

# Australians at War Film Archive

## Robert Buick - Transcript of interview

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### Tape 1

**00:30 What we spoke about?**

Okay I am Robert Stanley Buick born in Durban South Africa, August 1940. During the war my father went to the Middle East and fought for the South African forces and after the submarines and various other things happened off Durban, Japanese submarines,

01:00 the family moved to a place called Maiselands which is a farm half way between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Around about where the Zulus took on the Redcoats [English soldiers] in the 1890s. From there we moved down to Cape Town in 1946 and for the next or six or seven years we stayed in Cape Town. In '48 the national government changed from a British kind of

01:30 government to the Afrikaner government and Mum being a good Pom [English] from Wimbledon and Dad and I being from Belfast did not want to stay anywhere near the Afrikaners. So we had a choice of Canada and Australia. We came to Australia in 1954; that was the year the Queen visited. We settled in Perth, I was not a good scholar at school and I started work at fourteen and a half on the state ferries in Perth

02:00 And I did get the sack from there, my first job and I was laid off because I didn't refuel one of the ferries and it ran out of fuel half way across the river and got stranded on a mud bank. After a series of other jobs which I didn't really enjoy, I had applied to go to the navy but I was colour-blind. So at eighteen and a half I joined the army and did six years.

02:30 In the six years I was in infantry I went to Malaya 1961 to '63. Came back from Malaya to Brisbane, met my wife Beverly at the Majestic Hotel which has now been pulled down, in George Street. We got married in '64, I got out of the army in '65 because there wasn't much going on and I joined the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] to get a trade. Of course 1 RAR [Royal Australian Regiment] the 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment was sent to Vietnam,

03:00 my mother-in-law died so Beverly who was living in Perth at the time went to Queensland, I was stuck in Adelaide so I said, "Bugger this." Got out of the air force and rejoined the army. That was in mid 1965. I ended up with 6 RAR which had been created to go to Vietnam, to go to Vietnam in September 1965. In mid '66 we went to Vietnam and

03:30 I was in D Company 6 RAR and we were the first people to create Nui Dat base 5 RAR, 6 RAR and some other engineers and artillery people. In August of '66, Charlie [Viet Cong] decided to throw a couple of mortar bombs and a few other things at us in Nui Dat and subsequent to that D Company went out to find out where Charlie had gone and

04:00 they were still out there, about two and a half thousand of them, so there was a hundred and eight in our patrol and for the next three hours we decided to shoot the crap out of each other. From that day, my life has never been the same. After Vietnam, Tracey was born just before I went to Vietnam; she was born in '65.

04:30 Came home, went to Townsville with 6 RAR, Robert was born in Townsville and from Townsville like most army people you get posted around every two years and I finally took my... after trips to Sydney, to Bunbury Western Australia, to the Royal Military College in Duntroon and then back to Brisbane, after twenty years in the army I decided to pull the plug because my two kids were becoming anti-social, I think Tracey

05:00 had seven schools in ten years. I retired from the army and worked for a private school and not being a very religious sort of bloke, I should never have worked for a church school. And after eighteen months I went into real estate, very interesting career at the time, Paul Keating [Australian Prime Minister] was in, the interest rates went up to seventeen or eighteen percent

05:30 and everyone was telling lies so I then became the manager of a Liquor Barn for a mate of mine who is

a New Zealander. After a while got out of that because once again I just couldn't associate with people socially. And in 1996 I was deemed unable to continually work because

06:00 I can be a very cranky, stropky, old bastard. And basically quit working in '96 at which time my son gave me an old Amstrad clunker computer. Then I started to write my story for my kids, which developed into a book published by Allen & Unwin called All Guts and No Glory. Since then moved up to the Sunshine

06:30 Coast of Queensland and settled in here about five years ago. We have now just finished another book about the Long Tan battle so Long Tan was not only three hours of shooting up and killing people it has become an intricate part of my life ever since and in 2004 it is still there.

**That's a fantastic summary thank you very much.**

Well you can thank the army for that.

07:00 All of the training I had.

**Okay Bob can we go back to your early life in Durban, can you tell us about growing up there?**

I don't have a lot of memories until I suppose I would have been four or five on the farm and there was another kid there called Craig who was the same age as us and we were two little wild buggers. And the only people of our own age were Zulu boys and of course Craig and I in no time

07:30 were speaking quite fluent Zulu. Later on my mother used to use me as an interpreter when they used to come around and sell brooms and all of those sorts of things. I did the normal things kids do, climb trees, check out birds' nests, chased animals, tried to catch snakes, did a good job of catching scorpions, all of these good things. And I can distinctly remember moving back to Durban after the victory in Europe

08:00 Going down to see the old man come home on the troopship. And then we moved down to Cape Town. Dad had been a travelling salesman and we moved down to Cape Town to where my grandmother was and we settled in a place called Buckhaven which is around the corner from Cape Town itself and I had a marvellous childhood there; used to go out and pinch a sheet of corrugated iron, flatten it out and pinch the bitumen off the road to plug the holes up and catch crayfish

08:30 or lobsters and all of this sort of business. I had a marvellous childhood. Bit of a loner all of the way through. Did mix with two or three kids and we used to get into all sorts of terrible things like boys normally do. My childhood we lived right on the beach Buckhaven. In wintertime the storms were so severe my grandma used to have steel shutters that she put over the windows and the house

09:00 used to be covered in foam and all of these good things. Used to pinch push bikes if we were too lazy to walk home and all of this sort of...it was a good life. For a kid in the late '40s after the war we didn't have much and we had to make our own fun. I can remember going out and picking nasturtium leaves and watercress because they were the sandwiches I had to go to school. And bread with

09:30 beef dripping was a standard diet for South Africa anyway. Because South Africa was hit with greater war restriction as far as food goes than Australia because we were closer. But it was a good place to live and then when I came out to Australia in '54 the skulduggery of being a kid continued.

**So what sort of things were in short supply?**

10:00 Well you could only eat...my mother, by law; my mother could not make ice cream because you were not allowed to take the cream off the milk and all of this sort. There was no such thing as white flour; the flour my mother bought at the shop in a brown paper bag sort of thing; was normal war flour before it got refined to white so that

10:30 when she sifted the flour to take the bran and all of the other things out to make a sponge,

Mum...you couldn't...you weren't allowed to have white flour, they were the restrictions. So if Mum had to make a sponge she had to turn around and sift all of the bran out of it just so we could have a sponge that looked like a sponge.

11:00 There were no batteries for torches. There was restrictions on fuel, clothes, there were no Cadburys or Nestles chocolates. All of these restrictions. There was restrictions on most fruit. South Africa like Australia produced a lot of citrus, apples and pears, but it all went to Europe because Europe had been devastated

11:30 and they had no food commodities so consequently all of the stuff...and it would have been the same in Australia, Australia would have sent a lot of wheat and wool and all of that back to Europe, same in South Africa, so restrictions were severe until '48 or '9 and then they started to ease up.

**What about brothers and sisters?**

I have got two brothers, I was the eldest.

12:00 Errol lives in Kalamunda in Perth; he decided to become a chalkie, schoolteacher, did two trips to Papua New Guinea, has just retired, he had a couple of heart attacks. That's what kids do to you. I have got

another brother who lives in Canberra, who was in fact working for BP [British Petroleum] and volunteered for National Service when the time came and he joined the army, went into ordnance corps, went to Vietnam.

12:30 Retired as a lieutenant colonel. Everyone calls him Mike but his proper name is Terry. He then worked in Albury with Rowntree Chocolates but got back into the army again and is now living in Canberra as a consultant to the Department of Defence. Errol is fifteen months younger than me and Terry is a post war baby, born in November '46.

13:00 I don't see a lot of my two brothers; I will see Terry, or Mike, when I go down to Canberra next month. But that's how we are, one in Perth, one in Canberra and one in the Sunshine Coast.

**So what about when you were children, what sort of things did you do together?**

Not a lot. I was the eldest and brothers and sisters don't play together, they go out to find their fun because you

13:30 live with the buggers anyway. But I can remember protecting, the eldest always protects the others sort of thing. But I didn't play a lot with my own brothers. Terry was too young anyway, six years difference. Errol was not an outgoing sort of child, he was an academic and he proved it later in life by becoming a schoolteacher. So we didn't do a lot together.

14:00 **So you spoke about remembering when your father came home on the troopship; when was that?**

He came home would have been very late '45.

**So you were five, what do you remember about that day?**

I don't remember knowing my father until that day because he wasn't around. When we were on the farm,

14:30 Dad was up in the Middle East chasing the Germans and Italians across the sand, I don't remember anything about my father until that day. And there were thousands of guys hanging off the side of this bloody old grey ship and Mum said, "There he is." "Where?" And apparently they had arranged some secret signal, he would be in a certain part of the ship and she spotted him. And of course I didn't know then that

15:00 my old man used to drink a lot and come home and belt the kids up, so as far as, that was the par for all families if their father went to war; we did not have a good life from our father. I had done what I wanted all of my life until that time and all of a sudden along comes this bastard to clean me up you know.

15:30 And that happened a lot, and many times I got a cuff under the ear, I would be out playing and half past five dinner would be on and the sun would be still up and I didn't go home until sunset. And of course many times I had to sit and eat cold cabbage. And I hate cabbage today and brussel sprouts and all of those things. As far as parenting goes I think

16:00 everyone of my vintage would have grown up in the same household where Dad went to the boys; he used to drink a lot of brandy in those days. Most South Africans or people in South Africa did drink brandy. So it was a pretty rough old...but it taught me the values I have got today so therefore he did his job.

**So what did he tell you of his experiences in the war?**

Never told me anything. Never said a thing. He was in armoured cars and they were running around the desert doing things.

16:30 He never said too much. He had blackwater fever which is a malaria which turns your urine black and once you get that they don't send you back out to the front so he ended up in stores in a place called Hal 1 Camp, just outside of Cairo and he spent his time there for the last year and a half of the war. Once [General] Rommel got pushed back

17:00 and Tobruk was relieved, about that time. But he didn't say anything. I can remember coming back from Vietnam and going across to see my parents in '69 because that's when my brother came back and my brother had a whole lot of photographs because he was a young second lieutenant in ordnance corps; he never done any bush work, he never walked the weeds. And he had all of these nice slides and Dad said, "Where your pictures?" and I said, "Well all of my pictures would be of dead bastards."

17:30 When you're in infantry you don't take photographs, what you remember is what you remember; you don't need pictures to jog your memory of a certain place at a certain time. So as a child Mum was a typical English rose, loving, protection from the old man, all of these sorts of things. I can remember one incident in Durban just after the old man came home a kid up the road

18:00 had what they called a shamrock, which is a like a bull whip all made out of one single piece of hide, normally from elephant or rhinoceros. And he was flicking this at me and I said, "If you hit me with that I'll hoy this rock." Which is Dutch for throw. Anyway it hit me and I picked up this rock about the size of

a brick and of course he had already taken off and it hit him on the back of the head and I bolted. I knew there was something wrong because he just lay there and I ran for my bloody life.

18:30 And I went across the road and there was a Kellogg's Corn Flakes box a half a metre square and as a five or six year old you could hide in those things and so I sat up on the hill looking down and this kid's sisters ran down the road to get Mum because she was a nurse, a nursing sister. She came paddling up the road and I knew I was going to get in deep poo poo when I got home. Anyway it started to get dark and cold and I was more scared of

19:00 the dark and the cold than the old man. And the old man left marks and welts all over me and I stayed home from school for a fortnight. Even in those days there was child brutality. I was told not to throw stones and I nearly killed this kid, but that's the way it goes. At five or six years old you do what you have to do for self preservation and you still do it when you're sixty.

**You said that you played with the Zulu boys, what were they like?**

19:30 Kids are kids; it is like kindergartens in Australia today, with all different ethnicities around, there is no problems with kids. They speak their own language and they normally pick up a bit of Chinese or Vietnamese or whatever the case may be. It is the same in South Africa; young Craig and I used to be out with all of the boys looking after the cattle because that's what the little Zulu boys used to do, look after the cattle and the goats.

20:00 We weren't allowed anywhere near the dairy and the machinery. Running wild in the bush, we saw springboks; all of the things that you now have to watch on [National] Geographic Pay TV were virtually at your back door. We didn't have lions and leopards but we had all of the other small bush...including a few zebras. So as a kid you

20:30 don't notice all of that you're too busy trying to climb a tree and try and get the birds' eggs out and all of those sorts of things. Kids were good, the language you learnt was Zulu, I can remember 'marnsy' was water, 'footisinkwell' was bread. When we moved back to Durban we lived in a place called Mt Edgecombe and we used to get the Zulu girls come around with the brooms and the chairs and

21:00 their needlework, beads and this business and I can remember distinctly sitting on the lounge acting as interpreter and bargaining for the best price. It was good fun. You only remember these things in a session like this when you come back and think about it you know.

**What do you remember about the animals and the type of fauna you had there?**

I didn't take a lot of notice, as you went along you saw them, it is like seeing dogs and cats

21:30 in suburbia, you don't take any notice of them. I can remember one day we were going around and we came across a little fawn only a couple of hours old. Mum was over on the hill stamping her feet and snorting and so anyway the little Zulu kid said, "Leave it alone." And we just went away and sat under a prickly tree and watched. The mother never came back until we went away and then we snuck back over the hill and had a look and then she came back to the fawn. Those little incidents like that are

22:00 probably the only things I can remember now.

**When you were in Cape Town can you remember what the situation was like there at that time?**

Well a lot of people talk about apartheid; there always was racial segregation in Africa from 1652. Now in 1652 the Dutch landed in Cape Town, Van Leibeck, and he pushed the Hottentots who were the local indigenous people off the beach and

22:30 said, "This is my part of the beach; you can go and swim and play and do what you do up that end." In 1652 there was a racial segregation in Africa; it is not a new thing it has been going on a long time. I can remember in Cape Town the seat you had 'blanks' and 'neblanks' which is whites and non whites. And you were only allowed to sit in a seat which had 'blanks', for whites, on it. The seat next door was for 'neblanks'

23:00 for non whites. Bloody crazy, drinking fountains had white and non white whatsiname. Very much like America. The buses were not segregated but the train was; you could not get in a carriage which had... the whites had better seats to sit in than the blacks. Blacks were always third class.

23:30 But as far as we were concerned, playing and things like that, although in Cape Town...there were not as many non Europeans in Cape Town as there were in Durban because Cape Town... the blacks aren't mad, it is too cold for them down there they stayed up there where the animals were and all of that. Only the white buggers would settle in Cape Town, There was no problem. The biggest problem in Africa, people talk about apartheid and people don't really understand

24:00 the biggest problem in Africa is tribalism and we see that in Rwanda and we see that today in Zimbabwe which was Rhodesia. One tribe is out to annihilate another tribe and that's been going on for thousands and thousands of years. And along comes a white man, intervenes in the lot, tries to get them together and it doesn't work, and they are still trying. And there will always be problems in Africa because Africa is Africa. And as soon people understand that and let them do their own thing, don't worry about

24:30 western values, let them do their own thing, maybe the better the world will be. That's most probably the only philosophy I will have today.

**Okay so what about school in South Africa what do you remember about school?**

I remember going to school at Neskim which was my first school and we used to wear little green blazers and grey shorts and long socks and had a little cap. I don't remember a lot about that school except I was usually locked up in the broom cupboard a lot so maybe I was anti-social.

25:00 I don't remember a lot about school but I can remember Neskim Primary School I used to spend a lot of time in the broom cupboard because most probably I misbehaved or was anti-social whatever the case may be. When I moved to Cape Town and went to the Camps Bay Primary School things were a little bit different, there were a lot of Afrikaners down in Camps Bay

25:30 and I can distinctly remember not doing well in exams with Afrikaans which is now the primary language of South Africa and I would get five or ten percent, but my old man never worried about that because he didn't like the Afrikaners being a good Irishman from Belfast. I was interested in such things as geography, nature things, I used to collect scorpions, I had a bathtub full of scorpions until Mum stood

26:00 on one in my bedroom and I had to get rid of them. I used to spend a lot of time fishing, a lot of time climbing Table Mountain and throwing rocks down and starting rock slides, which you now realise were not the smartest things to do. Schooling, it is funny how fifty years after you left the place it was computers I have now contacted through the computers kids in my class. I can remember

26:30 when we lived in Buchhaven ten years old in 1950 I had a crush on a girl by the name of Emma Bus, I used to carry her little bag to school. Can you bloody imagine that? Anyway all of a sudden I would go on the computer, type in Camps Bay and there is the high school I used to go to with the names of all the kids in my class. A lot have died since but I have been able to contact a few.

27:00 As far as school goes we had British teachers and all we learnt about in fact was the same as Australia did in the '40s and '50s, you learnt about British history and who discovered Victoria Falls and what Stanley did and Livingstone. We learnt the same things in Cape Town as we did in Australia. In fact life in Cape Town was most likely exactly like

27:30 in Australia. There wasn't a lot of difference in the British Commonwealths in those days, all flew the British flags and what have you. So things have changed in the last fifty years, sometimes I wonder if it is for the better but that's not for me to judge.

**What do you remember about the family decision to leave South Africa and come to Australia?**

I can remember Dad coming home from work one day and he was sober, one of the few times, and we all sat down and he said, "We're leaving

28:00 South Africa." And of course I being the eldest, eleven or twelve at the time I was absolutely astounded, 'Why? 'And then I got my first lesson about politics. Up until then I didn't know the problems between the British and the Afrikaners goes right back to the Boer War, it goes back to the First World War when a lot of Afrikaners were locked up in concentration camps because they supported the Germans and the same happened in the Second World War,

28:30 and I found out later in the film The Power of One which is an excellent movie because it does demonstrate the difference between the British and the Afrikaner and the Afrikaner never ever liked the British because they lost the Boer War. So it got to the stage where the old man said, "This will be a republic within ten years." and this was in 1952 and I thought, "Jesus what's a republic?" I was ten or eleven years old, you

29:00 don't know much about anything. So he said, "Where do you want to go? You can go to Canada or Australia?" Well Canada sounded good because all we ever heard was 'the Canadian mounties always got their man', 'the gold in the Yukon', 'the snow' and all of these good little boy stories you read in adolescence. So of course I put my hand up for Canada and my two younger brothers never participated because they were never interested and were too young anyway.

29:30 Anyway the old man made an arbitrary decision; I don't know why he gave us a choice. We're going to come out to Australia because Mum had a second cousin on her side who lived in Perth. Now we were all British subjects in those days, you might have been a citizen of South Africa or a citizen of Australia but you were British subjects and you had British passports, so it was easy, sell your house, book yourself on a boat and come over.

30:00 Now I came from Cape Town which is a very modern city with electrical fridges and hot water systems and stoves and four foot six gauge railways and American cars and I arrive in Albany, which you know has got to be the arsehole of the world for God's sake. There were no tugs in Albany, the bloody ship we were on had to come in and tie up at a jetty in Albany which is nearly a mile long.

30:30 We had to walk that mile to get into the taxi which in those days was a British Cambridge or some pokie little car; we had come from American Plymouths and Buicks and Chevys and Oldsmobiles to this pokie, farty little car that could only sit four people in it. Then we got onto a train that is six foot three and a

half and as an eleven year old boy I had to get onto my hands and knees to look out the bloody window because they were so small. There was no servants to carry our

- 31:00 bags and that was bad news because we had come from South Africa and the train stopped every ten or fifteen mile. From Albany to Perth took just on eighteen hours and it is only three or four hundred kilometres and it took eighteen hours. So we found out there was a drought on, we arrived in the January and found out there was a drought on and every time we got out
- 31:30 the guard used to stand outside our window and say, "Gee, if we don't get rain soon the bloody wheat crop is going to fail." And I thought, "Bloody hell, what have we come into?" And then we arrived in Perth in January '54, it was nothing. Talk about Brisbane in the '60s, can you imagine what Perth was like in the '50s? Anyway old Uncle Dick had a Ford Prefect ute [utility truck] and he ferried the whole family out
- 32:00 to his place called Maylands which is out near Mount Lawley, East Perth way, and we had to sit there with our baggage until he came back. Dad sat in the front which is only a two seater, a little Prefect ute and we sat in the back with the bags, the three boys. Oh God. And then we arrived in Maylands and they had a big house but they had filled the veranda in just the same. All post war houses in all cities
- 32:30 and countries in Australia, the kids slept out on the veranda; they were basically two bedroom houses. But there was a chip heater so I had to go out and chop wood to have a hot shower. Had to fill a kerosene thing up because they didn't have an electric fridge. And a wooden stove, and for the first time in my life I seen a horse and cart delivering bread. Horse would come up the road and a baker would jump off with his basket of bread.
- 33:00 And then the horse would go on and stop about twenty or thirty metres up the road. He would deliver the bread and jump back on again and fill his basket up and off again. Yeah first time I ever saw a horse and cart delivering bread, walking up the street and baker jumps off and he delivers the bread and the horse goes up the street. It was totally as a twelve or thirteen year old I had no
- 33:30 idea that these things happened in the world. So I arrived and I spoke with a South African accent and I had fair skin and fair hair and I was still called a Pommy bastard. I didn't know what a Pommy bastard was because Afrikaners call Pommies 'roynecks', rednecks. So it came to the situation where we had to do something to stop this, what is now called bullying. So I went to school
- 34:00 after about a week at school, and I went to high school, I picked the biggest kid in the class and I said, "Do you think you are a smart arse?" I king hit him and I dropped him. I was a pretty big kid for thirteen, fourteen and after that I had absolutely no trouble. A couple of the kids thought they would get me one day, I had gone to the sea scouts, we used to go sailing on the Swan River
- 34:30 and I sailed past Maylands jetty, Cawley Street jetty and I saw these kids on the jetty, they dived in and tried to tip me out of the boat. So I stood up with an oar and I said, "If you bastards want to tip me out of the boat I will break your arm." So this kid said, "You're not good enough." And put his hands on the side of the boat and rocked it and I just went whack with the oar and broke his arm. So I knew I was going to be in big doo doo again. So by the time I got home his
- 35:00 mother had been around to see my mother and my mother said, "That's enough; you have been doing this all of your life. We're going to have to sort you out." And I said, "Hang on, find out my side." So I told her what happened and she promptly stormed down the street around to this other kid's mother and got fair up her. My old man came home from work and he found out and he threatened to punch the lights out of this kid's old man, "Bloody little bastard need to learn how to behave themselves!"
- 35:30 So my life took a big change in Australia to what it was before. Dad wasn't drinking so much of course and he was on beer and not brandy. So things looked up. Australia for my family was good, didn't really set up my Mum and Dad but it certainly set up my Mum and two brothers. So the move to Australia
- 36:00 was definitely beneficial and that's exactly what my parents wanted.

**And as a teenager at the time did you see that that was good for you?**

No, teenagers, and all teenagers...you find out that girls are built differently and your whole social understanding of what life is all about changes. I played a lot of sport and I did a lot of competitive rowing. I took up rowing, fours and eights and all of that.

- 36:30 I played rugby, Aussie rules, soccer; girls were there but as a fifteen or sixteen year old at that stage of the game, they were there, they were nice to have along, they would give you a kiss if you did something right but no one explored each other like they do today, which was good. You have to learn slowly, they learn in kindergarten these days. So as a teenager with other teenagers
- 37:00 you hang around in your own little suburban clan, you do things together. I used to pinch fruit and vegetables; I can remember flogging some guy's rockmelon patch, we had been in there plenty of times and got away with it and this time the bastard seen us. And I got shot in the arse by saltpetre from a shotgun. Gees my bum hurt for week. I joined a church group and I'd go up and pinch some oranges and I get caught.
- 37:30 At sixteen I was in children's court getting a two shilling fine and two shilling cost. I wasn't the only

one, there was nineteen of us climbed over this fence but I was the only one who got caught. I was wearing a big thick coat and jumped over a barbed wire fence and got hung upside down and the bastards caught me. These things happen, you get smart as you get older.

**And while you were at school, did you have any hopes and ambitions about what you might do?**

38:00 No in fact I can't remember having any ambitions. I left school at fourteen and a half, 1955, when you sit down in those days. I was in a technical school in East Perth called Forest High and they did the normal academic subjects but they also did metalwork, chemistry, woodwork, tech drawing and various other

38:30 trade type things and most of the others kids in those days all went into trades. The people that went into offices were the kids of private schools. Us kids in the public schools, well we were all the tradesmen and various other things and I had no ambitions, I can't remember ever being ambitious. As the cards got laid on the table I

39:00 picked up the cards I thought best suited me and followed that path and you couldn't do it today because everyone expects you at fourteen and a half they expect you to know exactly what you want to be and where you want to retire at. Crazy, let people grow up and learn how to be people before you do all of that sort of garbage.

**So when you left school you started working with the ferries, was that right?**

Yeah my first job was with the state ferries in Perth. Used to run from the bottom end of Barracks Street,

39:30 across the river and then on the long weekends and weekends used to run a cruise down the river in this old steamer and I ended up as a junior deck boy and cleaning the toilets and polishing the brass and refuelling the ferries and selling the tickets and all of this sort of stuff. And it was a pretty good job; I enjoyed it because I did like the water. I had been a sea cadet at this

40:00 stage of the game and I thought this is a good job I might end up the skipper of a boat; fourteen and a half, fifteen years old. Anyway what happened was I used to work six days a week and then get a day or two off and I'd go to work on the Wednesday and next thing you know Mr White was the boss ferryman and he wasn't real happy with me and as soon as I got there he pushed me against the wall. He said, "Get into my office." And I thought, "Gee what have I done?" And it worked out that I never refuelled one of the ferries

40:30 that ran out of fuel half way across the river full of people in peak hour and it run up against the sand bank and they had to tow it off, not a good day. My first job and after six months I got the sack.

## Tape 2

00:30 **Okay, so after the ferry job?**

I worked for I think it was Wilma Brothers, as a storeman, until I did the wrong thing there, I probably didn't clean the dunnies [toilets] properly or whatever; they didn't want my services there. So I then ended up as a strapping seventeen year old

01:00 getting a job with Harris Scarf and Sanders delivering fridges and washing machines. And we did that over the Christmas period '57 and they must have been impressed with my attitude and work ethic because they put me into the big store in Hay Street in Perth.

01:30 There I met my first girlfriend, really my first girlfriend. And through the electrical department I met a guy called Joe Byworth who later married Lynne, but that's a different story and he had a car. I was flat out owning a push bike in those days. He was a fifth year electrical apprentice and so we decided to go down to Margaret River and have a bit of a swim, surfboards weren't invented in those days,

02:00 and it was a Saturday morning. And in those days everyone worked five and a half days which included Saturday and so I didn't go to work on Saturday. So Mum phones up and says I was home crook [ill] in bed, my brother happened to be in town to say that I had gone to the dentist or something. And on Monday when I arrived at work the personnel manager wanted to see me and he said, "Where were you on Saturday?" and I thought Jesus, I knew that Mum had said I was home sick in bed so I

02:30 said, "I was home crook in bed." And he said, "Well your brother said you were down Margaret River." And I said, "Well if you are going to give me the sack I resign." And he said, "You can't do that, I have got to sack you." And I said, "No you don't, I am going to pick up my bag, you can phone up the pay people and give me my pay and stick your job where the sun don't shine." Of course I get home around about ten o'clock and Mum says, "What are you doing home?" and I said, "Oh I got the sack again." and she said, "What are you going to do?" and I said, "Oh

- 03:00 bugger this, I have got to get out of Perth." So I said, "I am going to join the army." January '59, eighteen and a half, been in and out of jobs everywhere, and I knew if I signed in the army I would have to stay no matter what happened, and besides I left Western Australia and that was one of the few ways you could get out of Western Australia in the '50s as a kid.
- 03:30 So go around St Georges Terrace recruiting, passed all exams and on the 4th of February '59 wearing uniform. And in six years, married, had a child, nothing was going on. Gone to Malaya and chased the communists around the jungle, gone to Thailand, got drunk, went to my first brothel. All of these exciting things that people do when they first join the army. I had some great teachers;
- 04:00 they had been around since the Second World War and they would grab a young fellow, mainly to look after them I found out later, because if they got pissed [drunk] the young fellow could take them home. So the whole thing was quite new, exciting, good training, fights with the Poms occasionally down in town,
- 04:30 girls trying to race you off because they want your money, that only happened over there, didn't happen in Australia much to my sadness and possibly delight in some ways. So the late '50s was an exciting and new time for me. I had left home for the first time, Mum and Dad weren't real happy, it was an adventure. From that time on, well really
- 05:00 when I look back my whole life had been an adventure, one door closes and another opens and that's what I think life is about; you have got to take the best chances when you can and if you stuff up, who cares, it is only you. And that's the important thing, too many people worry about too many things, what other people think. I used to but when I got older, possibly in my '30s I realised no matter what
- 05:30 you say or do you're never going to please everyone, so you please the people you love and bugger the rest. And I think that's possibly a good philosophy. I mean you don't purposely go out to ruin someone's life or just to be an arsehole, you have got to be nice, if an arsehole is an arsehole to you, you be an arsehole back again and that's really about being who you are.
- 06:00 And to me if people adopted that kind of thing, do the best you can for the people around you, but don't take any crap off anyone who goes out of their way to upset you, just ignore them. And there are people who try to upset you, even today I have problems with a few people and I ignore them. They come up in conversation but it is not good conversation.

