you removed the boots at the end

09:30 of the patrol usually half the socks came off with the boot and the other half you peeled off in pieces. So you didn't have to worry about underwear out there and you went through lots of socks.

Animals in the jungle, what would give you problems, ants or what sort of animals?

Yeah, green ants I suppose my most vivid memory was a patrol towards the end with Blue Perrington I think, I was scouting

10:00 and a lady snake stood up in front of me, king cobra, fanned out the hood and I swear to this day it was

looking me in the eye so I don't know how long the bloody thing must have been. Probably exaggerating it in my memory now but it scared me. There's nothing you could do. It looked at me and I looked at it wishing it would go away and the patrol commander's behind going, you know.

10:30 But they slithered away and that was fine. We had bamboo snakes living in the lines in Nui Dat, wasn't a big deal. Green ants, they stung. I do recall one occasion where I, no underwear and I had a rip in the cam gear just in the groin and I brushed past a tree with green ants on it and rest of the patrol didn't know what I was doing rolling around on the ground with the sweat rag

11:00 stuffed in my mouth. Monkeys, they were a bit cheeky, a bit aggressive too. Didn't like you being in their territory. A bit inquisitive, come and have a look at you and occasionally throw things at you. One other occasion we were, it was Johnny Jewel, we were LUP'd near the banks of the Song Rye and about halfway through the night

11:30 there's this noise through the scrub and a slow steady tread. Everybody's awake and at full alert and listening trying to figure out what this is and there was this terrible stench, just foul, it was death incarnate, this stench. It was a crocodile, a bloody crocodile walked all the way around us and went off down to the river again. Didn't sleep a lot

12:00 after that. Didn't come near us but that's what it was.

Fascinating. Weather conditions, the rain through to the dry season. What effect did that have on you when patrolling?

It made a number of differences. The wet season was much easier because you could move much more quietly and didn't have to carry as much water. Dry season was much harder, you carried lots of water, stealthy movement was more difficult,

12:30 twigs more likely to break. There was perhaps a bit less foliage as well so you didn't have quite the same amount of cover. And also any vehicle movement was followed by this six mile long plume of dust. So if we were being inserted by APCs [armoured personnel carrier] which occasionally happened anybody sitting on a high OP could follow the track of these things all the way although we had a technique

13:00 for getting out of the APCs without anybody actually seeing us.

What was that technique?

We stayed covered up inside the APC the whole way, only the patrol commander had his head out the top and he didn't have his cam paint on and he just had an ordinary green drill shirt on and we usually went out in three APCs and they would get in to a habit of pushing off into the jungle and coming back out again while the other two covered. This would go on for an hour and about halfway through all of that

13:30 while it was off in the jungle it'd drop the back ramp and we'd just pile out, lift the back ramp and they'd reappear again. To an outwards observer they would not be aware that we got out.

You spoke a little bit of once you got back from patrols, debrief, going to the boozer. Time off though, what did you do in your time off?

In between patrols? Got your kit ready basically,

14:00 practised drills. It wasn't all that long between patrols, perhaps a week if you're lucky. By the time you got yourself cleaned up from one and organized for the next the time went pretty quickly. Recreationally we had an arrangement with 9 Squadron where if the boss agreed we could go down and spend a night in Vung Tau so we'd go down on the first light chopper one morning and come back on the first light chopper the next morning. I got

14:30 to Vung Tau and I got to do that probably half a dozen times I suppose. I had a week at the RNC centre at Vung Tau and I had R&R [rest and recreation] in Hong Kong. There were breaks in all of that. It wasn't full on a hundred per cent of the time. Vung Tau was only twenty four hours but you crammed a lot in to that twenty four hours.

What sort of things would you do in that twenty four hours?

You'd get a proper hair cut

15:00 and drink a lot, go down the beach. Not much of a beach and not much of surf but you'd go down to the beach. Then you'd have a night out on the town, usually ending up with some purchased bar girl.

What was the deal or the relationship there in respect to the bar girls?

In terms of, I'm not sure I understand the question Michael, could you

15:30 put it to me another way?

In respect to prostitutes, I take it.

Yeah.

So how much would it cost to?

I don't know. Too long ago. I don't think it figured high on my Richter scale anyway. It cost what it cost. It was a purely physical release and that was it, see you later. They generally tended to like Aussies,

16:00 we didn't mistreat them. I'm not aware of any. They called us cheap Charlies because we wouldn't pay a lot and we wouldn't buy the Saigon teas too often. But generally we treated them well. It wasn't a every time you went down but you did do so.

R&R on the broader scale, you went to Hong Kong.

Yeah, went to Hong Kong. That was good, five days. Spent more money than I had

16:30 I think from memory. But it was civilization. You could go to a restaurant and have clean table cloths and you could order any sort of meal you wanted and they had shops and people walked around the streets without being armed. You were clean, really clean for the first time in six months. It was a good break, I enjoyed that.

What was the importance to you of getting the hair cut and having the shave after all you'd done?

It was a bit of a humanising thing.

17:00 It was a bit of a release I suppose from the stricture of being on patrol or just being back or just getting ready to go or being again because there was nothing else, that's what you did. So it was a real break from that process and a real release too. We let the hair down big time.