#### **Sure; so how did you parents react when you signed up for the army?**

- 06:30 I think my Dad was real happy because I was getting out his bloody hair and I didn't look like doing much in Perth anyway. I know Errol my second brother was pleased because he had been shackled up with Terry all of the time and all of a sudden he has got his own room. I think he was still in high school or might have just started university, was
- 07:00 going to be a teacher. The youngest Terry, young Michael I don't think he knew what day of the week it was, he was twelve years old, he was going through the puberty blues he was, breasts getting hard and wondering what's all the hair under your arms. So I don't think my youngest brother cared one way or the other but I know Errol was happy because he took my bed.

#### **What about your mum?**

- 07:30 Mums are mums no matter what, always worried about their boys. They reckon the girls will marry someone nice, but in those days that's no panacea for happiness, but mums always seem to worry about the boys and I don't think Mum was real happy. Not much they could do about it, in those days you had to be twenty-one to vote and you have to get your parents permission even at eighteen and a half to join the army. You didn't
- 08:00 get any social services and government house to leave home and live in some doss house under the bridge like you do today. You were stuck at home and had to do what your parents told you and if you didn't you got a cuff under the ear, even at eighteen. I can remember one day I was going out and taking Lynne to the pictures or something and the old man [Dad] came home from work and he braced me up and said something and I said, "Stuff you." And I bopped him. It just got to the stage of total frustration,
- 08:30 the old man having a go at you over nothing. Mum was in a cranky mood see? So I was having a shave and doing my hair or trying to find a bit of hair to shave off. And I happened to make the remark, "Oh look out Mum's mad." And I meant it in a behavioural mad kind a way. The old man walked in and grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me around, that was the end of me.
- 09:00 One hit and my old man sat on his arse. And so I just put on my coat and walked out and then walked home and got into bed about four o'clock the next morning. One of the few nights I took Lynne home and she lived eight or nine kilometres away and after nine o'clock at night in Perth there was no buses so you had to walk home.

#### **How did you meet Lynne?**

Lynne was working at Harris Scarf and Sanders. She



- 09:30 came across to Melbourne in 1960 and I was in Sydney, I went down to Melbourne to see her but she wasn't allowed out and of course I was fancy free and could come and go and Lynne was a very quiet sort of girl and she had to get her aunty's permission to go out and all of this. I thought, "Bugger this". I am on the grog [alcohol] and God knows what else. And so we stopped communicating and at that stage of the game John Byworth
- 10:00 my electrician mate who I got into trouble with down at Margaret River, he had moved in when I moved out and they are still married with three or four kids living in Perth.
- So when you joined up do you remember exactly what happened when you joined up, what the process was?**
- Yes you had to do a psych [psychology] test, and I didn't know I was so smart. You had to do a medical, the normal type of thing, you put your hand up in the Bible and repeat after me and you did that and then sign the piece of
- 10:30 paper and then the whole world is saying, "Get in the back of the bloody truck." They're real nice to you up until then and then some old cranky bastard comes out and, "Get in the back of the bloody truck!" And in those days the personnel depot was out at a place called Guilford, out near Midland on the Great Eastern Highway and you're locked up for about a week and the army pays you every fortnight, and I had no money anyway so
- 11:00 I was quite happy. You got issued with your khakis, KDs, khaki drill trousers and you thought you were so smart. You had the rising sun [Australian Army badge] on the side of your hat, you had a belt with brass on it, no boots, you had shoes and you had to learn to wash, starch and iron your clothes, so the learning came quickly. After about a fortnight they put you on a train and of course in those days the train from Perth to Kalgoorlie, and then across the Nullarbor to Port Pirie and you then got another train to Adelaide
- 11:30 then jumped another train to Melbourne and we stayed at the Melbourne personnel depot which is Royal Park I think it was. And you waited for South Australians, Victorians and Tasmanians to join you. And an interesting thing happened to me in February '59; they were making the film *On the Beach* and they wanted extras and they wanted some army guys and there were no army guys around in Melbourne in the '50s, very few.
- 12:00 People up at Puckapunyal [camp] with the tanks. So there was about three or four of us caught the tram into Watsonia, had to meet people in town and they gave you two pound ten or three pound and a packet of cigarettes, I was a smoker by then, and we had to walk around the Botanical Gardens and there was thousands of people, girls of all shapes and sizes
- 12:30 and so we thought this is a great idea, two pound ten in the pocket and so we're chatting up all of the sheilas [girls] and cameras were following the group around and I was most disappointed when the film came out that I wasn't in the bastard.
- What do you remember about that trip over from Perth?**
- That was exciting, you leave Perth at six o'clock at night and you arrive at Kalgoorlie and all of a sudden you're in a big train, four foot six, air conditioned,
- 13:00 that train was air conditioned the others when I came back on leave weren't. And you were like a kid in a lolly shop, you are glued to the window looking at everything going past, none of us had ever been out of Perth, we might go to Freo [Fremantle] or Rockingham. But none of us knew what the Nullarbor Plains was, we knew Forest walked across or Eyre did, someone did and all of a sudden there is absolutely bugger all out there and
- 13:30 it went all day and all night. And then all of a sudden we came across magpies that were different colours in South Australia than they are from anywhere else in Australia because they have got a white back magpie, we have black back. So for the blokes that went across I can still remember a bloke by the name of Barry Olt, he became a cook, Pritchard he went to tank corps, I went to infantry. So it was an exciting thing. You arrive in Melbourne, we had trams in Perth
- 14:00 but nothing like they have got in Melbourne. Big exciting thing to catch a tram down to St Kilda and go to Luna Park. Melbourne is still the same today, nothing has changed in Melbourne, they still pull up on the left hand side of the road to do a right hand turn, they were doing that in the '50s. It was cold in Melbourne, even in February it was bloody cold in Melbourne. I had to go looking for the jumper they issued
- 14:30 me with. And then you met all of these strange people from South Australia over in the west, we had bathers and all of a sudden we're talking about people with 'cossies', what's a 'cossie'? It still happens a bit in Australia these days. Every state in those days had their own Australian words, even though they spoke the same language but all different.
- 15:00 So it was a big learning curve and even then state rivalries, there was no AFL [Australian Rules Football] but you know but if you didn't play Aussie Rules and you were speaking to a South Australia he reckoned you were crazy, "You come from West Australia and you don't play Aussie Rules?" All of these stupid things but I enjoyed it. In fact I have been back to Melbourne a few times and since and as

I said nothing has changed.

**So can you tell us about recruit training and what you did there?**

- 15:30 Yes now this is a culture shock. Kapooka which is still today's regular army training was a World War II camp with water tanks on their side, the old igloos, half round huts. And Kapooka I think is ten or eleven miles out of Wagga, it is really the arsehole of the world.
- 16:00 It is freezing cold in winter stinking hot with flies everywhere in summer time. You have got all of the angry army people to teach you and instruct you because they don't want to be there either and you have got twelve weeks of purgatory, you may as well go to Louisiana Prison Farm. I have never been to a place where you had to
- 16:30 fire up a coke heater to get hot water to have a shower. Now when the temperature is minus four degrees, and it is that temperature in April in Kapooka, it is like bloody Canberra, and you're on fire piquet and you're responsible to keep the coke heaters going to boil up the water for hot water for the troops to have showers. Now Kapooka
- 17:00 those days, there was a hundred and nineteen in my platoon, they only have thirty or forty now but there was a hundred and nineteen. From all over Australia, we had people who couldn't even speak English; how they got in I will never know, we had one bloke who was in the platoon who was a bloody murderer, we didn't find that out until he raped and killed a girl in June in Easter time '59 and he was in the same hut. We all slept with our bayonets under the pillow after that in case he came back.
- 17:30 We didn't know if you were a real bad bastard in those days you had the choice to go to the army for six years or go to gaol for six years and all of these sorry turds jumped into the army. So it was place where you had to live on your wits, but it was good because it gave you a good grounding of self reliance and also team work. And that's the whole thing about recruit training is, you have to learn to be part of a team and also to
- 18:00 be an individual. That's exactly what recruit training is for. It is a cultural shock, particularly for those boys who had never left home before like me. And there was a lot of us, I would say ninety percent of them. Some were jackaroos and so on, but for most of us it was a very quiet home life to come into the army. Get kicked out of bed at six o'clock, in fact I would get up at five to
- 18:30 have a reasonably warm shower, it was seven days a week and eighteen hours a day; it was full on. And if you see any movies like Sean Connery in The Hill, the bastardisation, well it is not bastardisation. If you don't do the right thing you are punished either officially or unofficially. Now you're not even allowed to call a turd a turd today you know? They have changed everything because girls now have to be part of it. I don't know if soldiers
- 19:00 of the twenty-first century are going to have the same attitude and the same ability of soldiers of my time. I daresay the old fellow of World War II said the same thing about us when we went to Vietnam. When you mixed the pot up and you put it out on a plate to eat it the same result, the psyche
- 19:30 of the Australian male, and I suppose I should put in female now, although they are not part of the fighting arm, they will all do their job when they have to do it and they will all do it to the best of their ability. And I think that is something that makes me proud now to be Australian, I don't think of myself as South African, I never have, when I came over here I was Australian. But when you look back and saw
- 20:00 how things have changed how we did things and how they do it today. All people getting older say, "We didn't have it as good as you have it." Our parents told us and we tell our kids. Life doesn't change; Aristotle worked that out two and half thousand years ago. So it was good, I still talk to a few of them, I am trying to find a few more of them you know because we soldiered on for many years you know.

**20:30 So what was the biggest shock for you at Kapooka?**

I think Kapooka itself, the climate; Perth is lovely sunny Mediterranean climate only rains in winter time, nice and sunny during the day, occasionally hot in summer time. You arrive in February in the Riverina and it is forty degrees all of the time and the flies are

- 21:00 up your nose and in your ears and in your eyes, I won't go any further than that. The climate, where Kapooka is...now if Kapooka was down on the Mornington Peninsula with the waves and all of that it would be a great place, but Kapooka is stuck in the middle of New South Wales. You have to be born in Wagga to like Wagga, most of us just drive through we don't even stop for petrol these days.

- 21:30 My apologies to anyone who lives in Wagga but that's the way it is.

**What sort of training exercises were you doing?**

How to stand to attention, how to stand at ease how to get dressed properly, how to make your bed properly. We had 303 rifles in those days; all our weapons were World War II weapons. You're taught how to aim and shoot at square targets

- 22:00 with bullseyes, they don't teach you how to kill people there, but they teach you the basics of getting the rifle to work properly. You learn all of your drill. They don't do any bayonet training there because that's particularly an infantry thing and you do that when you go into corps training. But they turn out soldiers to be, basic training and from there you can be a truck driver, clerk, medical orderly.
- 22:30 But you are trained as a basic soldier. All soldiers are trained to kill irrespective of whether you work on a computer or carry a rifle and walk the weeds. Every soldier is trained to basically be able to shoot and kill the enemy; it is just that some are more specialist at it.

**And what punishments were meted out when you did the wrong thing?**

- 23:00 Well the army has what they call 'confined to barracks'. You used to get a five or ten pound fine in those days, ten pound was the total fortnightly pay if you were lucky. So you could lose a fortnight's pay. 'CB' you're confined to barracks which means you couldn't go to canteen or anything like that, you had certain parades that you had to attend to, in the morning and in the evening and you had a drill parade and you had to wear the full kit which in those days was around about
- 23:30 fifteen to twenty kilos and you spent half an hour doing drill on the parade ground morning and afternoon. And then at night time, after seven o'clock at night every hour you had to parade to the orderly sergeant and he would give you a different change of dress, you might have to be in your pyjamas for the next one at ten o'clock you know. Sandshoes and pyjamas, no greatcoat and it's minus five outside.
- 24:00 And you had to run all of the way up there and back. I never copped any of that crap, I never did any CB, as a sergeant I enforced CB on the drill parade but I never did any CB. I think I was a bit smarter than some of the infantry that I was in with the time, there was some people that continually had it, now they shouldn't have been in the army in the first place because they never had, shall we say, the nous and the ability.
- 24:30 To come up to the army standard, they should have caught those fellows beforehand, half way through after six or seven weeks; to catch them after they have gone through six weeks of bloody hell and that's basically what it was, it is a bit late. And also I suppose when you're thinking about the biggest shock was the PT, physical training. To be a qualified physical training instructor, PTI you
- 25:00 had to be born a sadist, you had to be. Because they would have to, they would do a special course on how to be a mongrel, fair dinkum. They are all running around, they have muscles in their poo, muscles between their ears, muscles everywhere and they think every other turd has got the same muscles and they run and they jump over things and climb and expect you to do the same thing. I bet none of them could fight, they were all bombardiers and no one would punch them up. One of the PTIs, Jimmy Husband, many years later
- 25:30 ended up as my RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] and he know lived up at Coolum just up the road. So the link from the army from recruit training is with me from 1959 to 2004 because the bloke up the road from where I live is one of the mongrel PTIs.

**How were friendships formed during training, how did people pair off or become friends?**

You tend to stick with the guys you know,

- 26:00 went across together on the train. But then when they put you in a hut with fifteen or eighteen people from all over Australia, the strangest people were from Tasmania because you know they didn't know where they were; people from Tasmania when they come onto the mainland have a shock, people who come into the army on the mainland from Tasmania, I think they have a bigger shock. And there is a mate of mine who now lives up at Gladstone
- 26:30 who will most likely tell you exactly the same . It is just like anything in your life, in your work you will... there is something between you and someone else and you go and have a drink and go away on leave. I taught myself to play the mouth organ and we had a guy who played the spoons very well and we went down to Albury, Easter 1969, and I was playing the mouth organ and he was playing the spoons and I can remember going for breakfast in the Golden Fleece servo [service station] and we had breakfast
- 27:00 and the bloke that had a spoon had an invisible dog. "Come here Fido. Sit down boy." And people stared looking. Give him a sandwich and we did some of the most crazy things and then I would start playing the mouth organ and he would start playing the spoons and all of the truckies in those days they were rough and tumble World War II fellows, and you had to be in uniform, they took your civvies [civilian clothes] away and you weren't allowed to buy any civvies in those days.
- 27:30 Blokes from the desert, "Good on your son." And slap you on the back, "Play this for me." and it might be Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag, and the whole bloody place was rocking, it wasn't all bad. And the bloke that did that was a bloke by the name of Ray Butlow, the name is just coming back, he played the spoons and had a crazy invisible dog. I don't know where Ray is, I have got a photo of the bastard.
- 28:00 So there was good times. And after twelve weeks of course you get allocated to your various corps and there used to be an old bastard down there by the name of Bird, Major Bird and I initially wanted to go

to armoured corps because that's what Dad was in the Second World War, but after learning the guns and all of that, I thought this is what being in the army is about, so I changed to infantry and I had to do some real hard talking to go to

28:30 infantry. From Kapooka they sent us to Ingleburn which is near Liverpool to do corps training. And there is where you specialise and train to be an infantryman, a very basic infantryman. Lets face it there is no secret to the army, you do as you're told and you can never get into trouble so long as you do as you're told, provided you put a bit of effort into it. And that was July

29:00 and July in Liverpool is not as bad as July in Kapooka but it is still not real good. A bit more rain around Sydney so you're always wet and cold anyway. And then after that I got posted across to the 2nd Battalion at Holsworthy.

#### **So how did the training change when you left Kapooka?**

Kapooka is very basic training, basic soldiers; they can stand to attention, salute, clean a rifle and so on. When you go to corps

29:30 infantry training there are dozens and dozens of skills that you have to learn .you have to work as a team in what they call sections, that's the very basic fighting unit in the army is a section, you have three sections in a platoon and three platoons in a company and that's still the same today

30:00 after fifty years. And you learn everything from section contact drills, attacking the enemy, defending the place, withdrawing, living in the field; we were horrified to know that we would go out for two weeks for training with one tin of bully beef one packet of biscuits and a handful of tea between us

30:30 and you would have to get three guys together, that was breakfast lunch and dinner, that was your meal. There was no such thing as curry powder or anything like that. So if you're going to go out for seven days, every man got seven tins of bully beef, seven packets of biscuits and a paper bag half full of tea, no milk or sugar. Well if it was raining the paper bag got wet and so you lost your brew anyway, but because

31:00 your three meals came out of that one tin of bully beef and that one packet of biscuits, they were like Sao biscuits but you had to have a hammer to break the bastards, they were hard, remember the term 'hard packs', that's what you had. Three of you had to use one tin of bully beef for lunch, so you would cut it up. And we had what they call canned heat, which is a little tin with solid methylated spirits in it and that was your

31:30 heat to fry your bully beef and boil your water. So you would use someone else's tin of heat so you didn't have to carry that and you learn how to share and spread around. It was hard and interesting and I think for me it was the realisation that what you learn here is going to save your life later, you don't think about that at Kapooka. You start seriously thinking about it; I have been in the army six, six and a half

32:00 months, all of a sudden I am learning to be an infantryman, and they pump it into you right from the start, the infantry seizes and holds ground irrespective of climate or weather and you're basically trained to kill people or be killed yourself. So the bloke that learns to do the job properly is going to be a better killer hopefully than the guy on the other side. That's basically being an infantry man. People call them 'grunts' and that really burns me up, grunt is an American term

32:30 and I must say this now, the American Army is nothing like the Australian or British Army. The American Army, the grunt is the lowest form of poo that drags on a piece of uniform; in the American Army they have their rangers and airborne and so on, their line battalions, 1st Division is a very famous division from the First and Second World War and also Vietnam, their basic soldiers are

33:00 called grunts. And that gets up my nose because if people realise exactly what an infantryman is and who he is, that's a most derogatory word but we have adopted it and even grunts call themselves grunts today, it gives me the shits but that's what happens.

#### **So how did you miss home when you went to Kapooka and infantry corps training?**

I used to write home regularly, I don't think I missed home. Once I finished corps training in

33:30 September of '59 I went back home on leave back to Perth in the December for a week and a half, two weeks. I realised that home is home but there is not a lot to do. Let's face it you have been out of the loop for nearly twelve months, the friends that you used to associate with have gone their own way,

34:00 people got married at twenty-one, twenty-two those days. So I used to go to the Savoy Hotel in Hay Street, Perth and meet the other guys on leave and we would try chat up a sheila and if you didn't win one, who cares.

#### **Was there much drinking in the army in those early training days?**

No not a lot.

34:30 there was no teenage drinking. Twenty-one was the drinking age in all states except New South Wales if

I remember correctly. But if you were in the army you could in fact, the coppers wouldn't bust you if you were under twenty-one because you had a leave pass. "How old are you?" "Oh I am nineteen." "What are you doing in here drinking?" and then you pull out your leave pass, "Oh okay." The army

35:00 guys in the services in the '50s and '60s before Vietnam had a special place because you still had the fellows from World War II around and a lot of those fellows were coppers and then you had the guys who had been to Korea, so being part of what they call the Australian Defence Forces, in those days it was the Australian Military Forces, they changed the name to be politically correct, what a load of crap, everyone treated everyone in uniform with some sort of respect. But you

35:30 didn't get any freebies, you know girls didn't run over and grab you by the arm and drag you off. But the thing was that if you wanted a taxi and you were in uniform, the taxi was liable to take you before he took some other yobbo. Today if you're in uniform no bastard wants to talk to you; only because of basically what happened in Vietnam and some dickheads who go around killing cats,

36:00 that doesn't go over too well.

**And did you have a sense of that respect when you first wore the uniform?**

No not really. You were too busy doing your own thing. And when you went into Sydney, Town Hall or something like that, it was all the same, sit down and drink with the same mob; but we didn't drink a lot you know, we would do our own thing.

36:30 **Did you feel that people treated you differently wearing a uniform to the time prior to that?**

No I don't think so. As I said before guys in uniform were treated with more respect; the job you were doing was important to Australians, where today it is not. I suppose that's the

37:00 best way of trying to put that together.

**Were there any officers in those training days that particularly impressed you?**

No officers. Senior NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers], sergeants and warrant officers and things like that. All officers were about as old as we were anyway, they knew as much as we did; they just went to a different school. Officers, you have got to get officers in the

37:30 right perspective. With an infantry battalion officers come and go, whereas your NCOs, corporals and sergeants, generally stay around for many years. They are the ones that create the heritage and the history. Soldiers create the history but officers take the kudos because they were the commanding officer, even though they were only there for two years. So when you sit down and think

38:00 about the differentiation between officers and what they call 'other ranks', it very much goes back to the British imperial days where officers got crosses because they were officers and knights of the realm; they were there by the grace of the Queen and God and everyone else, we just came along and enlisted and were a gun fighter you know. It is not the same today but up until '91 officers got

38:30 Military Cosses and things like that and us fools got medals, but there was no difference they got a different thing for the same job; they got a cross, I got a medal. But no officers, there were very few officers that I took a page out of their book. There were quite a few sergeants and corporals that I took a page out of theirs...and then you build up your own book as you go up through promotion

39:00 and responsibility, you draw on the experiences of someone else and that's how the whole thing rolls along.

**When you joined the army did you have any thoughts about the possibility of you actually going to war?**

When I joined the army the Korean War had been over five or six years, they were in Malaya shooting up the communist terrorists, old Chin Peng [Leader of the Malaysian Communist Party]. Indochina war had ceased in

39:30 '54 although there was still a fair amount of trouble. Vietnam was never on the horizon in the early '60s, not for any Australians. We were tied up with South East Asia Treaty Organization, SEATO, for the protection of Malaya, Singapore, Thailand and all of that sort of... our defence forces were all in Malaya, in Singapore the navy had a quite strong whatsisname, the air force had a squadron of

40:00 fighter jet Sabres in Butterworth. After the emergency which finished in 1960 that created a brigade camp for the British battalion, Australian battalion and the New Zealand battalion at a place called Terendak down near Malacca and that continued on from 1961 through to I think it was

40:30 '75 and '76 and then that went down to Singapore. During that time of course I was in Malaya when the confrontation started with Indonesia. Everyone talks about we didn't go to war with Indonesians, bloody hell we didn't. Australians were killing Indonesians lock stock and barrel in bloody Borneo or Kalimantan. Indonesians put a party at Nemis which is a river

41:00 between Malacca and Singapore where the 8th Battalion in the Second World War held up the Japanese, they had a famous battle there, Johor Bahru. Well the Indonesians landed there and 3 Battalion went in

there and took out a few. But the Australian Army, when you joined you joined for adventure, you don't think about going and killing people. The old slogan, 'you visit exotic countries

41:30 meet a lot of people and kill a few of them'. Terrible philosophy to have but that is what happens. You don't join the army to, you should be aware that if you join the army you become a servant of the country at the whim of the government. If the government wants to send you somewhere to kill someone or be killed that's what you do, right.

## Tape 3

00:30 Well in September of '59 I went across to 2 RAR [Royal Australian Regiment], now 2 RAR like the other three battalions in the regiment had been created after the Second World War and they were the first three permanent military forces Australia ever had. The 1st and 2nd AIF [Australian Imperial Force] were mainly militia people and volunteers and after the Second World War the AIF became the Australian Army.

01:00 Three battalions had been to Korea and the 1st Battalion in 1959 had gone across to Malaya because Australia was involved with the Emergency with Communist terrorists through the '50s in Malaya. 1 RAR was in Malaya and 2 RAR was to go in 1961 if the Emergency was still

01:30 going. We marched into 2 RAR and it was that time in the army where the Americans had changed to an organization called 'pentropic', now they had arranged the whole army for atomic warfare, the Cold War was at its height in the '50s so the Australians, like we do, we have now become a lot more American in what we do because

02:00 of the Second World War, so we changed everything to what they called pentropic. We had gone from four rifle companies and three platoons in each, a strength of about seven hundred and twenty in a battalion to a pentropic company which had five infantry companies and a whole lot of other things to a strength of twelve hundred, it didn't work out anyway but the army

02:30 carried it on for a few years. We in fact in 1961, when we went to Malaya had to change back to what they call TE, tropical establishments, went back to the four companies and three platoons. 2 RAR once you, in those days once you finished your training you got out of the khaki and you got into the greens. And the most important thing in those days was to put on the greens and put the Royal Australian Regiment

03:00 flash up on the shoulder because then he was a fair dinkum soldier, up until then he was only playing the rounds right. So we march into 2 RAR and being the new kids on the block everyone looks at you and says, "Oh, dickhead." and all of this, but there were two platoons went into infantry from Kapooka, those two platoons stuck together and created 10 and 11 Platoon

03:30 of 2 RAR and out platoon sergeants and CSMs [Company Sergeant Major] were all Korean veterans Joe Vescoff who lives down at Stanmore Park in the south of Sydney he was in fact in Kapyong which was the big battle that 3 RAR was in and they got the presidential citation and of course us kids in our brand new greens looked at Joe Vescoff, my bloody hero you know.

04:00 A few years later I am wearing the same gear old Joe Vescoff is. To give you an idea of what the army was like in the '60s, we still wore boots that were made in the Second World War. They were brown in colour called tropical TS boots, tropical studded boots, and we had to get raven oil to paint them black. We had gaiters that had to be painted black

04:30 with raven oil. We had exactly the same greens as they designed to go to Papua New Guinea and places like that. Nothing had changed. Fifteen years and we were still trying to wear out the stores they had created for the Second World War. My rifle, at that stage of the game my first rifle was made in 1914, bloody hell. Some of them

05:00 probably went into the Somme and Ypres and all of those other places; could have even gone to Gallipoli, I wouldn't have a clue. 1914 made Mark II Lee Enfield Rifle, God almighty. Anyway being in a battalion was now king of the shits, you're now the big kid on the block. You're away and it was good, once again you had learnt the skills to continue on in your training

05:30 into the company. We had only trained into platoons at that stage of the game, platoons and sections. Now we start to get into battalion and company exercises. In November the battalion went from Holsworthy near Liverpool all of the way to Puckapunyal because for the first time ever there was going to be an infantry and armoured exercise in training done. We had Centurion tanks, you know the

06:00 infantry hadn't worked with armoured corps since the Second World War in the desert and this is totally new. 2 RAR is going down to work with the armoured and the Centurions. Well when I first went to the army I was going to tanks, all of a sudden now I am infantry; arrive down at Pukka [Puckapunyal] and it is freezing cold again and this is November and I run into all of the guys from recruit training. So the army is one big family even then;

- 06:30 you moved around and you meet thousands of people and keep in contact with possibly dozens of them 2 RAR was great, used to go and drink at the Bognor Hotel in town. In those days there was certain hotels where army went to and certain hotels where navy went to, and certain hotels for both. Now the Bognor Hotel, let me paint you a picture of Sydney
- 07:00 1959/1960, the six o'clock swill was still on at that stage [bars closed at six pm]. It was about to change in a lot of places about then. But to drink after ten o'clock you had to go to a hotel and buy a meal, normally a sausage roll or something like that for the privilege of drinking on. Very few hotels did that. The Bognor was a navy/army place,
- 07:30 was one of the...and I can remember being down there with a bloke called Dasher Wheatley the bloke who won the first VC [Victoria Cross] in Vietnam was in 2 RAR in a company and Dasher, there is a lot of stories about Dasher, I might indulge in some of them. But they had one measly little bowl for four hundred guys to piss in, in this hotel. There would be thirty guys all lined up
- 08:00 and most of us don't go until we have to. Anyway Dasher waggled his willy [penis] and walked out and he said to this bloke, "No one knows, piss in the bowl." So of course this bloke undid his fly and started urinating in the wash out bowl and at this stage Dasher pushed everyone back and said, "Hey you bastard, look at this prick pissing in the bowl!" These were the sort of things Wheatley used to pull, he was a bloody mongrel. I was
- 08:30 fortunate in that just down the road from where I lived in Perth there was a bloke by the name of Peter Briton who had joined the navy just before me, and I used to meet him at the Kings Hotel which was in fact a navy pub; army weren't allowed you know. And anyway I used to be able to go in there and I used to be able to take a few navy blokes from there up to a place called the Civic Hotel which is controlled by Ma North. Now Ma North was a
- 09:00 war widow from an army guy in the Second World War. And she would not allow anyone in her hotel who wasn't army and she knew that if a guy came in and wasn't army, because if you were short of a quid [short of money] Ma North would give you five dollars because she knew you would spend it at her pub and when you came in next pay day you would give her five pound in those days, back again. Ma North was a great publican, she knew everything.
- 09:30 And I walked in there one day with Peter Briton and it cost you ten bob [shillings] for sandwiches and you got two slices of bread cut up into four little corners and that was your entry fee into this pub after ten o'clock and of course I took Peter along. And so Peter goes up there and said, "I can't go in there," and I said, "Get in here." Anyway Ma North sprung me she said, "Who is that?" and I said, "Oh that's a mate of mine, he is in the navy and he lives two or three doors down from me" And she said, "Well you look after him, if he's in any trouble you're in trouble too Buick."
- 10:00 So these are the sort of things that would go on. I can remember when I first met Beverly in Brisbane and we went down to Sydney, I took Beverly out one night and I took her to the Civic Hotel and also, Saturday afternoon it was, went to the Civic and then went to the Cross [Kings Cross] I had to show her all the places because Beverly had never been to Sydney. So we go into the Civic Hotel and old Queenie, what was her name?
- 10:30 She used to play the piano, an old entertainer from the vaudeville age, the Old Tivoli [theatre] and that. Queenie Ashton, she was playing a sing-along on a Saturday afternoon. And we sat down and this guy tried to crack onto this girl and she wasn't interested and he pulled his dick out and God strike me pink I am never endowed like he was. Anyway when the sheila saw what he had she said, "No bloody way!" and bolted out of the place. These are the characters you get
- 11:00 in the pub. And later that night I ran into a bloke who was ex-army and he said, "I know you." And I said, "Yeah." It turned out he was one of the blokes I met at Kapooka, he got out of the army, because he had been in for three years. and I said, "What are you doing?" and he said, "I do a bit of local protection work." And I said, "You're a bloody crim you bastard!" And he said, "Yeah I have got a job on tonight." And I said, "You carrying anything?" and he said, "Yeah." And he pulled out a little snub nosed 38 pistol. And I said, "Jesus Christ mate is this the best you can do?" and he said,
- 11:30 "Good job, pays well and all of the sheilas are free." They were the characters you had around in those days. Petty crims, this is before drugs ever got into Australia, before Vietnam and all of this sort of business, it was a pretty hectic sort of time.

### **What about fights, did you see any fights between navy and army or army and civilian?**

Not so much, I got into a nice old blue [fight] in Myer which we

- 12:00 will discuss later, but there were a few punch ups but they were pretty minor, the Rock and Roll Hotel down in Woolloomooloo used to open at six o'clock in the morning and close at six o'clock at night. We all stayed at what they call Johnny's which is a navy doss house down near the Quay [Circular Quay] left over from the Second World War where the guys
- 12:30 would leave the ship and go on leave and pay ten bob and get a night and breakfast and Johnny's. No one ever saw any air force in those days, they were all stuck out at Richmond, nobody wanted to know the air force anyway in those days. And there was a few fights in the Bognor but because you were

separated in your drinking places, the Town Hall was a mutual meeting place, the Town Hall Hotel but I don't remember too many fights there

- 13:00 everyone knew if you got into a blue with the navy you would get your head kicked in anyway. Navy if they got in a blue with the army would get the same thing, so it was mutual respect, like the Cold War, mutual annihilation if it started. So there wasn't too many. But when we went to Malaya we used to punch up Poms and so forth, that was par for the course.

**You said before they started company exercises, what was involved in the company exercise at Puckapunyal?**

- 13:30 Well when you work at tanks and you take a whole battalion down and use a squadron of tanks and there is twelve or thirteen tanks in a squadron there are special drill that had to be written and created so that if we ever had to go to war with tanks, which we did do in Vietnam, basically what you did in 1959 and how they developed things was basically the pamphlet of armoured in fighting. And we did
- 14:00 attacks and advances up the road and all of this sort of business. It was all brand new to us, dirty, dusty, smelly tanks, you know you would try and be upwind all of the time because when they went past they created clouds and clouds of dust, so you would always try and be as far away from the tanks as possible. They draw the crabs, what they call the crabs, if there is any fire someone is going to try and knock out a tank before they knock out me. You had to be careful where you sat
- 14:30 because they can't see very well out of tanks and they will run over you. We had a bloke by the name of Herbie French, and Herbie was a bit slow, and most of us used to sit up against trees when the tanks were around, because the tanks wouldn't, they didn't have enough bloody trees in Puckapunyal anyway but they wouldn't knock any trees over but Herbie this day decided he would sit out there in the sun, cold miserable day there in November Melbourne, Pukka and along came a tank and nearly ran over Herbie, someone called, "Herbie look out!"
- 15:00 So he got up and moved away and a tank ran over his gear and mangled his rifle. Destroyed Herbie's hoochie [small plastic tent cover] and all of his personal gear. Shaving brush and it all went crunch. They were the sort of things that were part of the whole thing. I can remember when I came back from Vietnam, Townsville late '67
- 15:30 that I was in B Company 6 RAR in Townsville and we flew down to Puckapunyal to do exactly the same for C Squadron who were going to Vietnam in early '68 I can remember what I did in '59 and nine years later we were doing the same thing again. But we were only working with a troop of tanks, four or five tanks instead of the whole fourteen or fifteen whatever it had in the squadron. So your term in the army
- 16:00 deja vu, gee I have been down here before.

**So can you describe one of those exercises from the start of it and what your role would be in those early days?**

Well before you start an exercise you have your briefings and it is normally before daylight starts so you get your gear, get in the truck, and they will take you out and dump you someplace. And they will paint a picture, you have got the

- 16:30 Orange force, they used to be called Red in the old days before the Cold War, they have probably got another name for them now, it then changed to Indonesians, Kampuchians they can't use, friendly is always Blue and the enemy is always Red. So the Red forces were advancing down from Seymour to Puckapunyal, they paint some story up.
- 17:00 And we had to go and defend this hill, so off we go. They would take us by truck so far because in those days they didn't have APCs [Armoured Personnel Carriers] we didn't have any in 113, and then over the hill would come these four or five tanks and we would get into our normal formations and the tank would pull in there and then there would be the bang. Bang, bang, old enemy, the Orange or Red men, would fire a couple of shots. For only one or two shots we would put in a section or platoon attack. It depended on....how much fire
- 17:30 you received depended on how many of the enemy were over the hill. So you would have a company or two of those, and then you would have a company attack where the machine gun would fire and the tanks got in and rumbled in and did their thing. Then you got to the top of the hill and dug in and then the enemy would attack. We didn't have any blank bullets, you had a machine gun that you had a stick on and you had to hit the bullets firing, bang, bang, bang. I tell you we had nothing in those days,
- 18:00 1959, we had zilch. We were wearing World War II boots for Christ's sake, bloody hell! Anyway you then develop into a battalion scenario where the battalion was [(UNCLEAR)], sometimes with tanks sometimes not. I can remember halfway through we became the enemy, Delta Company 2 RAR, the two platoons became the enemy and then we broke down into section groups and stuff like that and then we did the enemy part while
- 18:30 the rest of the battalion did their attack. That's the scenario; for most exercises you do an advance to contact attack, a hill, you stay there whether by company or by battalion. And then the enemy attack and you get information that more and more are building up and so you have to do a withdrawal. They were basically the three phases of warfare in infantry. So that was exercises with the tanks, we got to



learn what tanks could do,

19:00 and you have got to remember that the only people who were using tanks in those days were the Israelis. In a fair dinkum sense and they were bloody good at it. Our tanks, the Centurions, possibly one of the best battle tanks in the world at the time and our guns, of course anti-armour weapons, rockets are no good, but in their time they were good. I think we sold out to the Pakistanis or the Indians

19:30 I am not too sure.

#### **And how did the tanks change the tactics?**

Tank tactics are totally different to infantry; we walk everywhere, we have only got a shirt on and let's face it a 7.62 bullet will go straight through there and go straight through your body. Tanks have got something like eleven inches of armour around them; their main trouble is to protect themselves against other anti-armour weapons. In those days

20:00 American 106 recoilless rifles and we had basic anti-tank bazookas like they had in the Second World War and stuff like that. So the tanks were working on basic World War II desert things and they had to then adapt that to suit infantry. There are two types of scenarios. There is one where there is an infantry advance, where the tanks then have to operate and mutually support the infantry and there are others where the

20:30 tanks would be doing something or they would be the main thrust of the attack and the infantry would protect the tanks from the anti-armour. You have to realise that your three or four arms in the army, infantry, armoured corps.

21:00 Infantry is your main fighting group, they have to take and hold the ground. Every other arm which is tanks, APCs, artillery, choppers, air force etcetera are designed basically to support the infantry. So the most important as far as contact goes, in normal contact like say in Vietnam it was an infantry war.

21:30 Korea was the same, the battle that they had in the desert, Rommel's armour against the British armour and Russians against the Germans in the Second World War around places like Stalingrad and like that are most probably gone for the times because of the new aircraft and helicopters what they have now, smart bombs can take out tanks and tanks don't even know they have been hit,

22:00 So infantry and armour are probably the most important ground troops that you can have and then you had artillery over the top of that which will support both infantry and armour. So that's basically how the army works, the infantry has got to be the spare or the point of your bullet and then the rest of the bullet is armour, artillery and stuff like that. So when you go to war it

22:30 is always the infantry that goes in to secure the ground and do whatever you have to do, go forward or go back or go to the side, whatever the case may be.

#### **What did you like about infantry?**

Good question, it is a place for an individual; you can do your own thing. There is always a challenge. In

23:00 February 1961 we had a CO [Commanding Officer] by the name of Coleman who was an armoured corps fellow, he was going to march 2 RAR from Windsor up the Colo Putty Road to Singleton, that's about a hundred and twenty miles, bloody near two hundred ks [kilometres]. Middle of bloody summer, we had American steel helmets and all of our gear,

23:30 one water bottle, a World War II water bottle to hold a quart of water, just under a litre and we had what they called Mavis Brampston water bags thrown over from the First World War from the light horsemen, a canvas water bag that you hung around the neck of a horse and we had one of those per section .we used to start at three o'clock in the morning, February in Sydney is a bugger of a month

24:00 it is stinking hot, the Colo Putty Road is a long windy road, not very wide and it was gravel made; there are towering cliffs on each side because it follows the Colo River. In the old Fahrenheit days it got up to about a hundred and twenty or thirty [degrees]. Now we had guys dropping off. The challenge was for me to finish the day. You would start at three o'clock and march for ten or twelve hours and finish at three in the afternoon.

24:30 And on around about the third day one of our officers a bloke by the name of Smith, I was in Bravo Company at the time, keeled over and died of heat stroke. This pissed the boys off very much, in fact an interesting sideline is that the battalion doctor, the regimental medical officer was Bill Edwards and he is now the registrar for the Nambour Hospital. And he had personally, I have been advised

25:00 he had personally told Coleman, "Don't do this you will kill some bastard." And poor old Smithy died. Now I have never been in a mutiny but I have been very close. It took us... they then put us on Land Rovers and trucks and took us up to sixteen miles south of Singleton which was our day's target. And I can take you to the place today where the whole battalion hoochied up on the side of the road for the night.

25:30 And at about five or six o'clock the word came back that Dennis Smith had died., no one said it outwardly, "I am not going to go any further." But everyone said the same, "Screw these bastards, I am

not going to kill myself for this bastard." Anyway the word came back at eight o'clock on the road next morning for the last sixteen miles into Singleton. No one said

26:00 a word but at eight o'clock the next morning no bastard was out on the road. There had in fact been a silent mutiny in 2 RAR. Anyway I think the officers realised that there was some serious problems about his whole thing. Just to satisfy the ego of some commanding officer, just to say his troops marched up here, and that's the way we saw it. We couldn't see any physical or any

26:30 other advantage to this, it was an egotistical sort of thing, and they took us up to Singleton in trucks. And there was a similar type of thing in Malaya, about two years later, a bloke by the name of Eric Smith who in fact commanded 7 RAR in Malaya their first tour. Our CO in Malaya was Bruce Stretton ,General Stretton who went up to the Cyclone Tracey disaster, he was our boss. He was away and Eric Smith became battalion commander and

27:00 the word was that he had bet the Pommy officer that he could get his battalion through this swamp in one night. Now he won his bet but he bloody near killed half of us. Bloody officer, I work with officers, I don't particularly like them, they are too egotistical and they will stab each other in the back those bastards just for their own promotion.

27:30 **When you were on the walk and there was the silent mutiny how did the officers react? Was their shouting?**

I don't know, I remember that day but I don't remember the platoon sergeant saying anything. I think it was one of those sorts of things that everyone knew that this was wrong. We didn't mind doing it but when you kill one of your own people just for the sake of being able to say you have done it. In winter time when it wasn't so hot

28:00 no problem, the big problem was we were running out of water by ten or eleven o'clock and you had to go for another four or five hours in the hottest part of the day with no water. And people were frying their brains because we were wearing these bloody stupid American steel helmets. There are some officers that will continue to do this. "It was done in the Second World War so we will do it now." And

28:30 when I think about it this was the days of pentropic when you had a full red cap colonel as CO, he had never had anything to do with, he was an armoured corps officer you know. So he had no idea what he was doing and he was the commander. "My battalion is going to do this." Yeah, pigs arse mate, up your arse..

**Did you actually see Smithy when he was dead?**

No I was,

29:00 he was in a different platoon. In those days of pentropic we had four rifle platoons of forty men each and then we had a support weapons platoon. So the companies were two hundred strong type of thing, we all knew each other because we all went on parade the same time of day and stuff like that. But he was in a different platoon, I lived on one side of the parade ground, he lived on the other, might have been 6 or 7 Platoon

29:30 at the time, I think I was 9. You know you got to know him because he was orderly officer and he would go and close the canteen and you saw him around, not like your own platoon company who you saw every day. The sort of guy you would see every two or three days.

**Was that the first death you knew of while you were in the training part of the army?**

That was the first guy that was killed in training,

30:00 right, and in fact he was the only guy I know that was killed in training. Other people got killed when vehicles rolled over and stuff like that but actually doing some activity in relation to training no. A lot of guys were killed later, but at that stage of the game no. Even in Malaya we didn't lose anyone killed.

**What about casualties in training, many injuries?**

Not normally, you got more casualties playing

30:30 rugby, I lost all of my front teeth I got bloody seven stitches in my hand and near got my ear ripped off. More casualties in sport than...the army's safety is very, very high. You know especially when there is live ammunition around; you can go out with your little black plastic blank bullets and go bang, bang all day. Stuff like that but as far as,

31:00 battle type casualty and training I can't think of anyone being hit in my time in the army and that included Canungra; we used to do Canungra before going to Vietnam and that is all live ammunition. And even in Malaya, even in Vietnam we had a bloke shot in my platoon , we will talk about that later, young Bevan was shot in the shoulder by one of his mates and

31:30 of course the artillery killed four and wounded thirteen in the company but in training I can't remember anyone.

**And how was the footy organised, was there a competition going on?**

There is always competition in the army; there is competition between you two on how you come across because that is human nature you know? You and me is and everyone

32:00 else particularly in the place you work, you're better than the other bastard. If you can be the best you can get more money and go out and drink more beer, whatever the case may be. Anyone who is competitive to the extent that he will stab someone else in the back is normally shafted very quickly. The good thing about the defence force is that peer group discipline is

32:30 the most effective of the lot. If you have got one turd who doesn't do his job, the peer group will sort him out. As NCOs [Non Commissioned Officer] in the army we knew that and you would only have to say, "Private Smith you're not doing the right thing and if you do it again the whole bloody platoon will be bloody." And you think up some drastic thing and you can bet that Private Smith never did that again. Because if he did

33:00 he would most probably get a smack in the mouth and you would see Private Smith with a thick lip or Private Smith's life became so unbearable and within a week or so he would ask for a discharge or transfer out .and this is what I don't understand about today. If you are going to train the army and particularly infantry and you have got to rely on people one hundred percent when you go into action. You have to know the fellow on your left and right and front and back of you is going to do his job.

33:30 That seems to be beside the point; we have this illegal dismissal and political correctness and all of this today. The army and particularly the arms that get involved in combat cannot be equated to any civilian type jobs. It is the same as the police force; they must be sure of the guy on their left and right will do the right thing because you depend on each other.

34:00 If you have people coming in that do not fit in or do not co-operate, you don't want them. they are there for no purpose at all if you look at the end gain, it is like Broncos [football team] going in with thirteen guys and the fullback has got both legs broken, they wouldn't win a game, that's

34:30 the closest analogy I can give for training in the army and relying on one another, it is that crucial.

**So how did you come to have your first experience with going overseas?**

Well I wasn't slotted to go with the advance party for 2 RAR but I was the only one in the company with a passport, and the guy who was meant

35:00 to go over had a car crash. And I was out in the bush and I was in company headquarters with Major Arthur Rowe, old Angry Arthur and he got a radio call; in fact I was his radio operator, and he said, "Have you got a passport?" "Yeah." "Current?" Yeah." And he said, "Right get back to camp; you're going to Malaya in two weeks." I said, "You have got to be bloody joking!" Because you get seven days pre-embarkation leave and all of this sort of jazz see?

35:30 Anyway I ended up going with the advance party on the old bloody [HMAS] Sydney which is a dago [Italian] migrant ship, Italian, you aren't allowed to say dago now.

**You can say anything you like.**

That used to bring all of the migrants out, Italians and all of the European migrants; used to work out of Genoa, the Sydney. Just as a sideline my barber at Brookside

36:00 came out on the Sydney in 1959, the Sydney stayed over in Sydney and then took the advance party over to...there was also a whole lot of British Navy guys on board went back to Singapore and then went back to Genoa. I was sitting down having a haircut and I said, "What ship did you come over on, Aldo?" and he said, "The Sydney." And I said, "Not Lloyd's Sydney" And he said, "Yeah, how do you know?" And I said, "Well, I went over to Malaya on that bastard."

36:30 You should have seen the people in Aldo's bloody hairdresser looking at us. No matter where you go there is only six degrees of separation. Sometimes it comes down to two or three. I went over there; there was a new camp at Terendak which was purposely built for the British 28th Commonwealth Brigade.

**Did you have a stopover in Singapore on the way?**

Yeah we went by Sydney to Singapore and then went by train up to Kamping which is on the Burma/Thai railway, this is the main train

37:00 line and then by trucks into Terendak.

**So did you actually stay over in Singapore?**

Only on the ship. And old Smudger Smith, no it might have been Butch Swanson who in fact died at the same time Dasher Wheatley got his VC, one of the two sergeants...we are going down the gangway see and

37:30 old Smithy has got a big box of French letters [condoms], prophylactics, and it didn't make any difference that he was married and going down there with his wife and two kids he got two of these French letters, these were the sorts of things that used to go on.

**Did they do any lectures on VD [Venereal Disease] prior to going there?**

Not to us, but the main body did. Old Doc Rogers got up and apparently he had the whole battalion in the theatre on the, I think they went over on the Livida which is a sister ship to the Sydney and

- 38:00 he was giving a lecture and apparently the wives had to walk through to go to the laundry for the kids you know and so no one took any notice, Bill Rogers giving a lecture on VD and Christ knows what else apparently he turned around and said, "The best advice I can give you is to hesitate and then masturbate." Just as about three or four sheilas walked past. No one worried about those things, today, oh shock horror, masturbate?
- 38:30 Christ almighty they go out and buy vibrators and God knows what else. That's how people my age in their sixties look back and go, "Our normal society has really gone soft, we have really been hijacked by the academics and the warm and fuzzy people, we are not the same people we were in my generation." Back two generations
- 39:00 fifty years, totally different people. You're totally different to me you know.

**And had you had sexual experiences before you went over; did you know much about sex?**

That's a funny thing; I was over at a Parramatta dance, old Henry Chisholm and he is in one of many photographs you will most likely take later. And I wasn't much for dancing, Henry was always shacking up with some sheila he met at a dance and you know

- 39:30 and he had the car so I was kind of waylaid, so I walked out down the road near the old fire station, Parramatta Road and there was a girl there, Faye Grey, Jesus—how are you pulling stuff out of me now. She went in and bought a chocolate and I was standing outside having a cigarette and she turned around and said, "Do you want a bit?" and I said, "Yeah I will have a bit." Thinking she meant chocolate.
- 40:00 Anyway the long and the short of it was that we went down to Bondi about a fortnight later and there is not much privacy at Bondi so when I tried to have my first naughty [sexual intercourse] with Faye Grey we were up in the rocks on the north side of Bondi Rocks and bugger me dead if before we really went for a grope I looked around and there was about forty kids watching us. So that stuffed that up. No I never had a real excitable sexual
- 40:30 experience. Even in Malaya you pay your ten or fifteen dollars, whatever it may be, and it is wham bang, have a wash over there and get out of my room because the next one is coming.

**We will talk about that a little bit more.**

## **Tape 4**

**00:30 Tell me about your first impressions of the base that you ended up at?**

Terendak was a brand new base purposely built to house a complete Commonwealth Brigade. 28th Brigade, it had a British battalion and supporting troops, an Australian battalion and a New Zealand battalion. Now it was set north of Malacca at a place called Terendak

- 01:00 and it included the beach area and all of this sort of thing on the Malaccan Strait, if you go across to Sumatra. It was about ten or fifteen minutes drive out of Malacca itself if you are going north. So we had a pretty substantial town there. Tampion Railway Station was about an hour's convoy speed away and you were about ninety miles south of Kuala Lumpur.
- 01:30 A brand new camp, very tropically designed, no windows only shutters, no trees because they cleared the jungle and your back fence in fact was the primary jungle you had to train in and the first job we had to do and there was about twenty-eight or thirty of us in the advance party was to plant about two and a half thousand bloody gum trees.
- 02:00 So besides setting up the camp and counting blankets and getting things done you also had to plant trees. Well gum trees in Malaya in two years go from seedling to half a metre high were fifteen or twenty metres high, great things. No koalas or anything like that. The advance party, we also had certain responsibilities to educate the local people
- 02:30 which included the brothels as well as the local barmen, that if you wanted our business your beer had better be cold because the first time I went for a beer was in the Valiant Hotel and it was just a warm beer and I said, "No, I want it cold." and so they put a chunk of ice in it. And this was going on; they had never seen any Australians; only British tourists and the Poms don't know how to drink beer anyway. So by the time the battalion arrived the camp was pretty well set up.

**03:00 How did the pub owners and brothel keepers respond to you giving them that kind of...?**

Well they were getting good advice; how to make money, you never got any freebies, you never get

anything free from Asians anyway.

### **How did you communicate with them?**

Oh they all spoke English and eventually you learn to answer, speak Malay or whatever it is, there is

- 03:30 no difference between Malay and Indonesian as far as the language. If you could help them make money they treated you a bit special and by that I mean you didn't have to wait for your next beer, they would have it there ready for you. You're going to pay the buggers anyway. It was quite good going around breaking the ice and
- 04:00 stuff like that. Battalion moved in and so did the Poms and we had the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, KOYLIS, who as a unit were just about completely banned from England. What happened at some stage of the game in the Indian Wars they broke into a nunnery and raped the nuns and the Queen had
- 04:30 banned the unit for ninety-nine years or something like that, the Yorkshire men, anyway they were coming near the end of their ban. We got paid a lot more than them, the British Army were National Servicemen in those days; we were full time regular army and we were reasonably well paid. The poor old Pom, particularly National Servicemen, you could always tell he was a national because he had sandshoes on, a pair of jeans and a white shirt and that did create a fair amount of friction.
- 05:00 There was quite a few blues but they were always on the losing end because if you picked an Aussie and there was a couple of Kiwis around, the Kiwis were in there, the only time we fought the Kiwis was over football and we're still doing that forty years later, so it doesn't change. But as far as the Poms go they were on the losing end, they got the dirty end of the stick all of the time. It was a good experience; we did a lot of work in the jungle. We went up to the Malay-Thai border,
- 05:30 because although the Emergency had been officially declared over August 31st, my birthday in 1960, there was still remnants of Communist terrorists running around the Thai-Malay border and still causing bad news. So 2 RAR went up there and A Company had a contact, shot two CTs [Communist Terrorists]
- 06:00 hit them but they never found them, they went off in the jungle and probably died. So they were still around.

### **What did you know about the Communist threat?**

It is funny; during the Japanese occupation a bloke by the name of Stirling who was the father of SAS in the long range desert whatsiname, created a clandestine enemy against the Japanese and recruited local,

- 06:30 there was a fair amount of racism in Malaya; still is. Although it is a mixing pot of Indians, Malays, Chinese, Tamils, the Malays are still very strong and they didn't like the Chinese of course because they were making money. Chin Peng and his band were the ones recruited by Stirling and of course when it was all over they wanted independence not dissimilar to what
- 07:00 happened in Indochina. Of course the Brits came back in again like the French went into Indochina. So you had the independence thing and you have got to consider that in the '50s there was a lot of that sort of thing. The French colonies in Africa, Algiers and Morocco were going through the same independence, nationalist sort of thing, the
- 07:30 terrorists in South Africa were playing up. So when you sit down and think about it, it was a common thing around with the local people getting pissed off with the colonials. So with the Second World War over, Chin Peng decided he would murder the odd British rubber tree planter and all that, that created what they called the Emergency which brought the British Army out in force and being Commonwealth we joined them.
- 08:00 And then there was the Communists terrorists. Then in Christmas 1962 I was on leave in Singapore when the call came out that the Indonesians were causing a lot of trouble because we had come into this Malaysia grouping thing and the Indonesians didn't like that, they owned half of Borneo, Kalimantan and so they put an army in there and were going into
- 08:30 Brunei and all of this and of course the British Army because they were also protectorates, British Army and Royal Marines went over there, we weren't involved, when I say we, 2 RAR wasn't involved because we were coming to the end of our two year trip and in fact we came home early and 3 RAR went over there early to get involved and the 3rd Battalion and the 4th Battalion and I think it was
- 09:00 '65 or '66, what they called a Confrontation, didn't want to call it a war, this pussyfooting around, one mob against the other and you're going to shoot each other; it is a war. So you know that I missed out there, although I did an operation up on the Thai border, only once because the second time I was in Thailand when the battalion went up there for the second time. We had been trained to do this sort of thing and we were bloody
- 09:30 good at it. We proved that in Borneo. When the 3rd Battalion went to Borneo you talk to the guys and

they went across the border and they used to shoot the Indonesians across the border. 'Bluey' Byers got a Military Cross for an ambush; I think he killed twenty or thirty in one ambush. SAS, a very good friend of mine, 'Rock' Hudson, who was with us in Malaya came home and then went across with 2 Squadron SAS I think it was;

10:00 disappeared, they used to go up to four hundred miles into Kalimantan things like that. It was a war, they carried live ammunition and they were out to kill as many as they could. And I am sure General Wiranto was very lucky, he would have been a captain about the time and when the Australians went into East Timor and General Wiranto was the boss of the Indonesian Army I am bloody sure General Wiranto remembered what happened in Kalimantan and said, "Stuff this." And got out.

10:30 And I am a firm believer that is why Indonesia or the TNI [Tentara Nasional Indonesia - Indonesian Armed Forces] never had a go at the Australians in East Timor, simply because of what happened in the Borneo confrontation and also Malaya because they did land on the Malayan mainland and 3 Battalion went out and took them out very quickly.

### **What are the highlights of your experience in Malaya?**

There is quite a few of them.

11:00 The first, I hadn't been in the country long, I was in the battalion rugby team and we went up to Perai which was near the border to play the 'one and three pennies'; now they were the first Anglicans and you have got to roll your tongue back to the money in those days—one shilling and threepence, one and a bleak, and a three so they were known as one and three pennies. We beat the Poms and then of course we all got on the piss [got drunk] in Perai; Perai was where the

11:30 Australians were and the Kiwis were during the Confrontation and you had the Sydney Bar and the Boston Bar and the Sydney Bar was where the Australians drank and the Boston Bar was where the Kiwis drank. So there was a bit of nostalgia, homecoming for some of the guys in the rugby team. And apparently the trick was you had to drink all night in a certain drain and then stand up in the morning and have a piss in the monsoon drain. So there was about eight of us stayed up all night, got pissed and had a piss in the monsoon drain at sunrise, tradition.