17:30 **The relationship between, particularly in Vung Tau, the SAS fellas and the guys in the regular army, what was that like?**

That was fine. We were not identifiable as SAS because we all wore civvies in Vung Tau. The Americans wore uniform but the Australians all wore civvies. So there was no overt identification. We tended to hang around together anyway. We'd go down in a group and we tended to stick to ourselves not through any sense of elitism

18:00 or just we were mates and we were only there for twenty four hours and we were about having a good time, not making new friends.

Were there any precautions that you wouldn't come in contact with any enemy spies around Vung Tau?

Well the story was the enemy used Vung Tau as an R&C [rest and care] centre as well so they tended to try and keep any violence in the town to a minimum. There was the usual flotsam and jetsam of

18:30 human society in any frontier military town. Pick pockets and thieves and money changers who'd jip you but you soon learnt to recognize them but it was possible to avoid all that. We had a favourite bar called the Mimi bar. It was supposed to be the Miami bar but when they got the sign over from the states the A didn't work so it became the Mimi bar. That was a favourite bar for us and generally that's where we'd gather.

19:00 We didn't do the big tour, the street of bars, the pub crawl sort of thing. We'd just sit quietly and chat and drink away and flirt with the girls.

In respect of the girls was anything said to you about using contraception and diseases?

Absolutely, the army is very strong on that and freely issued contraceptives and they were pretty avidly used too I can tell you. There was some frightening stories going round about that stuff.

19:30 **Any fellas get caught out by not using it?**

No, not that I'm aware of.

Pub brawls and those sort of things, did they occur in Vung Tau?

I was only involved in one, not our fault, never is, is it. I was involved in one which involved a couple of American soldiers and Dave Fisher and Johnny Cousins. Then the white mice, the Vietnamese security police

20:00 who arrived sort of at the end of the melee when the American sailors hadn't done too well and had grabbed the oday[?] of a passing Vietnamese lady, a proper lady and she screamed and the white mice came out of nowhere. They called the American MPs and these two great big black fellas who carried colt 44 pistols that looked like water pistols in their hands drew them and they

20:30 cocked them because they saw their compatriots lying in the gutter and here's these blokes dressed in civvies that have obviously just done them over so I can understand why they were a bit concerned. They found out we were Aussies and they called the Aussie MPs and the meatheads drove us round the block, tipped us out the back and told us to keep out of trouble. That was about the extent of it.

They were called meat heads for what reason?

A traditional name. Derogatory but all of the

21:00 corps have a derogatory name.

And how had this barney with the Americans begun?

Well Dave was talking to a Eurasian girl who was a school teacher and she was in seeing her sister who was a bar girl. Dave looked at this girl and was just enamored and thought he'd chat her up and

21:30 was doing so. Struck out, found out that she was a school teacher and she was off limits and came back to where we were and these four American sailors came in and made the same assumption only they were a little bit more pushy about it and at the end quite insulting and one of them got a bit physical, picked her up. So that was enough for us and we got into them. There are worse reasons to fight.

22:00 **What did you think and what did the SAS think of the Americans?**

We saw so little of them and it's so easy to make a generalization as a result but from what I saw there were about three groups. They had this huge logistic rump, it was absolutely massive. When you flew in to Vung Tau on the chopper there were just

22:30 square miles of warehouses filled to the brim with the materials of making war and making war comfortable too and thousands of people working in those compounds counting blankets or running PXs [American canteen store] and whatever else they did. So the actual ratio of the logistic rump to the grunt walking the weeds was there was a huge amount of people behind. That was one group. If you go to the combat arms I think there were two groups in that. There was a group

23:00 that didn't want to be there and would do whatever they could do to avoid situations where they had to go and walk the weeds and if they did walk the weeds they would avoid situations where they'd get in to what they called a firefight. However I thought they were a minority. I thought the majority of the combat arms of the Americans were quite professional, they were well trained, certainly very well equipped and they were prepared to fight.

23:30 I thought generally up to battalion, perhaps regiment level they were well led, their officers were well trained and they were aggressive but they cared for their men. Beyond that once you got into staff positions I've got some doubts about the quality of their leadership but certainly at the field level I thought their leadership was good. I think the problem they had was they were using entirely the wrong tactics or indeed strategy for winning that war.

24:00 Even though they were never really militarily defeated, very close in Tet '68 but effectively if the political will had been in place after Tet '68 that war could have been won by the end of '68 but the political will dissipated with the images that were seen of Tet on TV.

Did you think that the war could have been won? I mean when you were there, did you think you were going to win?

24:30 They're two different questions. Could it have been won? Yes, absolutely. Could have been won by the end of '68 with determination and the political will, but it wasn't. Did I think as I went through that it would be won? I came to the realization probably about halfway through the tour that no, it wouldn't be won

25:00 and that what we were doing was pretty much a waste except for the value that it gave to the US Australian alliance we were not going to be able to change the ultimate lot of the Vietnamese people and I came to that view perhaps seven or eight months into my tour.

Did that affect your morale or the morale of others that may have come to that decision?

No it didn't because you were professional you did the job

25:30 professionally. Win, lose or draw that was what you were going to do. I was sad about the waste but it certainly didn't change the way I responded or soldiered, not at all. What changed me about the way I soldiered was basically fatigue.

26:00 The last three months were very tough. It was hard to muster all that you needed to do the job well. I did but it was very hard.