12:00 Another tradition was apparently in Perai, they had different trishaws. In Singapore they have got trishaws with a side car, in Perai they used to sit two wheels and the front and one at the back and at Perai you had a hill and it came down and crossed the bridge where the Perai River went under and on the right hand side if I remember rightly was a pass and guard. What you do is you say,

12:30 "Trishaw!" And there is always some there quickly to earn fifty cents. "No no my drive." And you go down this hill and it was the driver and the owner in the front seat and you would mount the footpath and run the whole thing into the river and the trick was to jump off before you went into the river so sometimes you ended up in the river and sometimes you ended up holding onto a tree on the bank. But it cost a fair amount of money to repair the bike but shit it was good fun.

### **13:00 What about the first brothel experience, what was that like?**

I will go into one of the previous ones first; the battalion was away on some exercise and I remained behind for some sporting activity, might have been rugby. And I was in the Happy Land Hotel; a bunch of Kiwis [New Zealanders] came in, we all knew each other and they said, "Mate do you like screwing a round eye?"

13:30 You're a round eye. "Yeah why not?" "You must say you're a Kiwi." "Okay." and we go around to this married quarters and pull up at this house and I knew the bloke's wife, I knew the bloke who lived in the house, I had never met the missus. And I thought, 'Jesus Christ what am I going to do here?' So I go in and she says, "G'day." and I say, "G'day." and the Kiwis have bought a couple of cartons of piss [alcohol] and they drive around in big American

14:00 cars, the old Maori always drives around in big American cars. And she said, "I haven't seen you before?" And I said, "I'm Bob." She said, "Where are you from?" "Auckland." And she said, "What's the main street of Auckland." I wouldn't have a friggin clue so she said, "Piss off you Aussie bastard." So while the Maoris were screwing around I was sitting out in the car drinking their piss. I can remember going into a brothel and they had a girl who followed the Australians

14:30 down from Perai and they used to call her 'shovel face' and she used to call herself Miss Cheval and so help me she had a face like a shovel, square up here and round and that's how she got her nickname and she was in her thirties and I am young buck at twenty and I knew what end was what but I hadn't had a lot of practice because my first episode in Bondi was a disaster and the only other girls I knew were back home, too close to home and you didn't worry about that too much, not

15:00 when you're sixteen, seventeen. So it was quite an experience and what really got me was when it was all over she got up and washed herself off and told me to get out of the room because there was someone else waiting. So much for my bloody ten bucks, so I used to try and do it for love instead of money but it was very hard to find in a place like Malaya to do it more for love. So I probably had half of the experiences of the other blokes.

15:30 We had a bloke by the name of 'Gruesome', poor old 'Gruesome', he had been circumcised and he had a

dick that looked like an old worn out witchetty grub. Blue head, wrinkles, folds of skin all over the place and that's where he got the nickname 'Gruesome'. And he had never had a naughty, as soon as he would drop his tweeds the sheila would back off and say, "No."

16:00 And he was quite frustrated so Christmas '61 we thought we would get him a present. Four or five of us all threw in a few dollars and we decided we would throw in a hundred pound Australian which is six hundred and eighty dollars Malay and we would go to that much. So we went into a brothel he hadn't been to, there was a few around and "Pick a sheila, 'Gruesome'." "That one over there, she looks beaut." "Come over here." See?

16:30 And so we said, "We will pay five hundred dollars for you to shack up with him." "Oh lot of money." "Yeah, cherry boy see, first time." "Okay." Well she took the five hundred dollars and we still had a hundred and eighty to get pissed with. Anyway poor old 'Gruesome' was out in five minutes and we said, "What's wrong?" and he said, "She took one look at my dick and said no way." "You poor bloody bastard." Anyway we got our five hundred bucks back and old Mama said, "Try another girl." "No, that's the only one he wants."

17:00 The rest were too ugly. We didn't particularly worry too much about it; if your testosterone was up and it was handy you went for it. Most of the time paying money to screw here and there, even in Vietnam, a couple of funny things happened in Vietnam that I look back on. I should never have put myself in the position in the first place. I went into brothels but never

17:30 had a naughty in Vietnam, that's how bad it was. I never had a load of jack [VD] in my life and if I was going to get it, I was going to get it in Malaya, so I sort of backed off a fair bit when it came to the brothels. Waited until I got home, that's when I really started.

**So what are some of the others things you did, two years is a long time? Did you miss home?**

18:00 See I would have liked to see the Commonwealth Games in Perth in 1960 but I didn't. When the Commonwealth Games were on the [HMS] Ark Royal visited Fremantle; the Ark Royal was the British aircraft carrier. It was not the aircraft carrier of the same name that went down in the Falklands but the Ark Royal is a famous aircraft carrier, was in the British Navy. And Mum and Dad being good Poms they decided that they would entertain an Irishman from Belfast so I get a letter

18:30 in Malaya, "You have got to go down to the Ark Royal to meet Tommy bloody Flaherty whoever". Okay. I had no idea; I had been in Singapore all of the time for leave and so I go down there and I had some time off. Now the Ark Royal has got five and a half thousand bloody sailors on it. And about four gangways up to this thing. I had his

19:00 name, I didn't know his mess or what his job was. So I go up the first gang plank and see the sailor and say, "I am looking for Tommy or Timmy O'Flaherty." He checked the book, "Not here mate". So I went to all four gang planks and no Tim O'Flaherty. So I went back to Neeson and got pissed at Neeson. And so while I am sitting there a couple of Australian sailors came in and a couple of Pommy sailors came in and

19:30 you could look at their tally and the name of their ship. So I am sitting with some Australian sailors and they are talking about Poms and how useless they are and none have got fathers because they don't know their father and there is a bunch of Pommies sitting behind not game to say anything because there is more Aussies in the bar. Anyway I went back on HMAS Quiberon which is one of the frigates they had in there and the sailor said to me

20:00 "I am going to get you some bedding, don't smoke, there is no smoking." So black as the inside of a cows guts, I go in there and he throws a couple of blankets, pissed out of my brain didn't know what I was doing. Woke up in the morning you know when you're dry and feel like you swallowed a cat, and I stagger out and unclipped the door and I am sleeping in the magazine for the anti-submarine bloody bombs, you know.

20:30 "You bastards." I am walking through this ship and "Where bloody so and so?" "Who?" I had even forgotten his name from the night before, anyway he eventually found me and we had some greasy bacon and eggs and went back out on the piss again. But I can remember a New Zealand cruiser came in. Might have been Christmas '62 about the time of the confrontation. And the Britannia Club which was a big club in Singapore where everyone

21:00 used to go and get pissed and try and pick up. We had gone to the dance and we couldn't get a dance and the Kiwi sailors came on off this cruiser and we said, "You're wasting your time in there mate." "Why?" "You're a bloody Kiwi, same as us, bloody Poms don't dance." Anyway, "We dance or no bastard dances." See? So we all walk in and sit down at a table and ordered our beer.

21:30 Anchor or Tiger and sat down there and we watched these New Zealanders walk in and they went and they never had a dance, so you know it must have been fifteen or twenty minutes and one of the Maoris stood in the middle of the dance floor and said, "All Pommy sheilas are sluts!" Well! Guys got up so these ten or fifteen guys back to back and they really into it you know, we ran out the door, all of the taxis were lined up outside and

22:00 they said, "What's going on?" "Oh big fight, Kiwi and Pommies." Everyone stood on the cab looking in the window and by that time the shore patrol arrived it was all over. But at the same Britannia Club,

Buddy Lee a good friend of mine he was at Long Tan with me and he got wounded, now lives at Hervey Bay. He was in Charlie Company and we both played rugby and any time we went on leave normally Buddy Lee he was of

- 22:30 Kanaka parentage, he was from New Caledonia I think it is and we were sitting in a little bar in Singapore and the Yank navy was in there, cruiser and the American marine a young fellow, didn't even shave couldn't have been more than seventeen and of course we're all older, we're in our twenties and smart arses, sitting in there and there is this Yank marine and Buddy said, "God Damn are you a marine or something?"
- 23:00 "Oh yes, I am a United States Marine Corps." "How about that. Well trained?" "Oh yes." "What do you do?" "Oh we protect the Admiral." "That's interesting, on that tin can you call a ship." And that burred up the American. And we had a few drinks, drinking Lemonhart rum in those days, nothing like Bundaberg, nothing good. And we get him half pissed and in walks a sailor off
- 23:30 one of the Australian ships and he has got a bag see? And he sits down, has a Lemonhart. "What have you got in the bag?" "Oh the ship's mascot." And he pulls it out and it is a bloody carpet snake about six foot long and the marine takes off. Big brave American Marine Corps guy and he is gone, he bolted. The sheilas took off, we couldn't get a drink, we had to help ourselves over the bar. Anyway this was ten or eleven o'clock in the morning and we were getting more and more pissed and we stayed there all day, we had
- 24:00 the poor bloody carpet snake with a cigarette in his mouth and pouring rum down its throat; the snake is going into convulsions. It was dark I don't know what time, anyway the sailor says "I want to dance with some white sheila." "Come down to Naffi, come down to Bitbar we'll show you. My first time in Singapore and some bastard on the ship said, "You're a junior sailor, you're responsible for the ship's mascot, go get a mouse or two and feed it."
- 24:30 Fair dinkum. This guy was old enough to know what he should get but just young enough to know when he is being conned. So we walk into the Britannia Club and he walks in with this bag with the carpet snake in it see? So we have a quick feed and he could hear the music start. "Let's go and have a dance see?" I will never forget this, the place was
- 25:00 crowded, Friday or Saturday night, and this guy walked around about fifteen tables, never got a dance. No one would even talk to him, Australian and pissed, who would want to dance with a pissed Australian? Chubby Checker was on, Lets Twist Again and this fellow gets up and he says, "Fuck this!" And up he went and threw the guy off singing, "All you Pommies are fucking bastards."
- 25:30 And with this he threw the bag on the floor; well no one took any notice until the snake crawled out of the bag. Straight through the glass doors, the Pommies if they couldn't get out they would pick up a chair and break the door to get out. He quickly retrieved the snake and jumped into a taxi and went around to another bar. We must have terrorised the Poms in Malaya. But it was all in good fun.
- 26:00 **You were saying before you had a fight with a Pom?**
- Yeah I didn't start it but it was in the, can't remember now. We were in there watching a Chinese floor show, you know singers that sing funny and all of this and there was a bit of a commotion behind us and I looked around and there was old 'Tar Brush' Heaview, he is now in New Zealand and he was in admin company
- 26:30 and in the battalion rugby team and there is two big West Indian guys and this bloody white Pommy bastard, so I walk over and said, "What's going on?" And 'Tar Brush' said "Whatever happened see. They were West Indians but they were black Poms, right, and I said, "Look if you start anything the red caps" they were the military police, "are around and you will get beaten anyway." And with that a guy tried to kick me in the groin.
- 27:00 So anyway I went down to cover myself and a guy had a big bottle of vodka in his hand see and he tried to hit me across the shoulder and behind me in this hotel which is upstairs, is around about half a metre wide, this passage way, and you came down I think sixteen stairs and you had a bit of a landing and another sixteen stairs down into the street.
- 27:30 The footpath was about two metres wide and then you had a monsoon drain which was about a half metre wide and a metre deep. And I thought, "Shit Bob what are you going to do?" So I grab two legs and I run down these stairs backwards. And I fell over and I got up down the bottom with two Poms on top of me and I was covered in blood and thought, "Shit what is going on here?" Anyway the first guy I saw I hit him as hard as I could and put him out across the footpath and into the monsoon drain
- 28:00 and the other guys was screaming like buggery, "Oh you knifed me!" And I went upstairs and I was covered in blood, grazed down my face and the girls said, "What did you do?" and there was one girl there who had been a long time around Australians said, "Come on out the back, clean you up." And a bloke by the name of Brian Joyce was in our company; I threw him a few dollars and said, "Go and get me another shirt." This is ten o'clock at night you can go and buy a shirt off the street anywhere.
- 28:30 So he went down and got me a shirt and this sheila, I can't think of her name, she cleaned me up and put my shirt on and threw the old shirt in the garbage bin, blood everywhere. And the red caps arrived, that's the military police, with the Australian MP [Military Police] and they were shining their torches in



the auditorium you see looking for the guy that bloody, I found out later, knifed this Pommy bastard. Anyway we had a line up in the battalion looking for the

29:00 guy who pulled this knife on this pommy bloke and the story was that one of the guys that I grabbed pulled out his flick blade knife and tried to spear me in the eye and all he did was open his mate's leg up from the inside of the groin to down past the knee. That's where all of the blood came from. I never volunteered for this, "It wasn't me." Walking up and down six hundred guys trying to pick out one, we all had the same haircut. Anyway two days before I was due to come

29:30 home I went to one of the Australian MPs came to the battalion see and I knew him because if you got stuck you could always get a lift home and I called him Blue. "Blue, did you ever come across that bastard who bloody pulled a knife on that prick?" "What do you know about it?" "Well I was the bloke involved but I never had a knife." "You weren't picked out?" "No." "You didn't step forward." "How stupid do you think I am?"

30:00 That was about the only decent blue I got into over there, there were a couple of small ones that didn't last but really damaging that one. But if you did the right thing there was always someone to help you. I knew the staff in a particular bar, we never ever caused any trouble in there, the Poms were really never welcome because

30:30 of this type of thing. So we went back there, "Oh good fight Bob, you certainly cleaned that bastard up." We had a bloke by the name of Howitson, he most probably had the best idea, he cottoned onto a prostitute and bought her a girl; you could buy a girl over there and the idea was the prostitute would look after this girl and when the time came and she was too old the girl would take over and once a month you would see them going down the road

31:00 with a bag of rice in the trishaw and he used to shack up in her house and everything. He had an order on every time he was in town, us fools would look in bars for girls, when you think about it, pretty bloody stupid. Still the bloody same for Christ's sakes, go up to the surf club here and there are guys buying girls, drinking all night and still not cracking, nothing has changed in forty years.

31:30 **Did you ever get sick in Malaya?**

Only from the grog occasionally; I used to drink gin and pineapple juice. I can drink a bottle of rum today, if I put my mind to it, if I have got a couple of good mates around we can go through a couple of bottles of rum no problems, they call that post traumatic stress when we do that. We used to go to the Happy Land Hotel and everything was on credit, so you buy a bottle of

32:00 whatever you wanted and when you finished for the day you would put a mark on where your whatsiname was. And then I found out later Mr Li, old Slim, would take a bit out of my bottle and someone else and fill it up with water. I can remember one night drinking at the Happy Land hotel and blokes got pissed and he dived over; it was right on the beach deep water, and we were sitting outside getting a bit of breeze off the Malacca Straits and

32:30 next thing you know he has taken his shirt off down to his jocks, "What are you doing?" "I am going home." And with that he dived into the fucking ocean; it took us half an hour to get a boat, we eventually rescued him he was about a mile and a half a mile off shore heading for Australia.

**Did you come across any Confrontation in that time?**

Who with, Indonesia? No it hadn't started then. Indonesia got stropopy late '62.

33:00 **You didn't come across any CTs in your time in Malaya?**

No we went off chasing them but the CTs were very lucid; they had thousands of guys in the jungle in the '50s and you could go out for twenty-eight days and not see one. Very similar to what Vietnam ended up being. You could go out on operation for two weeks and not see a bastard.

33:30 Walking around with all of this gear; infantry work is ninety-eight percent boredom and two percent intense activity. But you have got to be instantly ready for the intense activity.

**So can you tell us about one of those operations, how many were there and what you did, even though you didn't see anyone?**

Well the first time and I didn't go the second time when we went to Thailand; they sent an advance party and a good friend of mine from

34:00 Bundaberg, 'Snowy' Curtis, went up with the advance party. And he was to lead us in. Now we had walked for hours and we had crossed a particular tributary of this river dozens of times and when you're carrying seven or ten days rations on your back or whatever it gets a bit bloody boring; used to stop every ten or so. And then Snow realised, "Hang on, I shouldn't be here; I have come up the wrong tributary".

34:30 So he turned around and go back again; twenty yards behind the last man are these footprints and the water had started to seep in, there was a herd of bloody elephants following us and we never heard them or saw them. These sorts of things. Another time a bloke by the name of 'Lochie' Cluff who was in

West Australia last I knew. You stop every hour for ten minutes and have a breather and a smoke and drink of water and all. We had walked

- 35:00 up through this bloody creek and in that creek was this python, it must have been about six metres long and nobody seen it, but 'Lochie' Cluff saw it and he started throwing rocks at it. And of course he eventually hit the python and it came out of the water. We had an RSM [regimental sergeant major] by the name of Metson at the time and he was lying out like this, trying to rest and this bloody snake went across his body and over his left shoulder and of course
- 35:30 Metson freaked out. And he went home, we don't know if somebody got his daughter pregnant or he went home after this snake. But he went home and was replaced by the CSM [company sergeant major] of Charlie Company by the name of Bill Turley. But we also had a bloke who has only recently died, Mick Owens, up in Townsville, he died of sugar. And Mick was the only man I ever met who could talk in Morse code. He stuttered that bad
- 36:00 it used to take him five minutes to say his name. He was a top bloke .We spent many hours playing seven card stud poker and old 'Clacker' Sullivan, 'Clackers' was called 'Clackers' because of the size of his testicles. We had a name for everybody.
- 36:30 The Ghurkhas were the enemy on this company attack up this hill, it was a steep hill covered in jungle and vines and you have got to try and keep a straight line as you progress up this hill. Mick's a corporal, and everyone had a compass and you had to follow this compass bearing to keep on line. And Mick is going, "Keep up on the right, drop off on the left." and all of this and he pushed this vine apart and a big python went "Arghh" and breathed out in Micks face. Mick was first to the top of the hill and he couldn't talk and they carted him out in a helicopter, he was absolutely rat shit.
- 37:00 These are the sorts of things that happen. We came home in '63, in 1963, there was also Sky High which was an exercise down the back of Singleton, at a place called Gosford's [(UNCLEAR)]. Mick went back to Sydney I came back to Brisbane so I was still with 2 RAR and Mick had gone down to 1 RAR at Holsworthy and we were the enemy, 2 RAR
- 37:30 were the enemy to 1 RAR. So we started at a place called Mushroom Flats; that was our rear echelon, our base echelon see? And 1 RAR had to march past us to get to their trucks or train or whatever. We knew Mick, because half of the guys with us with 2 RAR in Malaya had come home to Holsworthy because that's where they had come from. And we could hear Mick, he pulled up, he was platoon sergeant at this stage of the game, "Okay, going past that 2 RAR scum, make sure you look like 1 RAR."
- 38:00 Hype, getting the blokes psyched up. And bloody 'Lochie' Cluff, the bloke I was telling you about before, he had a passion for snakes; he had killed a great big brown snake see and we were sitting on a lot of windrow, they had cleared the road off and stacked all of this timber up. And we sit in there and we knew Mick was coming around the corner and so we knew he would be on our side of the road see so we all moved down closer to the road and Cluff has got this bloody dead snake. "Left, right, left, right To the f-f-f-front."
- 38:30 And we're "Good on you Mick give it to the 1 RAR, bloody blue poofters." We were giving these people all the bloody shit in the world and Cluff gets the snake and whirls it around his head and lets it go and it wraps around Micks neck. Well, poor old Mick once again fucking speechless. This was a good thing about being in the defence forces in my time, I don't know about now, but in my time there was always some wag that would do something, scare the crap out of
- 39:00 everyone, it broke the monotony. And when we went to war in Vietnam you had the same, different people but the same philosophy on life .At the worst time someone would say something and "Break, build." and that's one of the Australian idioms that no one seem to understand why. There is always some bastard, you go to,
- 39:30 take Buddy Lee and I, we went and saw Hatari!, you know that bloody John Wayne catching animals and all of that and we had seen it for about the second or third time in Singapore and I don't know if you would ever see it again but have you ever see Red Buttons [Hollywood actor] milking a Billy goat and he is supposed to be getting milk and after a while he goes "Ewww." you know. And Buddy turns around and says, "Yeah
- 40:00 you bastard, you have been a bloody poofter all of your life." This is in the darkened theatre. We went and saw The Ten Commandments, and it goes through and on the Seventh Day God said, "Let there be light and there was light." And Buddy said, "And he could see for fucking miles." Little things that you know when you get to a situation like this, you remember these things.
- 40:30 **They're good memories those ones.**
- These are part...these crazy bastards who wore green uniform and I can always go and have a beer with any one of them, that's the good thing about being ex-army or navy. I don't know much about the air force.

00:30 **So you had a lot of good times in Malaya?**

I had some great times in Malaya, most of our time was spent in Malaya but we did do, B Company, my company, did do one exercise across to Thailand in '63 and that was, we flew from Singapore to Udon which was a base that the Australian Air Force had occupied which was over towards

01:00 Cambodia, Mekong River, Laos but in fact during the Vietnam War became a very important United States Air Force base, but in 1963 it was just the Australians and their Sabres that used to fly in and out of Butterworth and part of Butterworth rotation and a Thai Air Force, Australian based, and we went over there for an exercise with SEATO [South East Asian Treaty Organization], and there were

01:30 Poms and Kiwis there. So there was a company from the Brits and Australians and Kiwis went into various parts of Thailand to do their own thing and also to win the hearts and minds, hand out books and pencils to the kids at school and all of this. And we in fact carried in five live rounds of ammunition and we walked along the Mekong River looking into Cambodia or Laos whatever it was at the time.

02:00 I don't know what for, I think just to make out, but that was an interesting four or five weeks because we had three or four weeks around Udon doing exercises and working with the Australian Air Force working, brining in bombing targets and all of this sort of thing and like most army guys you visit the local village and get to know the people. At one stage

02:30 there were that many French letters on the airport tarmac that the air force had to come over and tell us, "Stop screwing the sheilas on the tarmac because the jets are sucking up these half filled French letters into the engines." And I can remember one morning just before breakfast I was sitting on the dunny which was just on the side of this concrete airstrip and two Thai Air Force planes came down and the first bloke stopped and the second bloke didn't and he cut the first guy in half

03:00 right behind the cockpit and of course a hundred and fifty Australians cheered and yahooped and reckoned it was the best thing that happened in a long time. We went out and met the people. And I can still remember, "Meehon Ma" which is Thai for "Hello beautiful lady" and we picked the ugliest bloody sheila chewing betel nut, red all over her lips, "Meehon ma". and she reckoned it was great, "Kiko yeah, eh hol".

03:30 But we did try to crack onto a few of the good looking Thai girls but it wasn't really worth it in the end, more important things to do.

**What was the purpose of that trip?**

That was there purely as part of the SEATO. The navy had their exercises in WINPAC[?]; SEATO exercises were never ever done and this was the first one, the South East Asia Treaty Organization agreement was created in the '50s I think after the Korean War. This was

04:00 the first time to my knowledge that they had an exercise. They brought all of the elements of all of the countries involved in SEATO into one place and they picked Thailand. It was the King of Thailand's birthday at the same time. So we had to go back into Saigon and line the streets while the King paraded in his Cadillac.

04:30 And the crazy part about it, that was 1963, in 1974 I was posted to the Royal Military College and who was there but the son of the King of Thailand, Maha Vajiralongkorn, but that's another story. It was purely a show the flag type of thing.

**How did you find the cultural experience different in Thailand from Malaya?**

Not really, all Thais, Malays, Indonesians are very similar. It is when you get further north into Cambodia, Laos you get the Chinese influence.

05:00 But the people down in say South East Asia are basically all the same. They live in houses off the ground, they have got their paddocks with their rice fields, they eat fish, eggs and rice. The Thais are friendlier, they are, the Thais are a different culture in as

05:30 much as they are still very jealous of their own ethnic environment and things like that, but they were never ever colonised by the Poms or the French. And they have been...Siam, which became Thailand, has always been a kingdom and they have always been an independent people and will always be an independent people. So in that way I think you take the

06:00 Malaysian people, they have gone through the war and Japanese occupation which didn't happen in Thailand and then the Poms came back and the white masters ruling over the whatsiname, that's why we just had twenty years of trouble with this Mohamad Mahathir [former Prime Minister of Malaysia], whatever his name is. The guy that hates Paul Keating [former Prime Minister of Australia] and every guy that comes out of Australia. That wasn't the case when I was there in 1963,

06:30 in Thailand they were a little bit softer people I think a little bit more genuine. Because of their history.

**During the time you had in Malaya what significant things do you think you learnt if anything as a soldier?**

I could practice what I had learnt in Australia which then came into

07:00 real life when I went to Vietnam. You can run around the Australian scrub all day and it doesn't look any different. You go across to East Timor and they have got the same gum trees and the same cockatoos in East Timor, it is all part of Australian history. You go to a place like Thailand which is a lot like Vietnam, all paddy fields and bamboo whereas Malaya is primarily jungle like New Guinea. You walk five yards out

07:30 and disappear in a green curtain. So Malaya was very good for me personally because of the skills I attained and developed as a junior NCO that then looked after me when I went to Vietnam and subsequently.

**So you came back from Malaya in '63 and when did you actually meet Beverly?**

08:00 Well I came back from Malaya July/August of '63, went on leave to Perth to see Mum and Dad, came back and we were all drinking in the Majestic Hotel and there was a pretty snazzy looking blonde sheila and I thought I will buy her a drink. It was about the time we were going away for an exercise as enemy for 1 RAR down to the Coricudgy, Gosford area where I was talking about

08:30 snakes. And I went up and she had a black bra strap and let's face it, anyone who wore black or red in those days was a pretty hot sort of chick. So I went up and said, "Do you always wear black underwear?" she was with a mate of mine, Harry Smitser, and she looked at me and she ignored me. This doesn't happen very often, so I said, "Can I buy you a drink?" "She said, "I drink scotch." And I said, "Well I only buy beer."

09:00 And I thought, "Bugger you." and I sat back down again. Anyway we then went away and a good mate of mine, I didn't even know her name but 'Smiley' Miles, old Harry Smitser was trying to crack on to Beverly see? And Smiley was so impressed she wrote her name on his arm see and anyway two weeks later he hadn't washed his arm, her name was still on his arm. And I said, "Who was that bloody sheila you were with that night in the pub?" "Oh that's Beverly, I am going to see her when I go back." So

09:30 I had never owned a car going onto twenty-four and never owned a car, and so I said, "Well I am going to save my money on this trip and I am going to buy a car to win Beverly over." So this is what I did and ninety pound, a hundred and eighty dollars, went out and bought a Mark II Zodiac which is a pretty swish old sort of car, two tone green, heater, no air conditioner in those days and I went back and saw Beverly the next pay day. We live for

10:00 three days a month, get paid on the Thursday and broke by Monday and that's how your social life continued. So I drove in in my flash car and parked opposite the Majestic Hotel which is now a one way street and went in there and there is Beverly. "Can I buy you a drink?" "Only drink scotch." "I am not going to buy you a bloody drink." Anyway I think she drank a beer or I bought a scotch but anyway I took her home and dropped her off see?

10:30 She didn't know I had a car, this was all part of the plan see. This was on the Friday night and I said, "I will pick you up from work tomorrow." And she said, "Okay." And she worked at Oxford House which is now MIM House in Ann Street, you know the little Presbyterian church opposite that is a private hotel and Beverly was the receptionist see? I said, "What time do you finish?" "Half past eleven." So I pull up at ten past eleven see and sit

11:00 and wait, being someone with honour and integrity, ten to twelve came, no Beverly. Ten past twelve, been there for a finking hour. And anyway I go in and see a bloke who owned the hotel, was a bloke by the name of Hal, "Where is Beverly?" "Oh she left at half past ten, she wasn't feeling well." That rotten bitch, but no one had telephones in those days see? I didn't have a telephone in

11:30 my house until I left the army, now I have got four of the bastards. So I knew I dropped her off and I knew she lived in a flat up there somewhere and I think the flat number was two, so I go up there and I knock and she answers and I say, "Well thanks very much." "Who are you?" "Well that's bloody lovely, I was supposed to meet you." "Oh that's right." I said, "Come on, get dressed."

12:00 And she said, "Oh, I am not feeling too good." And I said, "Don't bullshit to me, I can see you're okay, come on we will go up to Redcliffe." Now Redcliffe in those days was a day's bloody trip for Christ sake. We went and had lunch in some hotel, Peninsula Hotel, and there was some old fellow there and he said, "Oh you two look like you should get married." And this is the first time I have taken her out. Anyway this is what we did, her fatal mistake was to hand iron my greens and I moved in. And in those days you had to get special permission to live out in the army.