You shared with Chris about towards the end of the tour, sickness had started to come on. What happened to you physically, did you start to get sick?

Yep. I had respiratory trouble. I had to be med-evaced off

26:30 a patrol once, had to be winched out and that's an absolute no-no, you would do anything to avoid that because you put the other four in jeopardy, just put a big signature above where they are but patrol commander sent me out because I just couldn't stop coughing and that's even worse, hacking your way through the jungle while you're supposed to be being stealthy.

Just on that, the coughing, I mean obviously you would have been sick

27:00 **before you actually went on the patrol?**

No but my susceptibility to catching nasal, breathing type difficulties was high because my resistance was low. That was true of many others as well. And because I was very tired but still carrying the same loads

27:30 I hurt my leg by moving awkwardly and I suppose being honest we drank more.

Drank more in the boozers?

Yeah.

Just in respect to coming back to the cold that you had how far were you in to the patrol at the time?

It was the last few days actually, last few days but Blue wanted to complete it and he couldn't take me with him because I was just a give away. So he winched me out.

28:00 **Did you volunteer to go out or did he ask?**

He asked me how I'd go and I said let's go overnight and see how I am in the morning but I was no better in the morning and then he just said, "Right, you're out". That was cool, I understood that completely.

One trivial question but in respect to when you are sleeping, did anyone snore?

No. There was a few snuffles but if somebody snored there was a very quick hand went out and went.

28:30 We all slept very closely together usually with our feet facing inwards so that if you rolled over you were then facing out which is where you wanted to be but also you could tap somebody on the foot. That was the normal, you normally slept in a five star pattern all with the feet in the centre.

Again just coming back to the sleeping was there sort of stand to at dawn, what was the situation there?

Somebody was always awake just before first light and they would gently wake the others so that

29:00 we would be off the ground, our packs packed and the ground recovered by the time first light broke. We were ready to go at first light.

Patrols, any other patrols which stand out in your mind as being quite interesting or significant?

Other than that one where I've got that enduring image of the kid. I suppose, it was John Jewel's patrol we discovered a pretty new track south of Courtney Rubber and we put an OP on it and we counted over eight hundred through in three days, that sort of got the eyeballs popping a little bit. We subsequently went back in with a

30:00 three patrol fighting patrol and ambushed that track but the numbers were so great that even with fifteen if we'd had one patrol each on flank protection and five in the killing group and if we had, I can't remember the number of claymores we had but would have been at least fifteen, one each, we couldn't cover the killing ground. The groups were too large to cover the killing ground. So we couldn't have a go at them in the mornings when they were all moving through but in the afternoons the guide groups

30:30 were coming back and they were in groups of five or six so we bowled those over. But what was interesting or sticks in my mind about that was the numbers, they were very large numbers. Apparently it was 274 that had attacked some place near Saigon and it was moving back to the May Taos, south of the Courtney Rubber and we just by happenstance found them. Others, relatively routine.

31:00 I can't really think of. There were a number of other contacts, not all that many, mostly ambushes after that which we initiated and only when we wanted to. They went as expected. We did do a job in the Nui Thi Vais once where we got chased around for two days but a shot wasn't fired despite the fact that it was a frightening time but no shots fired. So it was pretty much normal SAS patrolling

31:30 after that second one.

Particularly this one being chased around for a couple of days, what happened from the beginning there?

We got inserted in APCs on that job and the Nui Thi Vais are quite a steep and densely forested mountain feature which you can see from Nui Dat, so its quite close but its cut by deep ravines and its not easy to move in the direction in which you want, you've got to move with the country, you can't move against it.

32:00 We were pushing into there to see if it had been reoccupied after the last B52 strikes or the last battalion sweep or something or other. We stopped for lunch, did our normal hook and we got followed, our trail was being followed through the jungle by a group of about six enemy and we got out of there

and we spent another two days and two nights

32:30 where they were continually following us. We'd see them but they mustn't have ever seen us because they never fired on us but just followed us and followed us and some days got close enough for us to hear them talking. Quite nerve wracking particularly as our means of escape were very, very limited, you couldn't go anywhere you had to follow the line of the ridges. Once you got down to the ravines you were stuck, you were boxed in.

33:00 So if they'd been absolutely certain who we were and where we were they would have been able to put in a pretty good ambush on us. But we got away with it. But it was forty eight hours of fairly high tension levels.

And the reason you didn't take them on was because you didn't want to draw attention to yourselves?

It was a recce patrol although by now they figured out we were there but if we initiated a contact even if we bowled them all over anybody else on the Nui Thi Vais

33:30 would know we were there and it was a difficult place to plan an escape from because of this linear nature of the ridges and the ravines. So we just didn't want to have a fight in that place, that would have been a bad place to have a fight. Remember what I said, only pick the fights you can win.

Earlier I think you talked about the M16 having jamming problems and those sorts of things, I'm not sure was there a story in respect

34:00 **to having a problem actually with your M16 out in the field?**

I never used an M16 in the field, I always used an SLR. I do recall an occasion when we and it was on that Courtney Rubber plantation when we blew the ambush and there were a number of survivors still alive, would have died but still alive. One of them had an RPD which is their equivalent of our M60 and despite the fact he was

34:30 shredded from the waist down, he wanted to make a fight of it, very brave man and held us back from going on the track to search the other bodies. I can't remember who it was now carrying an M16 plugged this bloke about three times in the chest, still didn't stop him and turned to me and said, "Mitch, can you bowl this bloke over?" I hit him three times with the SLR and he stopped. For that reason I always carried the SLR

35:00 despite the fact it was much heavier and a bit more cumbersome.