12:30 For me to shack up with Beverly which was a big thing in the '60s, cohabitation was not the norm, I had to write a letter to my CO [commanding officer] and say, "Sir, my young brother who is seventeen or eighteen has come across to Brisbane. My parents expect me to look after him. I want to secure a flat so we have some place to live. I seek permission to live out." And the CO was a great bloke and said, "Certainly." And you got a bit of extra money to live out see?

13:00 So that's how we got shacked up and I think I was on five pound a week in those days and things just got on from there, got married '64, married forty years.

### **What sort of wedding did you have?**

Well it was funny you know; the battalion wasn't going out on exercise and my mates were all going to come along and get pissed with me, because you have got to work these things out three months in advance

13:30 and all of a sudden the battalion is going bush. I have made all of these arrangements, got the rings and everything else, and that's another story, you bought the rings on a fortnight's pay. Because you only lived on fourteen pounds a week. So I had to get time off the exercise to get married and you know that didn't go over too well but that was the army in those days, family and private life was nothing. You were in fact committed

14:00 to the unit, you signed up and you stay there and so that's what we did. Getting up toward my six years, '65 I was due out, nothing going on I came back from Malaya, it was pretty boring in Australia and so I thought I would get out of the army and join the air force and so that's what I did in 1965.

### **Why did you join the air force?**

14:30 Wanted a trade, anyone could go around killing people, it was easy, get better with practice of course. I just thought, "Wife is pregnant, you have got responsibility." and all of these things that run through your mind, responsibility, they don't even think about it these days; have five kids and they don't even know who the fathers are. But in those days you had responsibility, you had a responsibility to your wife and she to you and so on. And when your wife falls pregnant the responsibilities multiply.

15:00 Thank Christ some people have the same principles of life today. So I had to get a trade because staying in the army at that stage in the game, it would take me many years to make sergeant and so on. And I didn't join the army for...I joined for adventure so the thing was I really had to start to think about where I was going to go from here. So I got out after six years, fully qualified for sergeant, standard corporal.

15:30 And then life changed again. You think you're going to go one way and it doesn't happen. I didn't join the air force; I was in Adelaide when Bev's mother died, she went back to Wondai, I was stuck in Adelaide, I had to get discharged in Perth because that's where I signed up and then hopefully got signed up in the army again. Back in the army in '65, back to Kapooka, back through the hoops again.

### **Why did you go back into the army?**

Vietnam had started. I think the big thing was in April '65 when I joined the air force, 1 RAR went over there. We had some Training Team guys over there, same as you have got people advising in Iraq today, training up the army and all of that. We had that from '62 to '65. '65 sent the 1st Battalion and some artillery and

16:30 APCs [Armoured Personnel Carriers] and all the other. It looked like Vietnam was going to be exciting, I could practice my trade; if you have a mechanic and then take his tools away he is not real happy is he? Here I was a fully trained infantry warrior and so I might as well go back and do that. At that stage of the game I didn't even think about my responsibilities to my family, I could have been killed. But

17:00 I could now in '65, '66 be able to prove to myself that I had the capabilities and I think that's what drove me or encouraged me back into the army.

### **And you said you were sort of excited about the idea of going to Vietnam then?**

Oh yes when I got back in the army, Johnny Randall, someone I knew in Malaya, he was working in central army records and so I wrote him a letter,

17:30 I am back in the army at Kapooka; I want to go back to Brisbane because that's where Beverly is and I said "Send me to the next battalion that's going to Vietnam out of Brisbane". So I ended up getting posted to 6 RAR, 2 Battalion; they had virtually split it in half and said, "You're still 2 RAR; you're 6 RAR." So all of the guys that marched into 6 RAR there are all of my

18:00 mates that were with me in Malaya and I was a baggy arsed private and all of these guys are running around and senior corporals and sergeants and these bastards are fair up me you know. The guys I had got up in Malaya were now corporals getting their own back.

### **So how did Beverly view your decision to go back into the army with a view of going to Vietnam?**

Beverly has never ever worried, we

18:30 never talked about it. The night I left to fly out to Vietnam we never talked about dying or losing a leg or coming back and living like a vegetable. We never discussed it. I had faith in my ability and when you get to war it is ninety-five percent of your training and five percent luck. It is like when you drive a car, if you train properly and drive your car

19:00 properly you have got a ninety five percent chance of avoiding a crash. If your luck is against you well that five percent you can't do much about that can you. And I looked at my job in the army, I am well trained and I have trained my soldiers well therefore if I ever get into a very serious shit fight I have got

a good chance of surviving. Besides I am a fatalist, if it is time to go, it is time to go.

19:30 **What did you know about what was happening in Vietnam and what did you think about Australia's role in that?**

It was never ever considered; I didn't even know where Vietnam was. Vietnam, Indochina, I mean we knew Indochina but we didn't know Indochina back in 1954 had split into four different countries North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. You are trained to go to war and it didn't make any

20:00 difference whether you are going to go to Korea, Malaya, Cambodia, Borneo; if you are going to go to war you are going to meet some people and try to kill them and all of that sort of jazz you know. You don't worry about the political scene, you have got to remember there is a 'red under every bed', your parents would have grown up with this and they would understand. There is always a baddy under every bed and every cupboard. In retrospect I look back and if the Vietnam

20:30 War had not become what it became, Communism would have come down through to Malaya and places like that. Well the Communist party in Indonesia was very strong in the '60s. So I think what happened in Vietnam, ten years of war in Vietnam showed the Communists, and you have got the Russian Communists and the Chinese Communists, that they are not going to win over capitalism.

21:00 Because the Yanks and the Australians and the Poms and everyone else is always going to be there and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation] in Europe and the South East Asian Treaty Organization is going to look after and I think Vietnam achieved that result. You can't test it because we don't have any parameters to test it by, but I feel as someone who has been in Vietnam we did slow it down and in the end we cut off the arms and legs,

21:30 so Communism slowed down. And I think what twenty-five years later the war came down, China is totally different to what was, so for an historian to sit down and think about these things they are going to sit down and think maybe the Vietnam War did prove something, did something for world peace; I don't know. You won't know for fifty or a hundred years but I

22:00 like to think that what we done or what we went to Vietnam to do has some ongoing effort towards peace.

**So what sort of additional training did you receive when you were posted to 6 RAR before going to Vietnam?**

No what happened with me and Delta Company 6 RAR is when they created 6 RAR we had the first lot of National Service come in, National Service was created in fact

22:30 because of the Confrontation with Indonesia in '64 and the first intake of National Service was '65 and they came in July '65 and as they came in the confrontation with Indonesia was starting to level off and Sukarno was pulling his horns in. So fortuitously the National Service, they were never intended to go to Vietnam, it allowed the government to

23:00 expand the army and send two battalions to Vietnam in '66. Half of those guys were National Servicemen. Now in '65 they hadn't created corps training for National Service they only had the recruit training at Kapooka. Now when I went to Kapooka in '65 the guy that was in the next building down from me ended up in the same platoon as me and he was National Service, but I didn't stay too long in Kapooka. I came...within

23:30 two or three months I was in 6 RAR D Company; 6 RAR was to become a training company, we were to do corps training right? Initial employment training where we trained the soldiers like I was trained in Ingleburn in '59. So you had these National Servicemen for about twelve weeks and they had to learn everything about machine guns, shooting

24:00 the targets how to zero the gun, live in the field, had to learn how to build sandbags and battle defences. They had to learn first aid, if someone gets shot you can, what you have got to do. Radio procedures, patrolling techniques. And you have got to think most of these guys, some wanted to be there, some didn't, and most couldn't give a shit one way or the other and all of a sudden you have got a hundred and twenty or a hundred and thirty guys and you don't know yourself if you are going to Vietnam in six months or what is going on

24:30 but you had to train them up to a standard that you could. We did a great job with them. After the three months and just before Christmas the battalion created the four rifle companies and we all went on leave and then in the New Year we got our officers, we didn't have any officers, officers are surplus to the needs of soldiers anyway, they are only there to tell us what to do. And in January the battalion started to form as a battalion and we started to do

25:00 what we did, what we talked about, the tanks. Learn how to work as companies and battalions and a battalion's standard operating procedures and all of that and you hone up your skills in helicopters and you're introduced to helicopters and 113s [APCs] and your final exercise is at Shoalwater Bay just north of Rockhampton. And then all of a sudden you had an idea you were going because of the intense activity. We

- 25:30 worked seven days a week, I would say from around about the March/April I would be lucky if I was home one day a week. I would get home at nine o'clock at night and here is Beverly with Tracey who is twelve months old now. And she all by herself in a flat in Toowong and I roll in at nine o'clock at night; I was absolutely buggered and I was that used to sleeping on the ground in the bush that I used to sleep on the
- 26:00 ground next to the bed because I couldn't sleep on the bloody bed. And that's not unusual; a lot of guys did that. It is intense training. I was promoted to sergeant and that pissed a lot of people off but I was qualified and they must have thought I was a better soldier. And as a sergeant I knew the survivability of my platoon was my job through my corporals to make sure that they are trained and operated at such a
- 26:30 level that if they ever got in the shit and if you do your job you win. Now Harry Smith was the company commander, he came in and he was not like all of the other company commanders, he was going to make his company the best in the battalion. We didn't walk anywhere we fucking ran. We were the only company that went out bush specifically to learn how to make sandbag walls. Because we had to put walls around our tents in Vietnam. We were the only company that went out and specifically learnt
- 27:00 how to make barbed wire fences. We were the only company that did extra first aid training for battle casualties. If we were going to have an exercise we worked twice as hard as any other bastard. And this all made the company stronger and how do you say it? Camaraderie was more cohesive, "We're better than those turds down the road."
- 27:30 Now we would go past, competition, once again competition within the individual sections platoon companies and so on. And soldiers really survive and thrive on competition particularly if they know what the challenge is for. If they know the challenge is for combat or to the end of combat they will work their arse off and we developed those skills
- 28:00 for that. I must admit looking back now if Harry Smith hadn't been the commander he was and if myself and other sergeants and corporals we had in Delta Company had not been of the calibre they were I don't think we would have survived Long Tan. I think the whole hundred and eight would have been killed. So that's how important it was for us as NCOs.
- 28:30 Non commissioned officer right? That is how important it was, these were guys who had been in Malaya; these were guys who had soldiered on for six or eight years. These were guys taught by the World War II and Korean blokes so it rolled on. Now the Australian Army hasn't got anyone with Vietnam experience; they have got someone with Iraq experience, yes. SAS Afghanistan, 4 RAR
- 29:00 went to Iraq, a company of them but it is not the same thing. Our army today probably hasn't got the depth of ability to train for combat that we had in the '60s and I think that's a very important thing when they think about defence today.

**At what point were you told that you were finally going to Vietnam?**

I think we were told around about April or March. I can

- 29:30 remember the day it happened, everyone who went to Vietnam and this is true I don't care what the press or the government or the politicians say, everyone who went to Vietnam went there as a volunteer they could have stepped out and said, "No I don't want to go." Because on this particular day the whole battalion lined up by company and we thought, "This is something special, what is going on? And at eight o'clock on the dot, the OC [Officer Commanding] read out the order that 6 RAR and there is every bastard
- 30:00 even if they were on beds they were brought out. "The battalion is going to Vietnam; if you don't want to go, step over there on the lawn." And we had about five or six guys. Now on this particular day D Company was going out to Greenbank range to do shooting skills so once those six get on the trucks, I never saw those six guys again I don't know who they are but never saw them. But right up until the time you got on the plane you could have pulled out, could have said, "No I don't want to go."
- 30:30 No one did, at this stage of the game and I come back to training, you have been trained to get to a certain situation and you want to go and do it. We were keen to do it. We did Canungra and things like that. So basically until the March/April, until I came back, that's in '65, until I came back from Vietnam in July '67
- 31:00 I saw very little of Beverly, for eighteen months I might have seen her for three weeks. And you have got the twelve months I was away. As far as going, we never spoke of me getting hit, everyone speaks of the poor other bastard getting hit and not yourself.

**Was it hard to leave your daughter?**

I had more, what I was doing was more important than my family; I was going to go to war and I was responsible for thirty guys.

- 31:30 I can honestly say that the family was never ever in my box of tricks, they were there, I had already been semi-divorced because I was in the army six days a week and getting home at ten o'clock at night and got up at five to be back at work at six; it wasn't much of a life. Because we did it like we did it, at that stage it was all part of the job

- 32:00 and let's face it, Australians do the job better than most other people. Even if they're not trained to do something the bastards will do it, that's part of being Australian, you will do it better than any other bastard. Yanks don't like you saying that but who cares. I can remember you get all of these shots in your arm and the army is great; you line up, no shirts on, and there would be a hundred blokes in the line and you have got a needle sticking out of this shoulder and a needle sticking out of that and you have six different shots and as you
- 32:30 walk down they just put the syringe on and give you your five or ten mils and then when you get to the last the guys pulling the needles out and throwing them in the bag. So we have got big brave guys who are whatsiname and as soon as they got to see the needle sticking out of the guy in front, they collapsed. What's that Munster with the ones sticking out of his throat? When it was time to go
- 33:00 I flew over with the advance party for 6 RAR; not the advance party for the company, we had already sent in a group to take over 1 RAR stores and we flew over in a group out of Amberley [air force base]. Now what happened, we had our farewell down here at Brissy [Brisbane] and I didn't expect to see Beverly, but Beverly ended up at Amberley and I got the shock of my life, ten o'clock at night you walk up the gangway into a 747,
- 33:30 all black and choof, the big bird takes off. And you land in the Philippines in the middle of the next morning and we nearly crashed there because the engines had frozen up and when they went into reverse one wouldn't reverse and the plane skewed off the side of the runway near this bloody great group of Filipinos planting rice on the side of the runway and the bloody big plane nearly run over them. But the pilot got it back on track. We were not allowed to leave the bar in the Philippines airport, we arrived there
- 34:00 about six or seven and we were not allowed to leave until ten or eleven o'clock because they had to fix up the engine. And I don't know how we got a hundred and thirty guys back on the plane because we were all pissed and we couldn't walk and flying into Saigon, there had been an attack two nights before and there was still bloody planes burning. "What the fucking hell am I doing here?" And Saigon is stinking hot and I drink a lot of rum, and then Yanks walk past you and say,
- 34:30 "Look at him." because the rum is just oozing out of your skin and there is a hundred odd Australian soldiers all still in states of semi-piss and the sweat, all this booze coming out and the Yanks were thinking who the hell are these people; we made an impression.

**Can you describe what was happening at Saigon airport when you arrived?**

Kick a bull ants nest and you will see what happens in a place like Saigon; the bastards are running out all over the place looking to bite someone.

- 35:00 Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon had to be the busiest airport in the world. There were F100s taking off, F4C Phantoms, Hercules coming in, Jumbo jets landing, there were Dakotas taking off, helicopters everywhere. Utter chaos but out of this chaos everyone who knew what they had to do, could do it. It was so chaotic they left us there.
- 35:30 Two thirds flew down to Vung Tau in Australian Caribous or American C123s and there was about twenty-five or thirty of us sitting there. And Keith Davidson who was the CSM of Bravo said, "What do you think is going on?" And I said, "Shit Keith, they have forgotten us." And he said, "We had better go and find out." And I said, "No stuff them. Might as well be here as anywhere else." Anyway a Yank master sergeant came up, US Air Force and he came out and said, "You guys
- 36:00 have been out here in the sun for five or six hours." So we were sitting there in the stinking hot and the Yankee sergeant came up and Keith Davidson said, "We're supposed to go to Vung Tau, where is that?" And he said, "God damned if I know." And next thing you know some other guy comes up and says, "Pick up your bags." It is like a taxi rank right? In you had to go to Vung Tau or Da Nang, there is a plane over there
- 36:30 going to Da Nang get your gear on that plane.. So we flew then down to Vung Tau and we arrived at Vung Tau and they put us out on the sand dunes. How can I say this, I would take you up to say Double Island Point on Fraser Island and say, "Walk fifty yards over there and that's your home for the next two weeks." That's what it was; they were the sand hills of Vung Tau. We had a battalion arriving in three or four days and we had to put
- 37:00 tents up for them. All of the tents had been in country for twelve months, they were rotted out and falling apart. We had no poles, utter chaos. But out of chaos comes good and we got it done. I can remember George Tin arriving and he said, the battalion's birthday was on the 6th of June, the battalion was formed on the 6th of June 1965 and on its first birthday it is in Vietnam in a war zone. I don't think that has happened with
- 37:30 any other battalion in the Australian Army, not even in the Second World War. So anyway he said, "You have got to go up and get two cans for six hundred guys." And I said, "Where the bloody hell am I going to get twelve hundred cans of beer?" What's that fifty or a hundred cartons or something, whatever it is? He said, "Look here is some money," and he whistled up his driver and said, "Take the sergeant around and get some grog." "Jesus, what about some ice?" "Yeah get ice too."



- 38:00 "Where we gonna put it?" "Well we have got steel trunks; we will put it in there." Anyway I went around to various places, the hill climbers which is the short people, went around to Catlo which is the navy Swift boats, coastguard and that was a great day for me because for the next twelve months I could get as much piss as I ever wanted to by going down. We got the ice and we got the grog and we had it all nice and cold and then at five o'clock, companies had to go and get their steel trunks.
- 38:30 Out of their grog, no one got any ice, all of the cold beer went to the officers' mess and we got hot beer, the sergeants' mess got a couple of cold beers but the company, whoever set it up when I brought it back, the officers' mess took all of the friggin ice. The officers have got to have cold beer, the soldiers are nobody and it is still the same today.
- 39:00 Nothing changes, the kids come, you grow up, you die, and it is all the same, nothing changes whether it happened fifty years ago or a hundred years ago, that's exactly how life progresses.
- What sort of ceremony was there for the birthday celebrations?**
- A couple of cans of beer. We had guys fly in from Australia that day and they had to fly down to Vung Tau, get on the cattle truck, come out, "Walk fifty yards there and you will find someone who knows you."
- 39:30 There was no ceremony or anything, no cutting the birthday cake. Just sit down and everybody would say, "Well here we go for another twelve months." And crack the top. Thank Christ there was American beer because we didn't have any Australian beer. When we did get Australian beer it had been out in the sun for nine months. 1 RAR demanded Australian beer and they had sent it over and it had sat on the docks at Saigon and we had to take it over and
- 40:00 it tasted like camel's piss. It was shocking. And if I went to Vung Tau to get some grog for a party for D Company I never got any Australian piss, Budweiser and Slitz were the two main beers, then you would take Blue Ribbon. Black Label wasn't acceptable. We used to give that to the diggers, we would have the Slitz and the Budweiser up in the sergeants' and officers' mess and the rest went down the diggers. So it worked for us too.

## Tape 6

- 01:35 **So can you tell us the lead up to Long Tan and the experience there?**
- Well we had to leave the Back Beach at Vung Tau before we were supposed to because Nui Dat was going to be created out of nothing; brand new base in the big rubber plantation about the middle of Phuoc Tuy Province.
- 02:00 And Phuoc Tuy Province, even when the French had been there had been a very strong nationalist, and the Viet Minh were very strong there and the French never ever moved out of the cities. So all of a sudden the Aussies arrived and unlike the Americans who hung out at Binh Hoa or Da Lat and around the cities, we don't do it that way, we go out and build a city in the middle of the province to stuff all of the nogs [slang for Vietnamese] up.
- 02:30 All that was up there was 5 RAR who arrived a month before us and some APCs and some artillery and Charlie [Victor Charlie - VC - Viet Cong] was all over the place. In fact the lead up to us occupying Nui Dat there were two villages that had to be totally cleared and the people settled and they were known Viet Minh villages that became Viet Cong villages in the '60s but they were Viet Minh villages in the Indochina War. So they had a history of being anti-French and anti-government
- 03:00 and all of this sort. So they were cleared out by the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] and 177 Airborne so that our bad neighbours had been moved out. But when RAR moved up there the VC [Viet Cong] were doing a lot of reconnaissance and there was a lot of contact going on and when you have only got a thousand to fifteen hundred men up there in a rubber plantation to try and
- 03:30 establish a base, you need a few more people up there, so 6 RAR moved up there two or three weeks before we should have been. And we flew up by Chinooks [helicopters] and we got out of these Chinooks and we walked about a kilometre I suppose into this rubber plantation and this was going to be home for the next twelve months. And all it was was a rubber plantation. We had to put roads in, create the thing. And on top of that we had to put barbed wire fences up and dig holes and carry out patrols and ambushes.
- 04:00 And what happened was, basically the day to day routine for a rifle platoon was you had a day on local protection within your company area where you dug your own pits. The next day you might rest up and go out for ambush or patrol during the next day and then an ambush and then the third day you would be back in resting up from the ambush and doing your own thing. On top of that
- 04:30 you had to go and do work for APCs, they didn't have time to put up their wire so you would go over there for two or three days and put their barbed wire up. And then you had battalion and company operations, go out for three days on a company operation or a week or two weeks' battalion operation. So there wasn't even time to go to the toilet, it was full on. We were eating hard rations and the wet

season in Vietnam, the wet season is about July/August and so every afternoon the skies opened up and it fairly pissed

- 05:00 on everyone. And when they did establish kitchens we had one meal a day and it was pissing down rain and you would put your dixie [eating dish] out and it might be curry and rice but by the time you walked away through the rain it was slop anyway. This is how we existed. Battalion did two big operations, that was 6 RAR; 'Enoggera' was our first operation. We
- 05:30 had to go down and search and destroy the village of Long Phuoc, this had been a Viet Minh village or VC village. And while we were down there we found caves that had been dug over the previous couple of years. Some of them were up to four or five hundred metres long. We didn't have a lot of contacts, we had a couple. I was with 10 Platoon at that time and I can remember we had a country boy
- 06:00 who decided he would show us city kids how to put a WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK to sleep at night because there was still WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s running around the place. So he got this WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK , put its head under its wing and rocked it two or three times and then put it in the floor and the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK was asleep. This really impressed us city kids. And he said, "I will hypnotise it." so he laid the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK down and he held its head and he got someone to draw a line in the sand and this WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK was looking at the line and never moved and while
- 06:30 he was doing this of course we had gone all slack and Charlie had snuck up and fired one round. It didn't hit anyone but it certainly scared the crap out of everyone. This happened every day for the next four days and no matter what we did we couldn't find this bloke. We would do things and make a lot of noise and we would have people hiding in the bush and all of this jazz and this bastard would pop out of a hole and go bang. And the closest he got to hitting anyone
- 07:00 was there is an engineer and he got a paw-paw, corporal engineer and he is the one that went down those tunnels. And he has got this lovely light paw-paw and he said, "Bob it is time for lunch." And he is holding the pawpaw out to me and bang! The bloody round blew the paw-paw up between us. I think it was a day or two after the operation was cleared but we never found the bastard. The next operation was a little bit more serious, about the middle of July,
- 07:30 Operation Hobart and we moved out to the other side of where Long Tan battle was to be. A few miles out and we found a lot of camps, a lot of food caches and camps had been cleaned up and prepared. B Company had a contact with D445 [VC battalion] which were enemy. And I think they lost two or
- 08:00 three blokes, nineteen, and all of a sudden, up until now we are saying, "This is like Malaya and Borneo, no worries at all." Now it is getting fair dinkum, people were getting killed and there was bullets flying everywhere and there was artillery screaming overhead. So we thought, "Shit." So for Bob Buick himself he said, "Hang on fella, this is fair dinkum." So what I did, every time I got into camp I
- 08:30 jumped into a pit and I noticed that they had cut all of the bottom branches off the pit and although they couldn't see your body they could see your legs. So they could be in their pit you would never see them in the scrub and they would see where you were walking along. Pretty basic, we were taught the same thing ourselves but we had forgotten it all. Anyway we were pulled out of Hobart [Operation Hobart] quickly because we were supposed to go into the village of Long Tan and there was no explanation why we were pulled out early, there was rumours that
- 09:00 old Charlie was going to attack the task force base and all of this sort of business. And we had the whole of 6 RAR; we had six or seven hundred guys in the scrub. I now think back and I look at it, we were very near the place where the Battle of Long Tan took place. And we were going into the village or hamlet of Long Tan which had been cleared like Long Phuoc and I reckon Charlie D445
- 09:30 was in there, already doing reconnaissance and stuff like this. Now there is a lot of speculation on why Long Tan started. As a sergeant I didn't worry about it, you worry about the day to day things and you have got other people to worry about the long term intelligence type thing. But when you think back and you think about what happened and what transpired before and after, I think the idea that the
- 10:00 VC and the North Vietnamese, I honestly believe they were going to attack Nui Dat because our defences were ratshit; we only had a couple of strands of barbed wire up basically, couldn't even stop a bull on heat, our defences. They could have attacked the base one night, killed two or three hundred Australians and we would have been on the bloody, down the beach a week later waiting for the Sydney
- 10:30 to come and take us home. That was not the thought I had at the time. We never conceived, wouldn't have thought about these bastards attacking us. So when they mortared us on the night of the 17th [August] , we just thought it was a harass and interdiction fire, throw a few bombs down the tube, bang, bang, bang I think they killed one and wounded another twenty or something. No one thought about it,
- 11:00 Bravo Company went out to find out where they fired from, I had been down to A Company—I was in 11 Platoon at this stage of the game—I had gone down to A Company to look after A Company while they were out on operations and they were out on operations within two thousand metres of where Charlie was when all of this happened. They weren't very far away at all, so on the morning of the 18th of August when we were told to go out and relieve Bravo Company to find out where Charlie had gone

- 11:30 our generals thought, "Oh well they're all gone, going out, going fishing, no fish, wet arse." the normal sort of story. We relieved Bravo Company and they started to go home and we started to move off and we had six or seven Charlie walk right through the middle of my platoon. We had a forward section go through, we
- 12:00 had two sections up, forward section went through, half the section went across the track and before I went over the track and I was only five or ten metres from the track up came five or six VC but they weren't normal VC because they dressed in green and they carried AK47s and these guys were permanent forces, same as we were, they were good bloody enemy. Anyway I up with the Armalite [rifle] and fired a couple of rounds and knocked one guy arse over
- 12:30 turkey, never got him but we got his AK47 and they took off bolted to the east. And so now I came to the situation where normal drills take over, we checked no one got hurt and we got permission and moved forward, which we did too and we went into extended line and we kept on going, cleared a hut, nothing there and we kept on going and I am thinking, we are getting a bit far away from the company, we were about
- 13:00 four or five hundred metres away from the rest which is not the normal thing we do. And I suppose while I am thinking about that all shit broke out on my left hand side. We got opened up on with machine guns and small arms fired and knocked over half of the left hand section. So for the next two and a half hours we started killing people and they started shooting back. Platoon commander's killed and that left me in the bucket of poo to
- 13:30 command this thing. I had trained for this and you know jumped out of the plane and you have got a parachute and no other bastard has and you have got to do the job. My immediate problem was that the enemy were only twenty-five or thirty metres away and we could never get any artillery, they were too far away. And they were killing our blokes and we were killing them with small arms fire.
- 14:00 I had to get the artillery in and I wasn't going to stick my head up because the bullets were clipping, in fact I ended up with eight holes in my little green bush hat, which is four rounds, one going in and out and so on. I didn't even know this was happening until someone said the next day, "Shit, your hat is shot up!" So if you stuck your head up you were killed but I still needed to get the artillery. Now there is a lot of things happen in battle, first up no one knows what is happening more than five
- 14:30 metres away from themselves, and even if you can see a guy five metres away he has got a different picture to what's going on than you have. So as the commander of a platoon I went out with twenty-eight blokes, my main job was to get the artillery in to protect us while they kept the baddies away. This is basically what happens in every battle, particularly a defensive type battle where you are being attacked.
- 15:00 These bastards they were about eighty strong and at this stage of the game we were down to about twenty because of killed and wounded. And this happened and it kept on going for two hours. I had to send my own grid reference, my own position on the ground and talk to Maurie Stanley [forward observer artillery] and said, "This is my grid reference, we are getting overrun you had better send some shit in." I really didn't want to have anyone killed or captured by them, you're better off to go out in a blaze of glory with a whole lot of artillery coming down and wiping everyone else out, bloody hero.
- 15:30 But these are the sort of things that cross your mind, you're better off to blow the shit out of everyone rather than to have anyone wounded and captured. Because the last thing you want is for someone to be wounded and captured because they are not going to survive anyway. So Maurie and I had a few words, I think I abused him and he wouldn't give to me what I wanted. The long and the short of it, we got the artillery in twenty-five or thirty metres away and when you're lying out in the open
- 16:00 and an artillery shell, 105 millimetre shell, it weighs about fifteen or twenty kilos, about thirty pound and it is all full of high explosive in a steel case. When it hits the ground it shatters into hundreds of pieces of shrapnel and that's what kills you. Now we were very fortunate, the guns were behind and so they were flying straight over the top of our head but we had rubber trees about five metres high,
- 16:30 so the last thing you wanted is a couple of rounds to drop short and hit a rubber tree and spray up your arse. That didn't happen. We got the rounds in, I asked for six rounds gun fire with thirty-six HE [High Explosive] rounds, and the first six rounds gun fire went whack and it knocked out Charlie real good, I personally counted a hundred and twenty one bodies there the next morning.
- 17:00 So once the enemy had been neutralised. So we had run out of ammunition 11 Platoon, and I had guys sitting there with an entrenching tool in one hand and a machete in another and a guy with a grenade. They were there until the end; there was no way anyone was going to give up. I knew at that stage of the game we were on our own, no one was going to come and help us we were on our Pat Malone [alone], 10 Platoon had tried to get to us, they
- 17:30 couldn't get to us, I didn't know 12 Platoon had moved down to try and get to us, but they had run into Charlie who had come in around us. So it got to the stage, I had played a bit of chess in my time and sometimes it is good to attack rather than defend. I was thinking maybe I should go ahead with the artillery and I thought, "No that's not a good idea". I knew I only had about eight or nine blokes left out of the twenty-eight. As it was there was
- 18:00 thirteen killed and another eight wounded, so there was only really only seven of us left and we had no

ammunition anyway. And so I said, "When I give the word everyone run back a hundred and fifty metres and regroup and we will take it from there." The idea was to go back and if I didn't find any friendly forces I would go up and lie in the river overnight and then eventually make in back to Nui Dat which was five or six kilometres away at the time.