In respect to war there are rules such as dum dum bullets and those sort of things you're not meant to use. Did you come across any infractions in respect to using those sorts of bullets?

We used standard NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation] ammunition which was full metal jacket and it was unnecessary to, I'd heard some stories of people filing the point off for the first round that was

35:30 chambered. You couldn't do it with the other rounds anyway because they wouldn't feed properly unless they had that nice smooth shape on them. You could knock the front off the round that was chambered but why would you? a) Its flight would then be suspect because it relies on that perfectly smooth shape to fly true and the round did enough damage by itself. It turned human flesh to jelly.

36:00 You see people hit in movies and TV by gunshot wound and even the more realistic later ones do not show you the trauma that's delivered to a body by a high velocity, high calibre military bullet. It literally breaks bones and jellies flesh.

Did that at all affect you emotionally or psychologically when you actually saw the effect?

Not at all. Not in the slightest.

36:30 I've only got two memories that give me pause for reflection. One is the kid I nearly killed and the other is coming back from doing a recce with 9th Squadron chopper we saw a timber getters truck and two timber getters in a free fire zone, they shouldn't have been there. Anyway the pilots radioed in

37:00 and we were ordered to attack it which we did. Tracer rounds from the door gunny set the truck on fire and both the timber cutters were killed. One of them ran straight down this track, I'll never forget to this day, if he'd dodged off into the side either way he'd have been right but he just ran straight down the track and got stitched up. They both were killed and at the time I didn't think much of it but subsequently all I think we did was killed a couple of peasants who strayed in to a free

37:30 fire zone and they were just out gathering wood for the village. They weren't combatants. We received no return fire. I regret that today. At the time I thought nothing of it but today I regret it.

Towards the end of your tour things started to change as far as tactics are concerned for the SAS?

Not tactics so much but the tasks became much further out, they became longer

38:00 and the enemy started to really twig to our SOP, our methods of operation and putting counters that we hadn't seen them do before for example I mentioned that when they heard a typical SAS insertion signature they would send groups to every LZ in the area and try to spring us on them. Their counter ambush drills got very, very good. They would send a decoy group down tracks first, three or four hoping we'd

38:30 trigger the ambush on them and then they could put in a flank attack on us and did on one occasion but we got away with that. So they became smarter. I think also they were a different soldier up in the May Taos. They were NVA and all this coincided with coming towards the end of my tour so it was not a change of tactics so much but certainly a much harder environment to do the job and to stay alive.

Given that the NVA or the enemy's tactics started

39:00 **to change and counter act yours did the SAS start to think up new ways to attack and approach the enemy's tactics?**

Yep certainly and some of those were to swap patrols, do an insertion and extraction at the same time so you didn't give that typical signature. The other one was to use APCs for insertions more but we couldn't do that at the May Taos, it was just too far way. We started to use repelled insertions a bit more so you didn't need

39:30 an LZ, just drop the chopper ropes over, fast rope down and off. And also there was a tendency to make the patrols slightly larger if it was going in to an area knowing it was going to be hot so take out six rather than five because the Huey could still lift six laden SAS soldiers.

You went through earlier with Chris just the positions of everyone,

40:00 **the sixth person, what would be his role?**

Sit in the middle on another gun. Somebody who could carry if need be.

We'll just stop there and change tapes.

Tape 10

00:51 **You said off camera that you stayed away from spirits because it was lunatic soup was there any drug use anywhere in Vietnam that you saw?**

01:00 Never saw it. I'm sure it went on. But we were a rather secular group. We had our own compound, nobody else was allowed in there. We operated from there. The only time we went down to task force was to go and give a patrol report in or go to the store, the PX, family store. We didn't mix very much at all with other parts of the Australian Army. We did see some Americans. We went to a couple of bases.

01:30 But I didn't see any overt drug use there either.

What was your poison of choice then?

Beer. VB [Victoria Bitter] at that. There was Resch's Pilsener and worse of all was Courage, that was the last stuff you drank.

Did you run out of Australian beer and have to drink American beer?

No. Some of the bars in Vung Tau only sold American beer but when that was the case we drank barmy bar which was

02:00 the Vietnamese beer. It was quite satisfactory, had the desired effect.

You mentioned in a quite offhand way before that there were killed in actions but we basically killed ourselves. What were you referring to when you said that?

We had a number of accidents which were very distressing. The first one was Darky Harris, Bill Harris who returned from an OP out on a track from the wrong direction and

02:30 under the circumstances he was considered enemy because he was coming from entirely the wrong place and his patrol shot him. He died on the dust off chopper I think. We had a couple of other accidents, a grenade accident once and we had two other incidents after my time

03:00 where a patrol killed their own patrol member because they made a mistake about how they re entered an OP.

Given that the squadron in the SS is as close as you have described how did a death like that effect you?

It was shattering particularly for the people who did the shooting. Very difficult for them to be effective again. In at least one occasion, an occasion

03:30 that occurred while I was there, Darky Harris, that effectively rendered the patrol useless.

How did the army officially deal with that?

Accidental death, happens in war. We had plenty of other Australians and indeed Americans killed by friendly fire but it's particularly personal when you line

04:00 them up and shoot them.

Was there compassion for the people involved?

Absolutely and the squadron gathered around and gave tremendous support. Not your fault, you did the right thing, all that sort of stuff but for the person who pulled the trigger that's of little comfort.

When you say they were ineffective, did they go back to Australia?

No, they stayed. My recollection is that

04:30 the patrol members went to other patrols and it was towards the end of 2 Squadron's tour so they RTA'd in Australia at the end of February and that was that.

Where they the only KIA?

We lost one other and that was my good friend Dave Fisher. He died shortly after I got home. He was there,

05:00 he arrived after me and that was a hot extraction in Joe Van Trofler's patrol and he hooked his carabineer on to the standing end of the rope that had been taped back rather than the actual loop itself. Chopper got up to about eighty feet, he came off and speared in.

We'll come back to your reaction when you heard that news after we talk about when you came back. For the deaths that happened

05:30 **when you were there was there any service or any kind of marking of their deaths?**

No. The one that happened while I was there was Darky Harris and I don't recall that there was a service of any sort. It was almost sort of like RTU, he was just there one day and not the next. Certainly there was an immense amount of compassion and support for the other patrol members but there was nothing formal that I remember.

Was there

06:00 **a chaplain attached to the SAS or any kind of?**

No there wasn't. There was somebody at the taskforce for those that wished to go to church they could travel down to taskforce and attend the services down there.

Were there any other types of counseling as you might see in the army these days?

No, none whatsoever. It was a pretty blokey place. Counseling was for wooses.

06:30 **Did any blokes need counseling in an informal way between blokes?**

There were perhaps one or two incidents fuelled by alcohol where there was a bit of finger in the chest stuff. Certainly towards the end of the tour but that was generally about some form of

07:00 behaviour within the base camp not in the bush.

Today it's got a name, it's called PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder], did you see that at the time in Vietnam or was that something that only started to show itself later on?

I certainly saw some people coming to the end of their string towards the end of 2 Squadron's tour when I was still relatively fresh.

07:30 That was evidenced by a predilection to violence, to excessive drinking and to a short fuse. I saw some of that and I suppose whether that's PTSD or whether that's just the stress at the time. Everybody's got a length of string and some people's are shorter than others and

08:00 sooner or later under those circumstances you're going to come to the end of it but there was generally an acceptance of that. "Don't worry about him, he's going to be okay, he's just having a bad time".

By the time you came to the end of your tour how much string did you have left?

Very little. It was pretty frayed too.

And how was that beginning to show itself in your actions?

The same

08:30 sort of stuff, excessive drinking, short fuse, prone to injury and illness, probably an excessive focus on getting home, unhealthily so I think. It was starting to get unraveled towards the end.

What was the process of looking towards getting home, what was this focus?

Well everybody had the calendar, three hundred and sixty five

09:00 and a wakey. You counted down the days, crossed off the days when you came back from patrol, there's another six or seven down. The letters to and from home talked more about what you were going to do when you got home. I was starting to think about Pat Feeley and what we might do about all of that.

09:30 Whereas before that those sorts of thoughts weren't ever in my head but they certainly were in my last three months.

Was there any superstition or trepidation attached to your last patrol?

Absolutely.

Can you tell us about that?

The last one was with Lou Carrington and I recall Jim Phillips was the 2IC. Last patrol I was scout and I had the wind up big time. I was moving too slowly for Jim and he saw me in an LUP position one night of the patrol

10:00 and said, "Get a move on will ya". He was being frustrated by the rate at which I was moving. I did have the wind up and as it turned out it was relatively benign patrol. Not much happened at all although the last extraction we did go out on the ropes but that was more for convenience than for necessity. Even so

10:30 dangling below the chopper wasn't the best way to go out. I'd rather just step on it. When I climbed in to the chopper and kissed the floor and everybody gave me the high five, home free. I got back that day and I was out of there not the next day but the next.

That must have been a cause for celebration on the chopper.

On the chopper yeah but there was a big

11:00 party on the night before I went. Very big party in fact some of the photos that are there are of that. A smile from ear to ear, couldn't wipe it off me with a shovel.

Before we go on to that were there other celebrations in Vietnam like Christmases, birthdays?

No, not birthdays. Christmas, relatively low-key affair. Tradition that the officers and sergeants serve the ORs Christmas lunch which they did.

11:30 Boozer open early. That was the extent of it. There wasn't a giving or receiving of gifts. I don't particularly remember anyone going to a service. Didn't have a Christmas tree or anything like that. It was relatively low key. Other celebrations, we exchanged visits with 9 Squadron from time to time. They'd come up for a barbecue and we had these forty four gallon drums which we'd fill full of wood, put a bit of grill over the top, grill a steak and drink beer

12:00 but that wasn't a particular occasion, just pre arranged come up this Sunday night for a Sunday night barbecue.

Do you remember the birthday you spent in-country?

Yeah I do. It was relatively soon after I got there. I turned twenty two in-country and it was not marked in any particular way other than I said, "You blokes buy me a drink, it's my birthday". They did and that was the extent of it.