- 18:30 Anyway the time came and I lost my operator, Vince Price going out; he was killed. So were a couple of other fellows and we were zig zagging through the rubber trees and there was a bloke by the name of Cahn, he is dead now, he died and we run into each other and just as we run into each other, a VC fifty cal [calibre] opened up and he picked up a bullet in the cheeks of his arse and knocked him head over turkey, didn't worry about it too much, we got up and kept running.
- 19:00 Some of us went to 12 Platoon and others went to company headquarters. So I got to 12 Platoon with four or five blokes, about eight or nine had gone out the other way. We stayed there with 12 Platoon, they were under attack, this is [2nd Lieutenant] Dave Sabben's platoon and I lay down in the rubber trees and it is pissing down rain you have never seen rain like it. Raining that hard that there was a mist over the battlefield. We could see the enemy but they couldn't see us
- 19:30 through the mist, that's the way I worked it out. And I was having a cigarette, the first cigarette in two and a half hours with Paddy Todd who was an old Korean veteran, he lost a couple of fingers in Korea and now he had been wounded again, shot through the ankles. And I said to Paddy, "Shit of a place to be Paddy. You're too old for this sort of crap." We had a smoke and a yarn and there were bullets flying around, crazy bloody world.
- 20:00 We organised the dead and wounded to go back to company headquarters and Sabben and I and a couple of others stayed behind and we got into company headquarters and we all got together. This started just after four o'clock in the afternoon; it is now just after six, so for two solid hours kill or be killed, there is no niceties about it, you blow the shit out of
- 20:30 them as much as you can. That's the name of the game. So we got back and as I said I had about seven out of twenty-eight left, I had fifteen missing; we left, there were fifteen weren't accounted for, found two alive the next morning. And I was put over in the back corner, over on the side of the small hill. And 10 and 12 Platoon had taken over and old Charlie was attacking them in waves of scores, possible eighty or ninety at a time were
- 21:00 rushing forward and at this stage of the game we have every artillery gun in the whole of the task force, now when you think about it a battery of guns supports a battalion, four rifle companies, we had the three batteries, eighteen guns supporting one company. So we had as much ammunition and artillery as you could imagine. Poor old Charlie to have to get up and walk and all of this artillery was
- 21:30 going around your head. Anyway it was getting dark we knew the APCs were coming out to rescue us, I sat in my little corner of the paddock with my half a dozen soldiers waiting to see if any VC were going to come up and attack us. The helicopters from 9 Squadron had already dropped some ammunition onto us which saved us,
- 22:00 the company was virtually out of ammunition itself at this stage of the game. So we got... once we started to get ammunition and it was getting dark and we knew the APCs were coming there seemed to be a new lease of life. We were here for the end game, no matter what happened we were here until the end. We had plenty of ammunition for the guns, we couldn't get any air power because of the thunderstorm and so there were purely Australians and Kiwis fighting, what they have done so well since bloody Gallipoli. APCs arrived and Charlie just disappeared, once the APCs came onto the battlefield they got up and racked off.
- 22:30 We didn't know that, all of sudden the shooting is finished, I didn't have any fire flies to look at because when the tracer goes it hits the trees and goes 'bing', I mean it is a sight, battlefields, when you get tracer coming towards you. I didn't see any tracer coming towards me, some people say they could see tracer, I didn't see it, I could see it going away from me but I didn't see it coming towards me. But it was an afternoon where
- 23:00 every hour we put in for training with our soldiers, and remember we had trained the National Servicemen when they had got in, so every hour we had put in and as hard as we had made it back in Australia and as hard as Harry Smith had pushed us to reach the level that he wanted saved our arse. Everyone did their job extremely well. No one flinched.
- 23:30 What's it like to be in a fire fight? Shooting to the death? You don't think about it at the time, you have got a job to do; I had a job to get the artillery in to protect the platoon. That was my job, it was the job of the corporal to make sure his soldiers fired and it was the job of the soldier to make sure he killed the enemy. So I had to keep communication going back to the
- 24:00 company and look after my platoon needs. The corporal looked after the section needs and the digger looked after his own personal needs, and that's how it works, how the ladder steps down. It was the next day and you don't realise what's happened, the next day when you walk into the battlefields and there are bits and pieces of body and they reckoned there was over five hundred killed, we only counted two hundred and fifty. But it was only then that you realise just how serious this bloody game of war is.
- 24:30 It is life and death, it is something that you can never accept it, and it is something that you can never

enjoy doing, but would you do it again? Yes I would. At twenty-five years old I was ten foot tall and totally bullet proof, I had holes in my shirt and trousers and my hat, but that didn't matter I was alive.

- 25:00 And all the other bastards were dead, and that's all that mattered. You lost your own guys, and okay you think about them now. Then they were entered in a roll book, you know you just put a red line through 'killed in action' and you got someone in to replace him and that's what war is. It could have been your name in the roll book, didn't make any difference. Scrubbed out of the roll book and the new name went into replace you and that's what happens in war, it just rolls on all of the time.
- 25:30 I look back to Long Tan itself and I think if it had been anyone else but D Company and I have determined that the hundred and eight Australians would have survived, D Company survived because of what we trained for and how we trained and how Harry Smith run his company. I am not degrading the other companies but I know how much better my
- 26:00 soldiers were to soldiers in other companies and when it comes down to a live and die situation such as Long Tan. And many other places, the guys of Tobruk, they were surrounded; for eighteen months they were there and you have to rely on the guy next to you. And if you don't train them so that you feel good in your group they are going to cut and run, get up and piss off and that's when you lost control and the whole thing falls in a
- 26:30 heap of shit. The aftermath of Long Tan is something that is difficult to talk about because when you have got to go and pick up your diggers who have been killed, that's pretty hard the next day. I had fifteen missing at midnight when we did a count, choppers took out my wounded, I had seven guys, myself and seven others left the next morning. They were gone,
- 27:00 we could just wander around and virtually do what we could, but when you wrap up your own guys and put them in the back of an APC and know they're dead, that's pretty hard, if you wrap up someone else from another company but you don't know them personally, it is sad but you don't dwell on it. But you do dwell on it when you think about your own people. It is still something that gets me upset today. But I suppose when you look at the battlefield and see how many bastards we killed,
- 27:30 I didn't think about sorrow, I was so glad to be alive and so was every other bastard so you didn't really dwell on it too much. I had a job to do, and that's the great thing about the army or the defence forces, no matter what happens today you have still got a job to do, what could have been bad in the last hour is past, you have got to think about the next hour. And that's what soldiering is all about.
- 28:00 They train you to do your job, they don't train you for the horrors of war, let's face it, two days later we were still burying Charlie and they were fly blown, we had maggots coming out of eyes and all of these bad things and you would dig a hole and you would pull a blokes arm or leg and the whole arm or leg would come out and his whole inside was full of maggots. That's the reality of war.
- 28:30 Australians always bury the dead, the Yanks just used to leave them; we have never just left the battlefield with bodies and bits and pieces of bodies. And because we did this, the VC have great respect for the Australians, they still do today. We buried their dead, unmarked grave but they were buried. The pigs came along and dug them up through the night but that's beside the point,
- 29:00 you still buried them. All sorts of strange things happened. Rigor mortis had set in and you're trying to bury someone that's got his arms up like this so we started digging holes the shape of the body so we could just put the body in and we got sick and tired of doing that. So then we got machetes out and cut the tendons on their arms to straighten their arms down by their sides and things like this. But I can remember one was buried and his
- 29:30 arm had come up overnight. And we woke up and it only happened about five or six metres away from me and I woke up and here is this arm sticking out, old dead Charlie. Anyway some smart arse and I think it was an APC bloke got a piece of cardboard and he wrote on it 'The Claw' and he got a piece of string off his thumb so you have got a thumb there with a sign 'The Claw'. But battlefields have got a, I call it 'the perfumed garden' in my book
- 30:00 because it is a particular smell when you have been there for a while, you don't smell it. But a battlefield in the tropics particularly after a few hours has got that sickly human death smell which in fact doesn't smell like a dead cat or a dog or a roo, people seem to have their own smell. So the perfume garden at Long Tan on the 19th and 20th if you flew in, and as you're flying in you would most probably smell it as you came in
- 30:30 the chopper, on the ground and you're handling dead bodies and everything and there was no such things as AIDS [Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome] those days, so you didn't have rubber gloves or anything, you just pick them up and haul them off. Pretty rough and ready. And I can remember getting upset; a newspaper guy came up, he wanted to know what was going on, a guy from Associated Press. I had already punched a major,
- 31:00 who made some derogatory remark about my soldiers so I fitted him, that got me in a fair amount of shit but I was rescued. And this newspaper bloke came up and wanted the story, I have got more bloody things to talk about than telling the newspaper; they were living in Saigon, they would hear about something, jump in a chopper, come down, get their story, fly back to Saigon and send it away in a cablegram and then get on the piss again by four o'clock in the afternoon. Bugger that; I wasn't going to talk to these turds. Anyway I threatened to shoot this Pommy bloke and Jack Kirby,

- 31:30 my company sergeant major, came over and grabbed them and hung them off the branch of a tree. And he was only a small fellow, five four or five, and he looked so funny hung up by the scruff of his neck on the branch, these things happen. It took us a couple of days to clear the battlefield. We found two or three VC after I had the situation of
- 32:00 punching out the major and this newspaper bloke; George Chin the RSM said, "Get away and count some bodies or do something." So I grabbed a bloke by the name of Peter Detnan who was a tin miner from Inverell New South Wales and he used to carry a M60 machine gun like that Sloan, what's his name [Sylvester Stallone], that Rambo wanker fellow with the machine gun? Anyway, "Come on Detto, let's go and have a look around." So everyone we counted we threw a branch over
- 32:30 and we came across this poor little sixteen or seventeen North Vietnamese and he was absolutely terrified. He had been told that us white bastards eat them and he was shit scared we were going to eat him alive. Anyway Detto rested the barrel of the M60 on his forehead and I called for a medic. Now this young fellow had been shot in the groin and fly blown and he was lying there and
- 33:00 I can imagine sixteen years old, absolutely dead scared. Detto was about six three or four and built like a brick shithouse. And I am six foot and I wasn't any weakling in those days. And they came up and the medic got a bottle of iodine and just poured it straight into the wound and this kid didn't even flinch he just looked and then he picked out all of the maggots. And we put a dressing on him. We found out later that he had come down from North Vietnam
- 33:30 only a month and a half before, he had walked down the Ho Chi Minh trail for three months, walked in, he had carried a couple of mortar bombs, they went in the tube, bang, bang. So what he had carried for two months gone in two seconds. He didn't know what he was up against, he was just told to go. Sometimes I wonder if he is still alive, I might buy him a beer, but I have never been back.
- 34:00 On about the third or fourth day we moved back to Nui Dat. We had to rebuild the company again; we don't stop because there is a battle. So 11 Platoon had to get a whole new platoon. Needed a new platoon commander, I got a guy by the name of Paul O'Sullivan who now works for the Australian Red Cross in Sydney, he retired as a brigadier, and I needed new corporals and private soldiers.
- 34:30 So the rest of the company went down to Vung Tau for a couple of days, I stayed back and checked death certificates. They don't teach you how to do this, you lost a digger and all of sudden you get a piece of paper with his name on it, his regimental number and how he got killed, shot in the head or whatever; at the time it didn't seem to be much, jobs that had to be done, but as the years went on and you think back, Jesus Christ
- 35:00 you really got a shit deal, but let's face it, I was a professional soldier and that's what had to be done. And a month after Long Tan, it mightn't have even been a month, we were out there again, we were up there in the mountains chasing the bastards around. So all in all the whole thing was a sense of achievement because we had won the day against innumerable odds.
- 35:30 We had no idea what we were up against. We thought we might have been up against a hundred to a hundred and fifty. It was two thousand plus, we don't know exactly how many but intelligence says two thousand plus of which a thousand to fifteen hundred were directly involved in trying to kill us. Now it may not be the fiercest battle of the world, but I tell you what, it would go close. You're not in a hole being protected,
- 36:00 okay, well we were lucky we only lost seventeen out of a hundred and eight killed and about twenty-four wounded, that was bugger all in the scheme of things. But to each and every one of us in the company it was important. These are guys you live and eat with. In the annals of military history Long Tan in Vietnam would
- 36:30 be as good as anything, any battle in the whole country, I believe better than most. Why ? Because we had so much artillery. It was the artillery that made the battle even; I can remember years later a psych [psychiatrist] saying to me, "Have you killed anyone?" And I said, "Yes I have." He asked me about three times and on the third time I answered him.
- 37:00 And he said, "Did you kill anyone?" "What's it to do with you?" Don't like psychs, all stuffed in the head. Anyway he kept on asking me, "Have you killed anyone?" and I said, "Yes." And he went, "How?" and I went, "Bang!" and he fell off his chair. I made out I was pointing a gun at him. And he looked at me and said, "How many?" and I said, "I don't know, I reckon I got at least thirty, might have been more."
- 37:30 And he looked and said, "What, with a rifle?" And I said, "Yeah, I was a pretty good shot. But." I said, "There's more." "What do you mean more?" "Most probably a couple of hundred." Now at this stage of the game the poor old psych out in Toowong was gob smacked. He said, "How?" And I said, "Boom phew splat." So the afternoon at Greenslopes [Hospital] when you're talking about Long Tan is a bright spot you know. It wasn't good at the time but thirty years later
- 38:00 when you talk about it you tend to make jokes and all of that. But poor old 11 Platoon, there was around about thirty-four people in 11 Platoon all together, an officer and thirty-three diggers. When 11 Platoon had finished its twelve month tour in Vietnam we had lost, killed and wounded, thirty-four. So at the time I was platoon sergeant of 11 Platoon I had lost a whole platoon.

- 38:30 So I didn't go back to Vietnam I only did one tour. I would have went back if there was something else to do, but I didn't want to go back as a rifle platoon sergeant. Besides after about '69/'70 the writing was on the wall. When I look back on 11 Platoon now and think about how some of the soldiers are, they have all got this post traumatic stress disorder you know, it's the name of the game if you get involved in something like that. To my knowledge
- 39:00 there hasn't been one of us committed suicide. They make a big deal about Vietnam suicide rates; I don't know of too many people who were directly involved in combat that have committed suicide, there was sixty thousand Australians went to Vietnam and only about seven thousand out of that sixty actually got in field in combat. And if you would think there is thirty thousand got involved in combat, every time you pick up the paper someone is talking about how they killed people and when you
- 39:30 check them out you find out they were stuck in Saigon or Vung Tau. Of the sixty thousand that went to Vietnam, probably only a quarter to a third walked the weeds, actually went out and chased Charlie, to chase Charlie or be killed by them .So forty years after the events I have to sit down and think about all of my so called Vietnam veteran mates, of which two thirds are bludging
- 40:00 you know what I mean? They have taken the cream off the top of the disabilities and what is available to the veteran. That's once again human nature. When you sit down and think about Vietnam as a whole, was it worthwhile? Yes it was; I believe we went over there for a purpose and our purpose was honourable.
- 40:30 We never lost a battle, we, I say 'we', I am talking about the free world forces. The peace accord signed in 1973, the North Vietnamese were on their hands in knees like Korea and they signed a peace treaty, we all left in '72/'73 and came home .The South Vietnamese had disbanded the army unit because they trusted the North Vietnamese who then
- 41:00 came in '75 and attacked and defeated South Vietnam and yet you turn around and you get politicians and members of the media who still say today, twenty-five years after everything happened, we lost the Vietnam War. That is bloody bullshit. Crap. We lost the principles of which our government did not stand by us. As soldiers and the American
- 41:30 soldiers as well, when we first went over in '65/'66 we went over to do an honourable thing., five years later we were sold out by politicians who were influenced by weirdo long haired louts who were bloody university students who were coming up to be marble drawn out in the conscripts and of course you had all of the moratoriums and demonstrations. Politicians survive on the Australia office and they will sell their soul out
- 42:00 to stay in their seat, so we were sold.

## Tape 7

00:30 **Did you want to continue?**

No.

**No I just thought you might have been in the middle of...?**

Well I suppose to go back to the previous. It is all right for politicians to say we shouldn't be here or there, we are judged by our foreign policy and what we do for other people, and when you sit down and think about

01:00 Australia, let's only take it from World War II, prior to that we were part of the British Commonwealth and if Britain got involved in a war we went to fight with the mother country. Christ, the Boxer Rebellion, the Maori War, the First World War, the whole works. But after 1945, Australia had its own defence policy and for the first time it involved the United Nations war, why? To look after the poor people in South Korea getting overrun by Communism.

01:30 Then we got to Malaya and we become involved helping the Malay people because of the Communist terrorists and then we help the Malay because of bloody Sukarno [Indonesian President] and the Indonesians. Then we go to bloody Vietnam to protect the people from Vietnam. So what we do then? We then get involved in Rhodesia

02:00 and Uganda when that bloody black mongrel Idi Amin [President of Uganda] started going troppo [crazy] and started killing them. Then we get involved in the election in Cambodia, what did the army do? Go along and protect the people in Cambodia, then across to Africa with the UN [United Nations] and a whole lot of other things, then Somalia, we sent people into Somalia to help the Somalians. Then we go into Afghanistan because some

02:30 bloody mad bastard with a beard decides to get his mates to drive some aeroplanes, but once again to get rid of the Taliban government that had taken over in Afghanistan and ruined the lives of the people in Afghanistan. Then we go into Iraq to get rid of another mad dick who is still alive and he will go to

the chair or hang or whatever they do. Every time we have gone overseas and sent our men into war or spheres of conflict has been not for our good;

- 03:00 the only time we ever fought for our good was when we stopped the Japanese on the Kokoda Trail for Christ sake. Every other time we have gone to help some other poor bastard. Australians will keep doing that, I don't care if Labor is in or the Coalition [conservative parties], we might have a whole change and the Kiwis will come over and be our government; not many of the bastards left in New Zealand. But what I am saying is you will not stop Australians being Australians.
- 03:30 You will not stop this nation going out to help other people live and have what we have here. And when you sit down and talk to people about this, I am talking about people my age and school kids, I said that on Anzac Day this year and a teacher said, "We have never thought about it like that. We get bits here and there." and I said, "Well maybe you should start to have a look at
- 04:00 Australia's history and how the military has evolved." We didn't go to Vietnam for Bob Menzies [Prime Minister of Australia], it was policy at the time, anti-Communism and the North was Communist taking over the democratic republic of the South. Everywhere else, we went to Afghanistan to try and capture [Osama] Bin Laden but at the same time we got rid of the Taliban. I am sure there were possibilities
- 04:30 of weapons of mass destruction I think is the latest term in Iraq. Now that's the first time Australia has ever been involved in the invasion of another country when they haven't been at war with them, it is serious shit. And I was dead against it until I started looking into the situation and the relationship to United Nations resolutions. And for ten years,
- 05:00 ten years Idi Amin [probably means Saddam Hussein] had been giving the world the two fingers. So I had to change my mind and say, "Maybe it will be a good thing for Australia to go into Iraq." And then when I thought more deeply about it I thought maybe we should get rid of the United Nations, what have the United Nations done? In fifty years formed in 1947 to '48, they have not done anything. We have still got people in poverty, Africans killing Africans, ethnic genocide because of religion.
- 05:30 We really in the twenty-first century should start thinking exactly about where we want this ball flying around in space, how we want it to end up; and I said I wouldn't philosophise but there I have done it.
- You're welcome to do that. I would like to take you back to Long Tan though and to try and get a bit more detail about what happened that day**
- 06:00 **because although you told that story we would like to get as much detail about how things happened,**
- You ask the questions.
- Okay so what do you remember about how it began in terms of what you could see and what you could hear?**
- Okay 11 Platoon advanced in extended line, that's basically twenty-one or twenty-two guys ten metres apart in line
- 06:30 walking forward with headquarters behind them. So you have got three sections in a platoon, left section, centre and right section. Also assault formation, it is called extended line, it is called assault formation, it is what the cavalry do when they charge, you have seen it on TV all of the time. We didn't expect anyone to be there and so when the machine guns opened up from the southern base of Nui Dat 2, any small hill in Vietnam was called Nui Dat
- 07:00 and so this particular hill was called Nui Dat 2 and we rolled along and all of a sudden we're already had the contact, six or eight that ran into us. So, and they had bolted east, we should have been smarter and thought about this, these guys were well dressed, they were professional soldiers, we should have said, "Now where have these bastards gone to?" But no. Everyone was keen to kill as many as you can and we never expected any baddies. And so we rolled along and it
- 07:30 opened up and once they had killed some people in the left hand section we couldn't do very much.
- When you say once they had done that, can you tell me before that what did you see of people being killed, what could you see from your position?**
- Well at that stage of the game it hadn't started, we were still advancing our position and the actual Long Tan battle started when they opened up fire from my left.
- 08:00 And they were about seventy-five, eighty metres from the left hand section in a long creek line on the southern side of the hill. We were still in rubber trees and the rubber trees were only about thirty centimetres in size. They were young rubber they hadn't been tapped or anything like that, so they didn't offer any cover. The ground was flat sloping gently away from us to the east and we had a bit of weed around.
- 08:30 But nothing, it was wet season and weeds come up. So once the platoon had taken casualties, the two machine guns told me or us that there was at least a platoon or a company. So there would be thirty to a hundred guys in around that hill. We had a company behind us. Now the normal drill is to go to ground and bring fire to bear onto the objective and then the company, feed the information back to



- 09:00 company and then the company would then attack that hill. Well, we were half way doing that, I raced down and go the right hand section; Bluey Moore and I pushed them around to form an L shape so if you can imagine, if you look fire is coming from this side and I am bringing a group around this side to bring fire onto them and the rest of us are still facing that way. We do that and all of a sudden—that took five or ten minutes—all of a sudden I look up and we're being attacked from the
- 09:30 direction of the camera straight towards us. Now we're in the wrong sort of formation to defend that, so we had to get Bluey Moore's section to come around to form an L to protect that side, the south east side. We had a situation where I have got at least a platoon or more of Charlie on my left hand side and Gordon Sharp is on the radio getting artillery in and
- 10:00 his first fire mission was onto the hill where the enemy first fired on us. We then moved around to develop a fire support base, a base to be able to support fire onto the objective and we get attacked again by another eighty, top a hundred, now things are getting pretty serious because we weren't taught to do this sort of shit, we were chasing people in black. So we design our formation and
- 10:30 we start defending ourselves. The spot on the left never stopped firing, they never stopped shooting at us but only when they could see a target. We were getting assaulted between eighty to a hundred guys from the east. Gordon Sharp then switches target for the battery of guns to the east to start bringing in the fire; he was on his hands and knees and got shot in the throat. At that stage of the game I had about three or four dead in the left
- 11:00 hand section and another couple still alive They had six or seven guys and four or five of them were out. In fact in that section there were four killed and the other two were wounded, I don't think anyone in that section survived. As the battle developed we could contain these eighty to a hundred with small arms fire which we did very effectively. They then started to push around my left
- 11:30 hand side from in fact Nui Dat hill so they pushed around to come in behind me. That's when 10 Platoon had come down to try and get to us. And of course they ran into those people. They had a bit of a shit fight and Charlie went back that way where they had come from and Geoff Kendall had one killed and three or four wounded and he went back to the company. That's about the first half hour of the
- 12:00 two hour battle. For the next half hour Charlie kept attacking us and trying to infiltrate around to our south, my right hand side. Which the right hand section promptly took up with a machine gun and knocked off a few and then they took off again and moved further around. So for the next half an hour, half past four through to about five o'clock, we were
- 12:30 on our own basically isolated. I was waiting for something to happen; basically a company come and get me. A thunderstorm broke out, now you have seen some of the thunderstorms in Brisbane; you cannot see fifty yards in some of them, put yourself in a pine plantation and it is pissing down rain and you can't see anything. It is raining that hard, you have seen it rain down and bounce half a metre high off the ground it is that hard? Well that's what it was like. Armageddon had arrived
- 13:00 thunderstorm, lighting, tracer bullets, artillery, oh great movie scene. So there is not much you can do, you have to stay where you are because you have got dead and wounded, you were taught to stay there and people will come and get you. The problem was we were a hundred and five Australians and three Kiwis, five or six kilometres away from home base, it is
- 13:30 pissing down rain and we have got radio communications but that's all we have got. It is going to take them an hour and a half when they get someone onto APCs to come out. So we were basically stuck and isolated for the next couple of hours, there is not much we can do. So the object of the game is to shoot and kill as many as you can and neutralise the enemy fire so that you can in fact move. If you don't do that you're going to run out of ammunition and you're going to get killed. You have to
- 14:00 neutralize him and that's where the artillery came in. Once Gordon Sharp was killed and the lightning came down I then had to adjust the artillery in to neutralise the people that attacked and advanced from the east and they got to within about twenty-five metres of us when they were stopped by small arms fire from us. The people in the north had basically stayed there they were still firing on us and down the line,
- 14:30 and the people from the south had moved around and tried to get us at the back. At no stage of the game was 11 Platoon ever surrounded. We couldn't move because of the bullets flying around, if you had have got up you got bloody shot, a lot of people say 11 Platoon was surrounded, 11 Platoon was not surrounded, 11 Platoon was in a situation where in fact it could not move. And there was no need to move at that stage of the game, we were holding our own and when the artillery
- 15:00 came in, the advantage then came to us. I now had artillery that was close to me that was killing the enemy you know by the score, over a hundred and twenty dead just in front of me. so for me as the commander of 11 Platoon at the time, the battle for me had been neutralised. There wasn't much small arms fire coming into my platoon. I was
- 15:30 extremely worried about where I was because I was getting short of ammunition. I had Charlie around behind me to my right and I had more Charlie around to my left and I knew where company headquarters was; I didn't know 12 Platoon had moved up to within a couple of hundred metres behind me but I should have realised if I thought about it there had to be someone there otherwise Charlie

would have come around and come in the back door.