12:30 **When you left, this celebration, smile from ear to ear was there any thought that you were leaving blokes behind?**

Not on the night but certainly the next day and all the way back on the C 130 which was a very long trip and because I was going back not as part of the squadron, I had to just be a bit of baggage in the Herc. Yeah, and to be totally honest, a bit of guilt,

13:00 leaving people there and I was going home.

Do you remember saying goodbye to Dave?

Yeah, we had plenty of drinks that night and chat about what we'd do when we got back. I went down to his hutchie about half an hour before I was due to be driven down to Luscombe field to go in to

13:30 Tan Son Nhut. We just sat around and shot the breeze. It was very low key. It was just like a chat really. It wasn't any big goodbye and hugs at all, it was just put my hand out and said, "I'll see you back in Oz mate," and walked off on my way.

Other veterans I've spoken to have talked of that process of getting off a patrol and coming back into country as being

14:00 **traumatic in some way, as being a shock to the system. How was it for you?**

The shock came when I was back. It came after I arrived in Sydney, got picked up by my parents and waking up the next day safe and warm in a bedroom, we were living in Strathfield by this time when forty eight hours earlier

14:30 I'd been in-country, fifty four hours earlier I'd been in the bush. I think that's when it hit me and particularly the thoughts of those I'd left behind as well. Sort of, what am I doing here, I should be there. There was a bit of that.

So what did you do, how did it affect your behaviour?

Over the next two or three

15:00 weeks there were a number of events that meant that I just put all that behind me. I don't know if you want to go there yet or even if you do want to go there.

We do want to go there. Just on the first shock of coming home what was the strangest thing about being back?

The normalcy thing, that nothing had changed. That it was

15:30 as though there was a time warp and the period I'd been away was actually only a day after I'd left. That life was just going on and I'd done some things and seen some things that were in some cases pretty horrific but the entire Australian world seemed completely oblivious to what was going on and to what

16:00 people were undertaking in their name and doing a bloody good job of it too. Just as though, "Yeah we've got troops in Vietnam, oh yeah, so what". That's what struck me, that Australia didn't seem to know, care, recognize that at the height of the war we had, what, upwards of eight thousand people on the place.

Did it make you bitter or angry

16:30 **or upset in some way?**

Not bitter. I suppose the strongest emotion I felt was a degree of sadness about it. Here were this group of people and in many cases wonderful people doing a bloody hard job and there was simply no recognition of it at all. Sadness I suppose was the strongest emotion I felt about that.

17:00 **Was the opposite true, did you see protests and that side of things when you got home?**

When we got back, yeah. We flew in to Darwin, refueled in Darwin, couldn't get off the plane, then to Richmond. We thought we were going to get off at Richmond but they said, "No, no, stay, we're going to fly you in to Kingsford Smith but we want to go in after curfew because it's quieter then".

17:30 So we got in to Kingsford Smith at about quarter to eleven at night having been in the country for almost twenty four hours and still not set foot on Australian soil. Nevertheless the protest groups were there. Save Our Sons were there again and I respected them but the ferals were there, with the nasty signs, and shouted insults. I didn't find that particularly distressing.

18:00 I didn't like it but it didn't change the way I was thinking about things. It didn't get under my skin particularly. If anything I felt a bit sorry for them.

Did you have any trouble getting through customs?

A little bit. Only because I was trying to bring in more than I was allowed and I

18:30 feigned ignorance to the rules and the customs officer said, "Oh go on, bugger off," so there was no real difficulty. They didn't search me for drugs or contraband or anything. Because we were a very small group. It wasn't as though we were a big 707 full of a battalion returning. I suppose when we got off the Herc there might have been twenty or thirty of us, a very small group.

Was it harder that you were such a small group do you think, that you were in some ways on your own?

Yeah it was much harder. It would have been much better to come back as a group, much better to go back to Perth

19:00 because that, I've talked about the bond before and the very, very strong friendships. We were just not as close to anybody else in a different way in your life. That just went bang, stopped the minute you step foot on the Luscombe Fields that stopped and I found myself in a world in which I really didn't know anybody other than Mum and Dad and my brothers and sisters. Other than that

19:30 I didn't know anyone.

What happened then in the next couple of weeks?

You get rational about it, you say, “Well okay, I’ve got to get on with the rest of my life now,” and I wasn’t sorry about not deciding to stay on the army because it was clear to me that Whitlam would win in ’72, blind Freddy could see that coming and that defence force under Whitlam would be starved of funds and as it all turned out

20:00 that was right and SAS struggled for a role for the next ten years. It wasn’t until the Hilton bombing in ’78 that it really got a role again and that was the CT[?]. So I thought that was the right decision to make so I wasn’t regretful of that and I thought, “Oh well, I’d better think about getting on with the rest of my life”. Didn’t rush out and try to get jobs or anything, my old MG had finally given up the ghost so I threw myself in to fixing that. I had brought a bit of money home so I had the money to do it reasonably properly.

20:30 About three or four days after I got home Pat Feeley came up to see me and I thought that was really good. She made the effort to come up. We spent a lot of time together over the first two days and on the night of the third day she was there, I think it was a Wednesday, she was going home on the Friday, she told me that

21:00 a year was too long and was with somebody else and what she actually was doing was coming up to say goodbye or words to that effect. She went home the next day. That was quite disappointing. I can’t blame her. A year is a long time, much too long for somebody that good looking sitting around waiting. It was a Utopian dream really.

21:30 Nevertheless it was a bit of a shock when she told me. Then perhaps three or four days later I was going down to the North Strathfield RSL and drinking a bit too much. About four or five days later I got home from that and Mum came in and gave me a glass of warm milk laced with whisky. I thought, “This is strange, Mum’s never done this before,

22:00 what’s she doing here,” and she gave me the news that Dave Fisher was missing presumed killed in Vietnam. That was a hard time. So I struggled with that for a few days and I spoke

22:30 with Dave’s parents and I went to a memorial service for him. What is, is. I tried to pick up with the rest of my life and I sort of realized I need a kindred spirit I suppose, kindred spirits because there simply was nobody

23:00 else. So I walked down, we lived in Homebush Road Strathfied and down the bottom of Homebush Road was Homebush and an RSL down there, Homebush RSL. I went down there three or four days later and fronted up and said, “I’d like to join,” and in those days the door fellow wore white shirt, short sleeves and a little bow tie and he handed me a form to fill out which was an associate membership form. I said, “No, I think I’m entitled to full membership, I’d like to join as a full member”.

23:30 He took the form back and he said, “You’re back from Vietnam are you?” and I said, “Yes I am,” and he said, “Oh look, members here sort of aren’t all that happy about Vietnam members but if you go over to Bankstown RSL I understand they’re accepting new blokes”. I’ve never joined the RSL since. I don’t think they’ve learnt a lot since either for that matter. So out of all of that,

24:00 what I learned about all of that was that nobody really gave a shit. So I bundled all of that up, put it in a literally, my uniforms, the packs, all of this paraphernalia and all of the other stuff with it, all of the baggage, all of the memories, the experience and I shoved it in that green bag

24:30 and I shoved it in the roof and I didn’t go near it again. My mother introduced me to a young woman who I subsequently married, Rosemary. For all the wrong reasons, as I said earlier. Her friends became my friends although I had bugger all in common with them, nothing in common with them. I found them shallow, uninformed and very self-centred. But I learned very quickly

25:00 that you didn’t declare you’re a Vietnam veteran. Everybody had an opinion, it was a wrong one. So I just put it away. I didn’t go near it again and I didn’t go near it again for fifteen years. I never denied if I was asked but I never volunteered that information and I never entered in to a discussion on the issue

25:30 and built something of a life with Rosemary. We had three great kids but it was a life that was built on very shallow foundations and that marriage failed after seven years. Even so I still never went near it again just left it completely compartmentalized and never opened the lid again.

Just before we talk about how you came out of that, a couple of questions about some of those things. Dave’s death. Your emotions were obviously

26:00 **great sadness in losing a mate but did you feel guilty as well? Was there some sort of sense that?**

Yeah, should have been there. I was in the lap of luxury in Strathfield and he was still doing it tough, falling off a chopper. It wasn’t overwhelming feeling of guilt but yeah I felt that I should have been there. Interestingly my parents twigged that. Quite perceptive.

26:30 **What did they do?**

Oh, said things like, “There’s nothing you could do,” and all that sort of stuff. They were quite

supportive. Dad came with me to the memorial service. They knew Dave too. He'd been a visitor in their house often when we were over in the east. That feeling

27:00 of guilt didn't linger but yeah I did feel it at the time, should have been there.

When the RSL rejected you, was that especially galling because they were the people who should have taken you in?

Yeah, it was a real kick in the guts. Particularly as I went there sort of looking for kindred spirits and hoped to find some, that you could just

27:30 an American expression, shoot the breeze with. Not get in to anything deep and meaningful but just people that had been there before. I'm sure you've often been told before it's difficult for people who didn't go through that Vietnam experience and particularly the SAS experience to really know what it was like. The words don't explain what all the feelings were. You can explain what happened but you can't explain

28:00 how it all felt. So yeah, I thought that was a real kick in the guts. That was the one thing I did get bitter about.

Was there a temptation for you at that time to jump on a train and go back to Perth?

Yeah, in fact I did get on a train and I was on my way down to the Kent Street recruiting station to get back in. That's perceptive of you, you must have heard that before.

28:30 **Especially with SAS blokes because of the bond you've talked about.**

Yep. I was actually on the train, on my way. By the time I got to, Wynyard was where I had to get out, I'd talked myself back out of it. For rational reasons, for the reasons I gave you. Vietnam War I knew was lost. Whitlam victory would mean a parsimonious army for some time

29:00 and SAS without an operational role I didn't think would be as focused and as interesting and indeed that turned out to be the case for my mates who did stay in over that period. That period from 1971 through to 1978 they were in the desert.

So what happened to you when you put that stuff away, bundled it up and didn't talk about it, what happened to those mates?

I didn't talk to any of them.

29:30 Johnny Cousins came home from Vietnam in about a week after Dave was killed and I had a night out with Johnny. He went back to sea, he was a merchant seaman. He went back to sea and I didn't see him again for some fifteen, sixteen years later. I accidentally bumped Terry Noland here in Canberra who was my troop commander in 3 Squadron and just to say g'day to sort of thing but that was it.

30:00 I didn't talk to any of them, I didn't visit them, we had no correspondence, I made no effort to seek them out, I didn't go back to Perth. I just put it in the box.

So maybe moving on then, how did you eventually find yourself resolving that?

30:30 With a lot of help from my wife Chris. There was some publicity about the welcome home parade in 1987 in Sydney.