- 16:00 So when 12 Platoon went down behind and to the west of me they stopped the baddies coming around from the south, Dave Sabben, this is five, quarter past five and Dave Sabben is now getting involved with 12 Platoon in stopping the enemy from coming around. Now the great thing about Long Tan is that 11 Platoon ran into the enemy, now there was only twenty-eight of us, 10 Platoon, enemy tried to come around to
- 16:30 the left, 10 Platoon came down. There was only twenty-eight or thirty of them right? But they thought, the VC thought they were bigger, so they buggered off. And this is spread over a very large area; I am talking five hundred by four hundred metres which is a big area for a battle field of this type. When they went down to my right they ran into 12 Platoon, so everywhere Charlie went he ran into Australians
- 17:00 and in their reports later, they thought there was a battalion there, six hundred guys and there was only a hundred and eight of us. So when you sit down and think about the Battle of Long Tan as a complete battle you must consider that there were three separate platoon battles within the thing and then of course the final company battle where the company had come together and the concentrated enemy to attack and that's probably when they had five or six hundred backed up to hit
- 17:30 us. Because when we did consolidate and you talk to people from 10 or 11 Platoon they would wipe out the first row and then the second row would come and this happened for an hour. So you know those people were killed or wounded in the first, they would jump up and join the next mob as they came through. The waves, and they tried to knock us over by waves but because the artillery came in and knocked them off and they
- 18:00 got up and got close enough small arms fire, remember it is still pissing down rain and it is getting dark, on toward half past five, quarter to six. The artillery had to stop while we brought in the Australian choppers to drop ammunition and that was around about six o'clock. It was around about six o'clock that I got back to 12 Platoon and it might have been twenty or quarter to six, time didn't mean a lot then. And
- 18:30 by six o'clock the company had in fact got together, now for two hours we had been fighting the battle as there separate groups and all of a sudden there was a company that had something like twenty-five wounded and we had guys unconscious with safety pins stuck in their tongues so they don't swallow their tongue. Little trick you didn't know but if you ever get someone unconscious
- 19:00 you can put a safety pin in their tongue and they can't swallow their tongue and die. That's why they put that funny thing down your throat when you get pulled out of the surf, pull your tongue out and shove that rubber thing down. But we don't have rubber things on the battle field, we have safety pins. So Charlie had an hour to wipe us off, he had been trying for an hour and a half, and all of a sudden let's say after an hour and a half of intense combat of which he had lost upwards of a hundred or a hundred and fifty people to artillery,
- 19:30 killed and wounded. All of a sudden he has got somebody he can finally put his fingers onto and he can get his people and try and take us out. This was the most crucial part, that's the wrong word, this is the last phase of the Long Tan battle, we have done the first two phases with the platoons; we are now in the last phase of the 'rip, shit, or die' situation.
- 20:00 We had a resupply of ammunition which now gave us something to fight with and we were getting very low on ammunition, the company was. Considering that we didn't have any and had to get some more and 12 Platoon had shot off a fair bit and so had 10 Platoon. We waited for an hour and a half for APCs and we knew they were coming but we didn't know where they were or how long they would be, and we had about an hour of sunlight left, so it got to a situation where we had eighteen guns, some small arms ammunition, we were all together
- 20:30 and it was our [El] Alamein battle ,you couldn't go because you had twenty-four wounded blokes, you were not going to leave them there. This was it, you either defeated the enemy or they pissed off. That was the only two scenarios that could happen. As it was when the APCs were coming up the whatsiname
- 21:00 they were sending another battalion to go around the back of us and the APCs run into them and they shot them up and killed them off and this is D445 battalion which is the local boys, the local hoons, we had been fighting the fair dinkum bastards and these were the local hoons. And the local hoons didn't want to be involved in this, so they pissed off. "No we're not going to fight this war." and they buggered off. As the APCs advanced and we were bringing a lot of artillery in, they then
- 21:30 became involved at fifty cal's [machine guns] and it was dark enough for them to put their lights on, now can you imagine a battlefield with a couple of armoured personnel carriers with lights on and fifty cal's? Great movie scene. That was about seven o'clock. So for two and a half to three hours Charlie had busted his guts to knock us over. And for two and a half or three hours we had resisted
- 22:00 and we were prepared to resist until the last man really, we couldn't go anywhere so we had to stay. And I suppose when you look at the American Presidential Citation which is one down from a Medal of Honour, so it is their second highest award and the Presidential Citation is given to the company or unit

and it is in recognition of every man in that unit

22:30 was entitled to the American Distinguished Service Cross. That's top of the tree stuff, not down amongst the tin medals, this is fair dinkum shit. There is only two Australian Army units ever got that; that's 3 RAR in Kapyong—3 RAR, Princess Patricia Light Infantry and another unit saved Seoul from getting run over; you have most

23:00 probably come across this. And here instead of a battalion we have got a company that gets the same thing. And when I heard about it in '68 I just couldn't believe my ears; a PUC, Presidential Unit Citation? Shit that's heavy gear. And you know, whether we were entitled to it or not when I think back it's for what we did in the battle, not what we did after the battle,

23:30 there is a lot of crap going around saying the whole battalion should have got it, but it was a company fight. It was only the hundred and eight out there that were directly involved. When you think about Long Tan and the survivability of Nui Dat and what we were able to do for the next four or five years, you have got to consider that the VC were going to attack the Task Force otherwise they wouldn't have had so many people out there. We ran into them and we kind of stuffed their plans up.

24:00 If the intelligence report is right and we killed well over five hundred and there would have been another four or five hundred wounded we virtually bloody decimated their force by a half. There was never another attack of such magnitude in the whole of Phuoc Tuy Province. Such a battle in Phuoc Tuy Province; there were other battles against companies but there was never a VC battalion or anything like that. The VC in

24:30 Phuoc Tuy Province within two years had basically become non effective, now this is basically because the Australians went out; they knocked them over at Long Tan and then chased them all over the province. We killed a lot of VC between all of us, 5 RAR and 6 and 7 and 8; we killed a lot of VC. Phuoc Tuy Province in the big scheme of the battles that the Yanks had was most probably not important but

25:00 the importance of Phuoc Tuy Province, it had to be cleared of VC influence or neutralised because the VC could have come down and come up and attacked Saigon from the bottom. Military historians need to look at this whole concept as to why Phuoc Tuy Province was so important and it was important. As far as the end product of the Australians in Vietnam, Long Tan was that start, there were other battles and we gave Charlie a hard time.

25:30 Fire Support Base Coral and Balmoral was a bit iffy but they beat the North Vietnamese but then after the '68 and '69 Tet Offensive there were no VC left in Vietnam. It was all North Vietnamese Army, now you don't hear the politicians or the military historians talking about it but it is a fact.

26:00 **Bob can I interrupt you again because I want to try and get a bit more detail about your own personal story, I know that by '68/'69 you were out of there; I want to go back to that battle, when Gordon Sharp was shot; how did the men react?**

Well I don't really know; they most probably had their mate next door to them killed so Gordon Sharp being shot I don't think was all that important.

26:30 **But he was the platoon commander?**

Yes.

**So people did react in a certain way?**

Well no, the only person who is going to be in the shit now is me. Right? Soldiers in platoon are there to do what the corporal tells them. The corporals are told what to do by the platoon commander or the platoon sergeant. So you have got to get that sequence of orders. I don't think the average soldier, I don't think anyone in 11 Platoon really realised who was dead and who was alive until

27:00 about eight o'clock that night. They might have known Gordon Sharp was killed but it wasn't that important because his mate that he sleeps in the same tent with has been killed. He is most likely more pissed off about that than Gordon Sharp being killed. When I got back to the company [2nd Lt] Geoff Kendall of 10 Platoon said, "Where's Sharpy?" And I said, "Oh he has been dead for a couple of hours" and that knocked over Geoff Kendall big time because they were mates, they were both Second Lieutenants.

27:30 Gordon Sharp being a National Service officer and he was the first National Service officer killed and Geoff Kendall, they were both about the same age, was a Portsea graduate, but they used to go out on the piss together. And if you're allowed to read the book you will find that out because Kendall talks about Gordon Sharp.

**What about your own reaction, what did you do immediately that you knew he was dead?**

I knew I now had to do...

28:00 I went from worrying about how many killed and wounded and how many ammunition to say, "Jesus I have now got to fucking do this job." all of a sudden someone opens the door and there is a cyclone outside and all of a sudden you're standing in the doorway, there is no use closing the door and hiding behind the door, you may as well go out and fight the cyclone, go and tie down the various things. You

have got to do something, you can't hide in the house because the house will be blown away, you know what I mean?

28:30 So...and sergeants are trained, sergeants train lieutenants, so sergeants know what has to be done. The army is always training you to take over and if necessary do the next job, so Gordon Sharp has been killed, I most likely thought about it for a split second and then you take over and you have got to do it. I said to Gordon Sharp, "You keep on kneeling up there you're going to get bloody killed!"

29:00 And he said, "There is not anyone up there good enough!" and I said, "Don't bloody give me the shits." and he got up again and he got a round right in the bloody throat and killed him like that. He should have done what he was told, but I say that in retrospect and I shouldn't say that. He was trying to do a job as he saw it, but I don't think he realised the gravity of the situation at the time, if you put your hand up, you would have got three holes in your hand at the time. So it was the sort of thing; that's how did I feel?

29:30 I didn't feel anything; I already had three or four soldiers down, I had some more down, I had a couple of wounded, I was getting shot at in a serious manner, we were all under bloody small arms fire and you had to do your own survivability as well as do your job. So when we came to the time when Gordon Sharp was done I just went into automatic mode and did what I have to do and that's the way it happens. There is no big secret in this;

30:00 it is a service thing that you were trained to do and it is like a doctor in triage. If a situation arises he has got a couple of choices, he will then take the choice that is going to do best for his patient. And that is the same as anyone in the services, you are trained to do a job and you just get on doing that job and you have got a couple of choices and you have to pick the right one, because if you pick the wrong one the patient is going to die.

30:30 In this case 11 Platoon would have gone down. It is just one of those sorts of things.

**Was there a moment during the battle where you actually doubted you would survive?**

Oh a couple of times. Particularly I didn't think about it while I was directly involved, while I had something to do I didn't have time to think of myself or the consequences. I can distinctly remember when it was all over and getting back to the company and it was dark

31:00 and the APCs hadn't arrived and there was shit flying everywhere and 10 and 12 Platoon are getting guys killed, I can remember sitting there staring out into the gloom and I thought what a shit of a place and a shit of a way to die. And that's probably the only time that I ever considered my own fate. I never considered being wounded, I can honestly say, and that would have been half past six, the whole thing started after four. So you know it is starting to get to the situation where it looked pretty

31:30 hopeless and I am not the only one that sat down and said, "Oh well, there is not much, let's just go out here, hope the kids are okay." But you don't think about it, you don't have time to think about it. If you did you shouldn't be in the job in the first place.

**What was the mood in the company like when the battle did finally come to an end?**

Strange thing about being in any sort of combat

32:00 in '96 I said to someone at the war memorial, they said, "What is it like to be in combat?" and I said, "It is like your first sexual experience, you shake with anticipation, your hands get all sweaty, you do what you have to do because that's what's got to be done at the time and when it is all over, what's the big deal?" and that's basically what battle is all about. Your adrenalin is pumped up so high that you can

32:30 blank out virtually everything except what you have to do, and it is a strange feeling. I know why people are soldiers of fortune and mercenaries because they go on these highs and when you come off the high that's when the problems start. Like being a drug addict, while you're taking the drug and puffing the smoke, whatever you're doing, while you're in that state, if you haven't been there it is hard to explain. But when you come off it

33:00 and your body all of a sudden falls apart because it has been operating at a hundred and fifty percent for hours and you come down off that and start to shake and you get that long look, that far away stare and if you look at people from Belsen they have got that far away stare because they have come off, you just go on automatic. Being in combat is that type of thing, while it is on

33:30 and even after, if you are still involved you are very hyped up. You are there and you do your job, if you fall out of the tree then you normally fall out of the tree and go gaga, so it is the sort of situation where the body and the mind is doing what it has to do. In survival mode really because that's what combat mode is all about, him or you, when it is all over

34:00 you come off and you crack funny jokes and all sorts of humorous things because you survived and I suppose that's the way the body releases whatever it is. And then possibly hours later you really feel down; you start to feel shitty, it is worse than having a hangover, you, if you're in the army, you have to pick yourself up and keep going again. That's what we had to do the morning after. I didn't really come out of my high until we got back to

- 34:30 Nui Dat on the 21st or 2nd. It was full on all of the time and there was things I had to do, the position you hold within the command structure and if you fall out of that the whole system falls down so there was a fair mount of pressure on people to do the right thing and do it properly and so on. But that's what you become a professional soldier for, and that's why
- 35:00 I rejoined the army in '65; I wanted to prove that I had the capability of being as good as I thought I was. And I am glad to say I think I did my job and I think I did my job well.
- You were awarded the Military Medal for your role in that battle; what is your view on that medal?**
- The Military Medal for a commander such as me, on the back of a
- 35:30 Military Medal it says for bravery in the field. It was first instigated in the First World War, the 14-18 War, the Military Medal is for someone who goes out and takes out that machine gun or who commands and does things. The equivalent for officers in the Military Cross. In the situation of Long Tan, Harry Smith should have got a distinguished...a DSO [Distinguished Service Order],
- 36:00 the officers should have got Military Crosses which is the equivalent to the Military Medal but on the chivalry side of the Imperial Award, they are both third level medals and the Military Cross and the Military Medal is the same thing. They didn't get that, they got a Mention In Dispatches which is one level down. Once again, because the government fucked up and didn't know what to do. I was fortunate that I got a Military Medal, poor old Gordon Sharp was killed and otherwise he would have got an MID [Mentioned in Dispatches], he might still get
- 36:30 an MID, we fight in Canberra all of the time. The Military Medal, the Presidential Citation is for the company, the Military Medal is a personal thing but also for what 11 Platoon did, so it is one of those combinations. You talk to Harry Smith, my boss, he got a Military Cross, he should have got a DSO, he will tell you that the Military Cross or DSO is for his command ability plus what his soldiers did.
- 37:00 An MID, we fight in Canberra all of the time. So it is not a personal award as a Victoria Cross or something like that, it is one of those awards that can go either way depending on the situation and it can be combined.
- I know that you said nobody faltered during the battle but what about afterwards, did you observe anybody break down?**
- No, when we got back to Nui Dat some of the blokes said, "I don't want to do that again."
- 37:30 We didn't send them home; they got a job as a barman or something like that in camp right. There were others that moved to other companies and other jobs and there were those that stayed, I can't think of anyone from 11 Platoon that did not want to get moved out.
- 38:00 A lot of them blamed me for the deaths of their mates because I stayed there after Gordon Sharp was killed. But that's understandable. But they were never in command so they would never understand what the whole situation was. I can say now that if I had pulled back and left Gordon Sharp and the others there and if I had got back to the company I would have opened the front door for these people to keep on coming. By staying there we kept them at bay, kept them at the outer limits right?
- 38:30 Before we did concentrate, if we had concentrated an hour earlier and we still had to wait two hours for the APCs, we wouldn't have survived. So it is one of those sort of things. In relationship to how did the other guys feel? Some of them still hate my guts, "You got my mates killed." and all of this; some of them hated me for being who I am. But when you are a platoon sergeant you're not there to hug and kiss people and all of this
- 39:00 jazz, you are there to do a job and the sad thing is that subordinates, the diggers, particularly the National Servicemen, hadn't been in the army long enough to understand what the system is and how it works. Even today they don't really understand. Even today someone will say, "You killed my bloody mate." "I didn't kill your mate, we went to war and that's war." Personally I don't worry about it.
- 39:30 Some people still write stories about me; I don't like cats, some person wrote in the paper last weekend that Bob Buick is a bloody idiot because he hates cats, so warm and loveable. So no matter what you do in this world you're going to piss off someone, so you might as well piss off as many as you can. It is a great philosophy so long as your missus doesn't get cranky with you, that's the most important thing.

## Tape 8

- 00:30 We went up to [(UNCLEAR)] and I went up to Binh Hoa, you haven't got enough tapes for all of this.
- But when you did come down from that experience, how did you?**
- When I got back to Nui Dat what had happened the day before and for five days earlier did not count anymore. You come down off these extreme highs of adrenalin and

- 01:00 you know, pumped up situation, you normally come down with a big thud first and that mostly likely happened around about the 20th or the 21st. After we got rid of all of the enemy and cleared the battlefield I most likely went into some sort of a state of remorse. But when we get back to Nui Dat I have got to build a new platoon, I have got to create a new mob, so you don't have time for self pity or to try and
- 01:30 remember these things. There is a war to fight, you are an integral part of the war, you have a responsibility and as I said before, the platoon sergeant, he is the mother and the father. You are the only thing that matters, and this might sound bloody self important but the platoon sergeants and the corporals are the most important people in the unit. Officers can come and go and in fact generally do, but sergeants and corporals generally remain. So
- 02:00 irrespective of how many generals say they run a war and this and that, they don't run a lot. The NCOs run the whatsiname. I got back to Nui Dat and I had, we left three or four in Nui Dat who didn't go out with us so I had a dozen soldiers and I needed to have let's say three dozen. So I have got to get twenty guys in and squared away and into the routine that we had.

**So you dealt with it by occupying your mind with the job?**

Well I didn't have

- 02:30 a platoon commander so therefore I was still platoon commander, I had to do my job and let's face it old Harry Smith is on my hammer and Jack Kirby, "I haven't got this piece of paper." "Stuff your piece of paper Jack I have got other things to do." They also had their jobs to do and of course as you go down the line the person that doesn't give you the first piece of paper, the person at the
- 03:00 end of the line doesn't have his toilet paper, you know what I mean? That's the way the system works. For me, those at Long Tan went down to Vung Tau for a couple of days R & C, [rest and convalescence] get drunk, they did all crazy things down there, the wounded came out of hospital and went and got drunk and this sort of thing. Walking along pushing a trolley with this saline or whatever went through it;
- 03:30 bloody Yanks think bloody Australian stupid bastards, they went down to the club and they weren't allowed in because they didn't have a shirt on so those guys that could walk quickly went back and got their pyjama jackets and they put them on outside and went in and got pissed. The Yanks didn't know what to do, but that's Australian. For me in Nui Dat, getting diggers, getting stores ammunition in for distribution
- 04:00 to the diggers. Hundreds of thousands of things you have to think of and to get going.

**Did you have to write letters to the families?**

No, I leave that to the officers. Harry Smith did that.

**How important was it directly after the battle when you went in the next morning and see the bodies; how important was it to go in and see the bodies to have gone through two hours of conflict, how important was it to know you had killed some enemy and to see the aftermath?**

- 04:30 You like to see what you have done; you have some damage on your side and you like to see what happened to the other guy. As I wrote in my book, you know, the amount of artillery we had, when they came down it was like a big giant had come through the forest and squashed a hundred metres square, you know, and in that hundred metres there might be bits and pieces of twenty people, there was arms and legs hanging in trees and Christ knows what else. And if you looked around the
- 05:00 battlefield there was great big areas where there was no trees and rubber trees they might have been say five metres high and thirty centimetres in diameter, but they were blown off at the stumps and latex was dripping out the of the trees. On the morning when we went in on the 19th there was no birds singing, it was deathly quiet, there was nothing going on. We went in a fair way and thought, "Shit, not much going on." and then you start to pick
- 05:30 up the smell; first we didn't get in until mid morning and as you progressed down you come across these bodies and half bodies, no heads, one body had no arms, legs or head; the bastard was just a torso. Stark bullocking naked, all of his arms and legs had been blown off by the blast. They don't train you for that shit. You tend to say, it is like
- 06:00 walking into a slaughter house, that's what it was. A bloody slaughter house, thank Christ it rained because it washed all of the blood away. That would have been horrific. Once again you worry about your own but you don't worry about theirs, well it is a piece of shit you know.

**But as a trained soldier was it useful to see that the enemy was killed in that two hours?**

- 06:30 Yes everyone likes to think they're a winner and you don't know that you are a winner unless you have some sort of result.

**Because in Vietnam there weren't always situations where you got to see the result? The Vietnamese would take their bodies out so that situation was quite unique?**

It is very unique because in this situation and they was the VC 5th Division and they had a division of regular guys and a battalion from North Vietnam

07:00 but they only took out, well they left over two hundred and fifty bodies on the battlefield and weapons. They don't do that sort of thing. We were finding graves weeks later on operations. And they could only have died at Long Tan but they were never included in the body count. They claim the victory but they never saw anyone. You claim a victory like Sampson did;

07:30 he walked over and he put his foot on the lion and held a sword up in his hand and said, "I killed this lion." That's the victory.

**So when you walk into the situation was there a reaction, cheering or silence or people throwing up how did you react?**

We were all pretty stunned about the whole thing; even the guys that hadn't been there. We had one purpose; to go back and get our blokes.

08:00 That's all, we didn't care about anything else, we wanted to pick up our dead and wounded. We found two alive; Custar Meller and Jimmy Richmond, and there was thirteen dead, there was fifteen left out overnight. All we wanted to do was get them and once we got them we were quite happy to go home. That's what you do, you pick up your dead and off you go. But we stayed liked the rest of them and got involved. We, D Company, kind of

08:30 hung around where the battle area was and all the other companies went out. We got saddled with the job of burying and counting the dead, it was a pleasure in some way, I guess because you had won.

**Was it some sort of closure to the situation?**

Yeah that's a good word.

**Did the two wounded who had survived the night; what was their demeanour when you found them?**

09:00 Well Custa Meller wasn't very happy; he was in my platoon headquarters, I was getting shot at and I said to Custa, "There is a bastard up about four trees up," and he said, "I can't see him." And I said, "Well, I will shift him to the other side." So I fired one or two rounds and this guy stuck his head around the other side of the tree and Custa went bang! We did that two or three times and then he turned to talk to me and had his mouth opened yelling, because you had to yell,

09:30 and a round went in his mouth there and came out of his cheek and he had a great big hole in his cheek. Anyway I don't even know if he got...I don't think he knew he got hit. But he got shot in the leg on the way out, I didn't see him go down; apparently a couple of other guys saw him go down and he said, "Oh no, I can make it." But you know he couldn't keep up so he wasn't real happy, Custa wasn't really happy that he got left out overnight. He reckoned we were all a bunch of bastards. Jimmy Richmond was different; he was hit in

10:00 left hand section; he was hit very early and as I walked in I could hear him calling my name and I raced over, "Jesus, Jimmy Richmond great to see you're alive!" And so we got the medic over and stuff like that. He had been hit a couple of times. He should have died because he was lying on his left side and he had been hit in the right side. Theoretically they tell me that the blood from your lung will flow into your left lung and you will drown in your blood but Jimmy didn't do that.

10:30 He used to be in Coolumb, I think he is in North Queensland now, so he is still alive. Both National Servicemen, Custa and...I don't know where the other one is; South Australia? I can't remember now. I don't keep in touch. Old friends you see and "How you going?" Shake your hand but you don't go chasing them up.

**So after the whole thing was over when did you finally get R & R [Rest and Recreation]?**

11:00 I didn't. I got a few days off in September because Morrie Stanley got replaced; we got Barry Windsor in see? We rebuilt 11 Platoon and we were going to go out on operations in two weeks or something like that. And we needed a tent for the officers' and sergeants' boozers and Barry Windsor had been up to Binh Hoa and he said, "We will go up to Binh Hoa." So Harry Smith said, "Okay Bob, you can go with him." So

11:30 we jump on this plane, fly up to Binh Hoa and go to the 173rd Airborne; Jesus they do things differently. We got our tent. While I was there there was an argument in the sergeants' club type of thing where two Negroes had an argument so they went out into the street to have a duel with M60s; so they did the normal thing, had twenty paces, turned around and then killed each other. Strike, crazy sort of things. I got dressed up as an officer; I put Barry Windsor's pips on my shoulder, shirt with no

12:00 rank on it and we went across to the United States Air Force officers' club and they used to line up all of the tables and then ride trail bikes down into the hot boiling waters of whatsiname. The diner club was two levels, around about a foot and a half between levels and you had to stop before you fell into the tub of boiling water; crazy bunch of bastards but shit they could fly.

12:30 **Did you feel that you had almost scraped through without being killed yourself; did you have a new ease on life or something?**

Well I never was religious and I am not now. Never could...once I went to war I couldn't believe that stuff, that's probably upset a few religious people but that's the way I am.

13:00 I have always been a bit of a fatalist; if it is time to go, it is time to go. It is not my time to go yet because I am here talking to you. Your time might come before my time so I don't really worry about what's happening tomorrow. I must admit I now don't worry about what people think of me. I am me, if you don't like what you see then I am sorry about that mate but you don't run my life or pay my bills—up your nose with a rubber hose sort of thing.

13:30 **But is that a result of getting older or going through things like that?**

I most probably...when I came home after Vietnam in '67 I looked around at all of these bloody wankers who were marching ,they hadn't got out of their short pants and they were trying to...I thought, "Stuff it, I know who I am and I am not going to worry about anyone else". The most important people to me are my family and I really don't care a

14:00 fuck about anyone else and that's the way it is. I can't afford to do it. My family is more important than the lady next door or the bloke who is behind me. My family is mine and God help any bastard that does the wrong thing by them you know. I developed that and it has grown stronger as I got older because I can't see any other way that suits me.

14:30 **Before we go onto some of the questions of family and coming home there was an incident that happened with your friend Kirby was it?**

In the February? Yeah, we were out on operation and it is a funny sort of thing. Paul O'Sullivan was the Platoon Commander; D Company was always the furthest company away from anyone else, we were always out in the boonies ['boondocks' meaning isolated area] somewhere. Harry Smith was in hospital and a bloke by the name of

15:00 Mick Weaver, Company 2 IC was company commander see and he dropped 11 Platoon off to ambush a site and this was three o'clock in the afternoon right? I thought this was bullshit. Anyway I didn't like the situation and in the course of the afternoon while we were sitting around resting for this all night ambush, because there was about twenty three tracks coming into one place and you can't cover all of them, I found a couple of WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK [hen] eggs

15:30 and I was cooking the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK eggs next to the main track then went onto the paddy fields and Paul O'Sullivan who is five metres that way and Brown the medic was over here and I had a big stump behind me about a half a metre off the ground and I heard this Vietnamese jabber and I looked around the stump. I hadn't shaved for about four days and I look around and there is two Vietnamese kids, one had three or four fish and the other guy had an old German rifle.

16:00 And what am I going to do; I had better shoot these bastards or something. And I couldn't find my rifle, my rifle was around the other side of the log about a metre and a half from where these kids are. And the other people all froze, so I looked around again and they spotted me and I jumped up and yelled, "VC!" And these kids took off and I picked up the rifle and bang, bang, bang. Shot them and I said to Paul O'Sullivan, "'We had better get out of here.'" "No we have been given an order." I said, "Screw you,

16:30 get the platoon out of here; this place is not safe." I was always arguing; part of the duty of the sergeant .We had only left the place ten minutes we wouldn't have been two or three hundred metres away and we got a raid call, because Mick Weaver stopped and got into a place where they could see back and there was about twenty or thirty VC back where we had been see and they called artillery down on them. So we then

17:00 caught up with the company and harboured that night and the next night we were moving on. No, we were in a place called Long Ren which is down near the coast of Phuoc Tuy Province. We had stopped and the normal thing when you stop...we came down a track and the track forked, we took the right hand track and the other fork went down towards the coast. Bluey Moore's section was sent down to check out the track and guard our arse end. And he had gone down a hundred and fifty yards and there was three shots, bang, bang, bang.

17:30 That is a signal that the enemy are coming. So Bluey Moore hightailed it back, told us what was going on and we told company headquarters. And Barry Windsor was told to fire some artillery so he fires one or two rounds and he gave an add for fifty and asked for two round gun fire, now that's twelve rounds of high explosive. So we heard the first six

18:00 boom, boom, boom, boom, and next thing you know we could hear the bastards coming, "They are going to hit us, they're not going to hit the enemy six or seven hundred metres away." So I yelled out, "Incoming!" and lay down and put the pack over my head I was extremely lucky because on gun target line where the guns were, where I was, was a large buttress tree around about a metre and a half in diameter

18:30 and a round hit a metre off the ground and I was a metre this side of the tree so if that tree hadn't have



been there you wouldn't be here and I wouldn't be talking. We took the twelve rounds; 11 Platoon never got a casualty. It all fell in company headquarters and the platoon in front. So I go up to find out what's going on. I came back to Paul O'Sullivan and said, "Mick Weaver has been hit; you had better go up and take over." I will organise platoon defence so we took about ten minutes to do all of that. I go up to find

- 19:00 out what I can do and I find out Jack Kirby has got a hole in his chest you can stick your arm through. Jack was our company sergeant major, a good friend of mine. Before he left Australia he said, "I won't stop for red lights when I come home." Bullshit, normal type beer talk. He didn't, he come home, they put him in a coffin and he didn't stop for the red light. The hard thing, we lost four guys, four were killed and about thirteen or
- 19:30 fourteen wounded all because someone stuffed up. That's the hard thing. I would fight five Long Tans to go through one day like that with the artillery killing us. You are so helpless when you know something has gone wrong and you have got to lie there and take this crap. You can't do anything about it.
- 20:00 If you got up and got killed you would most probably get hit, take the easy way out, I might die here. There were five guys on a log, number two and number four of the five, if you think about five birds on a branch, two and four were Sergeant Jack Thomson and Mick Cray. Mick Cray lives at Glasshouse and Jack Thompson lives in Cairns. A round landed in front of them five feet away, killed number one and five,
- 20:30 seriously wounded three, the two sergeants never got a scratch, they got a bit of blast on them but never got any shrapnel. That's...talk about being a fatalist, you don't have to be a fatalist. We had a little pommy guy with us, Pommy Renshaw and he was in company headquarters and when I went up there; Pom's not looking real good and there is a great big hunk of steel sticking out of his neck here. This bloody long and I said, "Pommy, don't move, you have got a great big hunk of steel in your neck and it is
- 21:00 going to cut your jugular if you're not careful. For Christ's sake don't move." He said, "Can I have a cigarette?" and I said, "I will light it for you but you are going to have to get someone to take it out for you; I don't want you to move your head." So we went around and tidied up here and there and in around about twenty minutes we were operational again; everyone was on the ball; we had our casualties, we had our dead lined up ready to go out. We had no company commander because Mick Weaver he had been shot in the arm.
- 21:30 Barry Windsor who was the artillery officer, he had been hit; Ross Kennard the company commander he got hit, two of his soldiers were killed. We had the FR [forward] party had, one or two killed; we were a bloody mess. We soldiered on, got rid of them and continued, that's the way it goes.