Firstly, when did you meet her?

We were married in 1982. My marriage to Rosemary fell apart in 1978, but I'd met her well before we got married. We were married in '82, Ron came along in '83 and then Lauren in '87.

31:00 I told her about Vietnam but only superficial stuff really. I didn't talk, I subsequently have but I certainly didn't talk to her about the sorts of things that we've been talking about more lately. Perhaps she recognized some unresolved issues in all of that. Anyway she got all of the information,

31:30 where the regiment was going to get together. She gathered all of that information up and she gave it to me and said, "You've got to go". Not as an instruction but very encouraging and I said, "No, no, I'm over all of that," but she persisted in the best possible way to the stage where I said I would

32:00 but the reason I was doing it was as much to please Chris as to please me. Anyway I did go. It was the best thing I ever did. The bond was instantly reformed, I was able to talk about, in a fun way all of that sort of stuff, able to deal with Dave's death, talk to people that were there at the time and had a big drink afterwards, just talked

32:30 to literally hundreds of people from the regiment days. All of that stuff that I'd put in the green kit bag and put in the ceiling all just came out and I felt good about it. I'm very grateful to Chris to this day as I often tell her. I got back into it. I joined the SAS association, ended up

33:00 an office bearer, go to Perth often, reformed all those bonds with good mates from the era, from those two squadrons I served with but also from the era, the period of mid sixties to early seventies. I count them now as my strongest and closest friends despite the fact that many of them are over at Perth but

quite a few of them are here in Canberra too. Dave's family I'm very close to particularly his sister.

33:30 That's a good strong relationship. We see each other a few times a year and so I've got no hang ups about that stuff anymore at all thanks to Chris.

In the fifteen years or about fifteen years in that period that you were away from it all, those other blokes must have gone through similar experiences,

34:00 **did you find that everyone had the same story to tell or had they dealt with it better than you?**

They dealt with it better than I because they stayed in. Most of them did anyway. So they went back as a squadron to Swanbourne, they remained a close group, they continued to work together, the majority of them and so they and Perth was an entirely different place from Sydney too. We talked about that earlier.

34:30 So they had a support mechanism there that was already in built. People started to slowly drift away from the regiment over the seventies because of the lack of a role or lack of focus. They had the benefit of coming home as a group and of not having to deal with those sorts of issues by themselves and indeed some of the issues they didn't have to deal with at all. So no, I didn't see those difficulties

35:00 in any other people from SAS but I certainly saw it and I still see it in some soldiers who haven't had the luck to reconcile all of that by, for me, that welcome home parade and subsequent events.

Have you had any other what you might call trauma associated with your Vietnam experiences?

No.

35:30 I'm not hung up about it. I have a very good friend twice decorated for gallantry so no questioning his bravery and he fell to bits with PTSD. I look at him and I think, "Thank goodness I don't have that problem". I've coped with all that fine. I sleep well at night. I'm not unduly anxious.

36:00 I don't have the sorts of difficulties that befell him. So no, not really. I have a couple of recurring visions with I've described to you, the wood cutters and the little kid but they are matters for regret rather than any traumatic episode.

How have your feelings towards the war changed in the intervening period?

36:30 Well it was a terrible waste. The end result has been the same and so it's impossible not to feel that Dave's life and the other five hundred Australians and fifty odd thousand Americans and several million Vietnamese lives that were chucked in to that cauldron was bloody all for nothing. It could have been different but for lack of

37:00 political courage, political commitment. So I think of it as a terrible waste. That's one thought but there is another thought and that is despite all of that, despite the fact that it was a waste and it didn't achieve what it was intended to achieve, certainly what the Australian Army did and I think the vast bulk of the American Army and a great many of the Vietnamese Army, I'm not one of those that knock the army of the Republic of Vietnam, I think

37:30 they bore the brunt of much of the fighting, I think much of what they did, they did very well Certainly the Australian Army and in terms of the practice of the military arts the Australian Army should be very, very proud of itself as should the regiment. They did a bloody good job. Tough job, did it well. So yeah, waste but that doesn't take away in any way from the value, the

38:00 professionalism and the compassion with which the Australians went about doing their business.

Have you in some sense resolved that feeling of bitterness or anger towards the Australian population for rejecting you when you came home?

I think I said I was more sad than bitter or angry and yes, I'm over it. Long since past it. It doesn't reoccur to me any more at all.

38:30 **Do you think, obviously 1987 was a turning point for you, do you think the Australian population has woken up to the role that you guys played?**

I'm sure they have, it's patently obvious. You can see it in the welcome home parade, you can see it in the dawn service in the Anzac parade these days. I think the Australian population has said, "Oh yeah, we didn't do that very well. Let's make up for it," and that's very welcome. Everyone's allowed a mistake or two.

Have you forgiven the RSL?

39:00 No.

This is the very last couple of minutes of the interview. You've shared a lot with us today but is there anything that you'd like to add perhaps to someone that's watching this in fifty or a hundred years time?

Yeah. I suppose just one thing really and that is I'd like to say that if you are looking at this in fifty or a hundred years time,

39:30 judge us by what we did not why we did it.

Thank you very much for speaking to us, it's been a great pleasure, you've done a great job.

Thanks Chris, thanks Michael.

INTERVIEW ENDS