#### **How did it come to an end that situation?**

Young platoon commander; in fact I was only talking about this last Tuesday,

- 22:00 young platoon commander, young officer, New Zealander who had been a Portsea graduate was sent home to retrain and sent back again. Right? When the guns fire they have what they call plotters, today it is all computerised but in those days you had circles and put marks on the plotters, you normally get two plotters to check against and the third check is the officer who has got his slide rule and all of this sort of shit. He wouldn't believe
- 22:30 the two plotters and said, "You will use my whatsiname." Now it wasn't one gun, the whole six guns hit it so it was a battery error and when you get the first six rounds and then no more and then a half a minute or a minute later the next six come in. And there is not much you can do about it.

#### **It was a fatal mistake though; were you angry about the mistake of it?**

No, what I did is when we got back to Nui Dat, I said to Harry Smith when he came out of hospital, Harry Smith was in hospital when all of his

- 23:00 soldiers were coming in. I will get back to Pommy Renshaw. Pommy Renshaw finished his time in the Australian Army, went back to England, joined the English Army; because he now had half an Australian accent he joined the intelligence corps and he was a spy in Belfast. Went across to Germany and also went to the Falklands and he was one of the last guys off the Falklands in the boats to go to
- 23:30 Goose Green when the Argentina barrage came in and put an Exocet missile up the arse of the [HMS] Sheffield and sunk the Sheffield. So Pommy Renshaw had been around; he has got a line, a cross. When he got to hospital he said, "I can't move". "And they said, "You are going to have to move." And he said, "I have got a chunk of shrapnel in my throat." And they put him on a stretcher to wheel him in and they grabbed his head to push his head back and it cut his jugular. And they immediately jumped on him and they cut him from here to here and they
- 24:00 put a clamp on both ends and saved his life.

#### **So you had been right about not moving?**

Oh yeah, you get feelings about these things. But getting...I got back to Nui Dat and I said to Harry Smith, "I am going down to 161 Battery, Kiwi battery." And he said, "Why?" and I said, "I am going to say 'hello'." So I walked into the sergeants' mess and the bombardier barman knew who I was and he said, "Sergeant, I would like you to leave."

24:30 "Why?" "The bar's closed." "I am going to have a beer in this bar before I walk out." And so of course he went. So I went around and I saw Tiny Hill who was the chief gunner sort of thing, used to be an All Black in his day and he said, "Mate, what we have done to you, we have ostracised ourselves, we don't want to see anyone." I said, "You can get your guys in the mess; I come up here for a beer."

25:00 I had a couple of beers and you know war is war, it is the same battery that saved my arse at Long Tan, the same mob, just because some officer come in and fucked the whole thing up, you can't blame the guys. So I had a couple of beers and within an hour and half no one cared about anything.

**So you see a friend die under a friendly fire situation?**

That's being a solider; you see a lot of friends die.

25:30 Just because one of your best mates is gone, when you roll the dice, as long as your number comes up it doesn't really make a lot of different. "Oh you're callous, hard, you have no feelings." Of course I have got feelings but my feelings are for myself. Not for you. So that's what happened.

26:00 I don't dwell on these things because if I go on, I become morbid and unhappy and Beverly gets the shitty end of the stick and so on; so you do what you have to do to live your life.

**So how did you feel when you learnt you were coming home?**

We knew we were coming home and we knew what date we were coming home. Everyone starts counting eggs because you're entitled to one egg a day in the army

26:30 so everyone would say, "I have got twenty-eight eggs to go." And so on. You don't really want to go out but you have to. After Paul O'Sullivan came and that's right, he got blown up with a Claymore bloody mine and he got shrapnel all over but he left the platoon and Harry Smith said, "Do you want another platoon commander?" and I said, "I am not going to train another one of those dickheads."

27:00 So for me being the platoon commander I got paid thirteen cents a day extra, and a second lieutenant got thirteen cents a day more than I did to make decisions that could be my life and death you know? That's the way it goes.

**So when you finally got home was it difficult to adjust to life back in Australia?**

I was...I came home; I had changed, you can ask Beverly.

27:30 I became very short tempered, would get angry at nothing and things like that. I had things to do in the army to continue on so it is not as if I came home and disappeared in the herd down the street sort of thing. I stayed in the green and I went to Townsville, got in a bit of shit with the RSM up there

28:00 one way or the other; that's a different story all together. And I got posted down to Ingleburn to train soldiers to go back to Vietnam. So I was still involved in being a soldier and training a soldier and so I was lucky in a lot of ways.

**Do you think that helped you assimilate into some sort of normality?**

I, well, see that's a good thing if you're in the job and you stay in the job; you just keep on rolling down the street, you don't think about what happened. You only do that when you get

28:30 old, while you're still doing what you're doing you don't think about, you try to make sure that you use what you learn to incorporate in what you teach.

**How did Beverly deal with the change that she seen in you?**

Like a normal loving wife did she accepted most of it until she got old enough to discover I was a complete arsehole

29:00 and then started to rule the camp. We had Robert come along in '68 so that kind of changed it and I got posted to Western Australia looking after CMF [Citizens Military Forces] and we had a great time in Bunbury. And then I got posted to Duntroon where I was training cadets at the Royal Military College and then I came back to 6 RAR as the CSM, so it has been constantly move, change jobs. And to be the wife of an army guy,

29:30 today it is easy, if the old man is away for fourteen days he gets compassionate leave to come home to service the wife. We were away for three months at a time and it takes a pretty special sort of girl to become an army wife, she has got to bring up the army brats and you know. And one thing you don't do is, 'wait until your father gets home', because when father gets home the one thing he doesn't want is kids cowering in the corner. Beverly never did that.

30:00 And she was, Beverly I have always tried to get Beverly to be independent to look after...in case anything ever happened to me, she should be able to go immediately into the role of, like platoon sergeant like I was put in. you know become the only one in the house. This is something people don't think of, you could go to work next week and a bus could run over you, you know? I don't know if you have kids, but what happens? Have you thought about that or your husband? In the army you do.

30:30 Most people in the army tend to think about it because you have got to be prepared for the day when the other one is not going to be there.

**And it is a risky job?**

No not really, we lost five hundred guys in Vietnam and there is sixty thousand went over, there is probably another two thousand got wounded all together, one thousand of which would have been seriously. We lose five hundred; that was over five

31:00 or six years, we lose over five hundred a year on the bloody roads. Tens of thousands wounded, so what is a risky job? You could plug that camera in and get an electric shock and die in my bloody lounge room.

**Let's not bring that scenario into it.**

What is a risky job? I was trained to do a job in my chosen field and

31:30 just because that chosen field is going out to kill people doesn't make that job any riskier. I think coppers in New York have a far greater risk than I ever had; who would want to be a copper in America? Jesus, everyone walks around there with a '48.

**So there was a family adjustment when you came back; was there a condition...I mean you had lived in the jungle**

32:00 **quite a different...?**

Well it took me a long time to get off the floor sort of thing. You virtually have to start over again. Tracey was twenty-seven months when I came home; she was thirteen when I left so she was, "Who is this turd?" I can remember we were going to go out and there was an argument and Beverly choofed off; we were living in Paddington and she took off to catch the tram and I have got this little blonde sheila, two and a half,

32:30 screaming her lungs out. I didn't know what to do; I had only been home a week and a half. So I put her in the car and took her up to the bus stop and left her with Beverly. That's stuffed her idea up of going to town. She cooked me a beautiful sweet curry but I had been eating sweet curries in Vietnam, all American stuff is sweet and we were using American rations and so I threw my bloody plate out the door, "If you're going to give me a curry, don't give me this shit!"

33:00 These type of things.

**How long did it take for that to start to settle down?**

Maybe a month or two. What do you mean? I am still trying to settle down.

**No, a month is a fine answer.**

She still tells me I am an arsehole and I most probably am.

**But you stayed together so there must be something. It is a very difficult adjustment; we have heard that before.**

33:30 Well as I said, for someone to be a fair dinkum army wife she has got to be a special sort of bird. What you do to your kids and how you bring up your kids is a joint responsibility. I have two great kids, neither ever in strife, both got their own kids now, very well respected amongst their own peer group;

34:00 really you don't need much more. You have an exciting life; do things you want to do. Raise a family that are melded and seem to be acceptable, particularly now in 2004 you know? There is not too many families...fractured families all over the place, I am talking about good solid families. And so if there is any credit I have got to give credit to Beverly and her strength got us to where we are today.

34:30 I helped a bit but it was mainly her effort.

**When you look back at your service experience, particularly Vietnam, what are you most proud of?**

Being an infantry platoon sergeant. That particular job has to be the most trying, sorrowful...I wrote it in the back of my book but I can't remember all of the words. It is one of those

35:00 things where you get so much enjoyment out of what you were doing but you have to balance it out with, when you got to war you're going to lose the kids you have got and have to get new ones in and all of this. So it can be exciting, loveable; it can be horrifying, anything you like to put in the pot to turn out a platoon sergeant that's what you have got, you go through all of those emotions. Good platoon sergeants and let's face it there are a lot of platoon sergeants who carry the rank of platoon sergeant but there is a special responsibility

35:30 for platoon sergeants, they run the infantry and if you don't have good sergeant in a battalion then the battalion is not a good battalion. Part of that build up of course is your peer group that you have served

with before who taught you the tricks of the trade; the regimental sergeant major has got a responsibility to his company sergeant major and so

36:00 once again the family tree comes down and you have got to train your corporals to be good platoon sergeants so that's how the Australian and the British system has worked, and it has served this nation for well over a hundred years and we have still got good sergeants. Unfortunately not every sergeant is going to be in the position I was; I don't think there was ever another platoon sergeant went to Vietnam, ever was in the position I was in. In some ways I am a little

36:30 bit unique. Because I am who I am, you know what I mean. Not many people have done what I have done, survived, and then continued on in the service and in normal life so I am a pretty lucky sort of bastard. I am glad I am around.

**You have such a varied experience and we only have a day to cover your life story but is there anything we have missed that you would like to talk about?**

37:00 I suppose if I am around for another fifteen or twenty years, I don't suppose you can look much beyond that that brings me to my mid eighties if the next fifteen or twenty years are as good as the last fifteen or twenty years I don't have a problem right? There are things Beverly and I want to do, spend more time with our grandkids and we will do that because Tracey is coming back from Townville, taking a house in

37:30 Keperra. So we will just go along as it is, reject the people that give us the shits, hold the people that love us, that type of thing. I don't have any regrets. From the time I was a kid in Natal in the war playing with bloody Zulu kids, doing my own thing, collecting scorpions and that sort of thing, coming to Australia, fighting for my own rights, breaking arms of other kids that's all,

38:00 I still laugh at getting sacked when I didn't refuel the ferry but shit that's what boys do, you can't rely on fourteen and a half year olds. I proved that. Throughout the sixty-four years I have been walking on this earth I have had a good time. I suppose I could have changed things to make it better but that's hypothetical,

38:30 if I change things I will probably end up in a heap of shit. You have just got to roll along. I think the important thing is you do what you do in your life so it suits you and so you don't deliberately go out to hurt other people. If people get hurt on the sideline because you are doing something you believe should be done, that's the way life is. But you don't go out deliberately bloody pushing down people or standing on their heads for you to get to the top of the heap, that's the problem we have today, everyone wants to stand one someone else's head

39:00 to get higher, instead of getting up there on their own volition and ability and hard work. Beverley and I instilled it in our kids and they have both done extremely well because that is the philosophy they took with them and that's what they will pass down to our three rugrats [children] Daniel, Georgia and Liam and they are the three rugrats, all under bloody four and

39:30 so we have got a few years in life where we will have a ball and I daresay we will have a fight with our kids because we want to do what we want to do with our grandkids and they most probably don't like it but who cares, they are our grandkids; you do it with your grandkids but don't tell us what to do with our grandkids. There will be fights and yelling and screaming but shit, who cares, that's the way it is.

40:00 **All right it has been fantastic to talk to you today Bob we appreciate your time and hearing your life.**

You have been patient; I kind of rambled on a bit. I am glad you got what you wanted.

**It has been an honour thank you.**

**INTERVIEW ENDS**

**NB. This transcript is of an interview filmed for the television series, Australians at War in 1999-2000. It was incorporated into the Archive in 2007.**

## Tape 9

12:24 Vietnam in fact came out of the blue. We had had been involved in Malaya and

12:30 then currently in the '64, '63, '64, '65 we got involved with the confrontation in Borneo which I wasn't there. All this was good background because in '65 the Australians committed a battalion of soldiers to Vietnam. We had Training Team [Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, AATTV] soldiers already there but we had finally committed a battalion of approximately six hundred to seven hundred people with supporting arms with a battery of artillery, a troop

13:00 of APCs [armoured personnel carriers] and supporting arms. That then developed in a bigger role where they formed the Australian Task Force, which was in fact a brigade consists of three battalions

and three batteries of guns and a whole lot of ancillary supporting arms like engineers, transport, aviation but because we were in a very fast growth period in '65,'66, '67 we only committed,

- 13:30 or the Australians only committed two battalions and therefore not being the three battalions called it task force and not a brigade as such. In '66 I went over to Vietnam with the 6th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment to replace 1RAR or the 1st Battalion that had been based in Bien Hoa. This was a very large air force base about forty kilometres the other side of Saigon. 1RAR came home and the 1st Australian
- 14:00 Task Force went into Vietnam and it consisted of the 5th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment from Sydney and the 6th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment from Brisbane. We then had two batteries of Australian artillery and a New Zealand battery had in fact gone to Bien Hoa and then rolled on down to Phuoc Tuy Province because the 1st Australian Task Force was established right in the middle of Phuoc Tuy Province because that was our responsibility as selected by our commanders and things like that.
- 14:30 There were two camps or two bases, two Australian bases in Phuoc Tuy Province. There was the operational base at a place called Nui Dat, which is around about the middle of the province and we had a logistics base which included all the ordnance people, the trucks, the hospitals and all the supply and material requirement based at Vung Tau, which is on the coast and had the ability of being supplied by large aircraft as well as shipping.
- 15:00 The Australian task force moved into Nui Dat June, May/June of '66. Now we just walked into a rubber plantation of young rubber, when I say young rubber it hadn't got to the stage where they had formed, started to tap the trees. The trees were approximately five to six metres high and a tree trunk I suppose would have been approximately fifteen to twenty centimetres
- 15:30 in diameter so there's pretty young trees in various stages of growth. We'd gone into this place underneath these trees in the middle of the monsoon season with nothing more than what we carried on our back.
- I think the thing that comes to my mind most readily
- 16:00 is that none of us had ever been shot at. We arrived in this country in the middle of the monsoon and we conducted daily patrols, ambushes to keep the place secure because the Australians have always patrolled extensively and made sure that no baddies came within around about three or four thousand metres. About four to five thousand metres south of the task force base was a village or a very large hamlet that was called Long Phuoc. I
- 16:30 say was because it had been destroyed by the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the Americans, to enable us to establish our base. Long Phuoc and a place called Long Tan in fact had been traditionally the Vietnamese or the Vietminh and Viet Cong home villages, and of course we could not afford to have enemy camps so close. 173rd Airborne had gone in there and they had cleared the place. Our job in 6RAR on our first operation
- 17:00 was to in fact to search and clear and destroy any buildings or anything like that that could be used for and by the VC. We found a number of tunnels, some big ones, some small ones. We found a number of caches, medical equipment and things like that. So within a matter of weeks of arriving in country we had in fact impacted onto the VC by eliminating some of
- 17:30 their stores, equipment and also knocking out their homes. This became very important later because once the Australian concept of warfare against guerrillas was in fact like oil spreading on water. You put a few drops of oil and that spreads over the water and the oil being the Australians pushing the VC out and away from their support. Because the VC ,like your Communist terrorist with Ho Chi Minh's teachings,
- 18:00 they can only survive with the support of the families and their friends. If they haven't got that support they starve, they'd lack information and they're incapable really of operating like they were. So for the Viet Cong and the National Liberation Front, which was the headquarters, their whole plans have now gone on a reverse role because we had arrived in and their main lifelines had been threatened, by the Australians occupying the task force at
- 18:30 Nui Dat, and the operational conditions as Australians were applying into the bush. It was during this clearance of Long Phuoc that we came under fire for the first time. Now I'd been in the army for many, many years and I hadn't been shot at and it's a real scary thing. You hear the crack. You hear the crack before you know where the bullet comes from. This
- 19:00 happened to us on three or four days running. On the second and third day we really started to find these fellows and we couldn't find them. The VC that we were up against at this stage of the game were the local guerrilla, the local bloke who lives in the village who's got a World War II rifle and most probably lived in Long Phuoc himself. And of course knew all the tunnel systems and things like that. We had no idea of where this guy was coming from
- 19:30 or going to and as I say for three or four days he really give D Company a hard time, or a couple of platoons in D Company a hard time. The VC system was, at the village level they had their political groups and a very small military cadre that used to carry food and messages and things like that. That then developed into a provincial battalion who was our main enemy in Phuoc Tuy Province and that was

- 20:00 D445. This provincial battalion had been pretty successful in what they were doing over the previous years and we were to find out that the VC soldiers in D445 were possibly getting up to the same grade as the Australians. They were good, aggressive, very brave and they fought for a cause and wherever they could they really give us a hard time. This occurred on our next battalion Operation Hobart where they run into Bravo Company
- 20:30 6th Battalion and really give Bravo Company a bit of a touch up. We lost, I think there's around about eighteen or twenty people killed or wounded. I think we lost two or three killed and about another dozen or thirteen or something wounded. This was the very, very first time that we in 6RAR had really struck the enemy, who in fact were prepared to attack us. We had been psychologically trained or accepted to believe that this is going to
- 21:00 be something like Malaya. All of a sudden Vietnam was not Malaya and we were up against a fair dinkum, young, dedicated, politically-minded young soldier and a group of men about the same age as us who in fact wanted us out. We were classified as American mercenaries, although we paid our own way all the way through Vietnam and we were not mercenaries for the Americans. We independently operated and I think, you know
- 21:30 that we can as Australians we're most probably the only country that can turn around and say that we didn't receive any handouts financially or politically to assist the United States in defending what they called democracy in those days and the domino theory by eliminating or stopping the Communist move down, which in fact was the big cat's cry in those days. So for myself and virtually everyone in the 6th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment who had never been
- 22:00 shot at all of a sudden we realised how this is bloody fair dinkum. It is not the sort of thing that we had psychologically built up in our mind. Hobart was in fact a changing of the guard if you like as far as the growing up and becoming fair dinkum soldiers. Hobart was an eye opener for myself. We had found a number of very large VC camps. They had built these camps underground.
- 22:30 They had in fact cleared fire lanes. They had gone through the bush and cut all the little branches off from around about ground level to about two feet high so they can lie down or sit in their pits and all they've got to see is your legs and then they look at the legs and aim up and go bang and they've got you. While you were walking you can't see through the bush and you can't see them. So this is the sort of thing that I personally discovered that these guys were good soldiers and after contact
- 23:00 with Bravo Company 6RAR, which is about three platoons of about thirty with a headquarters around about a hundred and eight, a hundred and ten guys were attacked by, possibly a group as big as them. We don't know. But in this attack as far as defence go there's only basically one platoon of about thirty Australians. We were being attacked. The other two platoons being behind because when they attack they only attack at one point and then they would try to infiltrate
- 23:30 behind you. So Operation Hobart was, for me, a waking up that I didn't really come to terms with until around about a month later. The first, in fact the whole of Vietnam was full on all the time. You really couldn't relax.
- 24:00 I didn't see mates of mine for years, you know for, I hadn't seen for months because they belonged to another company in the same battalion. The duties of a infantry soldier in fact is to walk the weeds, to search and destroy, to kill or be killed and therefore you most probably try to kill the other guy before he kills you otherwise not a real good story. And it was,
- 24:30 if I can talk about the life in Nui Dat for D Company, and it will be the same for every other infantry company. We had our own perimeter to protect, which in fact was generally around about a hundred and fifty to possibly two hundred metres in linear length with around about ninety blokes. So we had to have approximately sixty forward and another thirty back and then the headquarters behind that. The routine was tonight
- 25:00 you'd be in the forward defence line, the FDLs, in the pits protecting the camp or your sector of the camp. There'd be a section of approximately eight or nine guys in one platoon's area and then under the section of another platoon area and so on and then the headquarters. So we covered the whole battalion, the whole company area with about thirty guys. The rest of the guys were in their tents. A platoon would be out on ambush for that period of time because most ambushes
- 25:30 were done on a twenty four or thirty six hour period in conjunction with patrolling. And there would be a platoon that had already done one night in the FDLs are preparing to go out on tomorrow for patrol and possible ambush and of course there's a platoon outside. So the three platoons in the company were saturated twenty four hours a day with operational duties. There was never any time off. For the first three or four months we didn't, you couldn't get a beer. Now the old
- 26:00 story two cans per day per man per day perhaps was rarely fair dinkum. We couldn't get any beer from Australia. The beer we got was some American beer. VB beer was sent to Bien Hoa because the Australians were supposed to be complaining, "There's no Aussie beer only American stuff." So all of a sudden we started getting pallet loads of VB tin cans and they'd been sitting out in the sun for anything up to six or seven months and I tell you
- 26:30 what, VB doesn't travel too well in the tropics and it tasted, if I may so like cow's piss. It was bloody

- terrible. Once we got our system working and we started to get Australian beer and American beer, although personally I like the American beer, so things developed and life became a little bit homelier but this did not happen until around about, I suppose October/November because for the first three
- 27:00 months we had to build a base. We had to protect the base as well as go out, look for Charlie, the VC, and try and protect ourselves as well as spreading oil, as I spoke about before.
- 27:30 In Australia we have, in most of Australia just a normal climate. Now when you're flown out by 707 in those days, one of the old Qantas 707s within twelve to fourteen hours you go from a place like Brisbane and you land in a very tropical country right at the beginning of the monsoon season. Now for those of you who live in Darwin or have been in northern Queensland you will understand. It is a
- 28:00 very oppressive heat, and when I say heat it is only around about thirty three to thirty five degrees but the humidity in the morning is most probably eighty percent, by lunch time it's ninety percent, and you're starting to dribble sweat off your nose into your eyes. By three o'clock in the afternoon the clouds build up and the thunderstorms arrive. Now try and imagine that you're in a rubber plantation, or any sort of plantation and every afternoon at four o'clock in the afternoon down comes the rain. You have
- 28:30 to build a pit to fight from to save your life until you get mortared or artilleried or even if you're attacked you've got to fight from the pit. Try and consider that there are no kitchens. You are eating what they call a twenty four hour ration pack for breakfast and for lunch, which is a small tin and a couple of biscuits and in the afternoon the cooks decide they're going to give you tucker. So what can they brew up? They can make some marvellous things the cooks
- 29:00 but in Vietnam because we had no fresh rations, and it was still all tinned stuff in the first month and a half, six weeks the cooks would make a curry or they'd make a stew. There could be potatoes. There could be some rice. They would put it into a dixie, which is an aluminium box with a very short lid on it, lip on it and you'd go along and you'd put your dixie out and they'd put in the rice and then they'd put in the stew and you walk out from underneath the tarpaulin
- 29:30 and it's absolutely pissing down rain and all of a sudden instead of having this much food in your dixie you've now got this much because within seconds your dixie filled up with water. So your tucker was very lukewarm. Today it could be a curry, tomorrow it could be a stew, tomorrow you didn't know what it was anyway, but that was what we had during the evening meals. This continued most probably until around about the September/October when we started to get
- 30:00 set up properly, we had to get, build huts. We had to start from, everything from the ground. Telephones, barbed wire, pits, listening posts which are in fact early warning systems out in the front. The whole concept, if you can think of a group of guys going into the bush, sitting down and building a village. That village then developed into a town of about five to six thousand that had TV,
- 30:30 air conditioning, bitumen roads, or nearly bitumen roads, an airstrip but when we arrived there, there was nothing. It was just plain bush under a rubber plantation and when it rained the red soil stuck to your boots so that you were carrying, most probably half a kilo extra on each foot. Now that was, that was normal. That's what the infantry guy and the Australian soldier,
- 31:00 that's what he's trained to do and that's how he lives, so it wasn't all that bad. I've been in Malaya and experienced before but I think some of the National Service kids got a bit of a shock because some of them had come straight out of Tasmania and Melbourne and Sydney or Tumburumba or some place in the Blue Mountain, the Snowy Mountains and without any idea have landed in a foreign country with the smells, the sky, everything is totally different to what they have
- 31:30 in Australia and all of a sudden you're in there, you're getting shot at and trying to survive, not only the climate and the conditions but survive to make sure you weren't shot by Charlie. So that was what Vietnam was. It was totally different to any other place I had been to because one it was war and second the climate was so oppressing during the wet season, during the monsoon that developed into a very, very dry tropical Northern
- 32:00 Territory. So if you live in Darwin you know what I'm talking about.

## Tape 10

- 00:57 **So tell me about your experiences**
- 01:00 **in that and you know within, just give us a one word answer, that's all we want.**
- Okay Malaya in the late 50's saw the cessation of the Communist terrorists and in 1961 they declared the Emergency finished. We arrived 1960 and '61 I went to Malaya with the 2nd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment and like most of the guys that were there in the 2nd Battalion we did
- 01:30 operations, two operations up on the Communist, up on the Malayan border, Malay Thai border to chase

any remnants of the Communist terrorists who were in fact still hovering around. The great thing about Malaya for me personally is that I learnt all my military skills and operational needs as a private soldier, then as a lance corporal. And I'd say that that is most probably the greatest benefit for Malaya for everyone that went

02:00 to Vietnam. It was one of those kindergarten primary school getting ready to go to Vietnam and really get some, Vietnam was totally different to Malaya and Borneo. Vietnam and Borneo, Malaya and Borneo were in fact the kindergarten teaching stages for the Australian. And I think that is why the Australians performed so magnificently in Vietnam in the eight to ten years we were there.

## Tape 11

00:55 **Now I'd like to talk about**

01:00 **what an infantry soldier wears. What he's expected to carry ...**

Being an infantryman is a little bit different to any other job in the army. It is the only job in the army where you have to carry everything that you need from shaving gear, toothbrushes to all your tucker plus your ammunition, your bandages,

01:30 everything for your own personal survival in the bush. When you're in a tropical area you don't carry any coats or raincoats or anything like that because when it rains, it rains and you're wet anyway from the humidity and the exertion that you've got to do. But if I can try and paint a picture, you've got ankle high, a little bit higher than ankle boots on. You've got green trousers that turn black when they get

02:00 wet. Around your waist you would carry most probably three or four water bottles, and they're all around about a litre in size plus two or three pouches of ammunition which most probably contain possibly a hundred rounds of ammunition plus a machete. Now that's that they call fighting order, that, you can throw your pack off and survive with just that. In your pack you'd have your sleeping bag or a ground sheet. A hootchie which is a nylon

02:30 sheet of around about three metres by two and a half metres which you'd put up to keep the rain off you at night time. You may carry a spare set of clothing. No-one wore any underpants and I didn't wear any socks simply because your feet were always wet and if you want your toes to fall off you wear socks twenty four hours a day without removing your boots because that's what you did. We lived like this for anything up to possibly a week to two weeks at a time with no shower. You cleaned your teeth.

03:00 You shaved because the army said you shaved. If you didn't shave it was because they suspected that there was a, some disease around in the water. The water, we could carry enough food for around about three or four days. After that they'd give some sort of re-supply. In the wet season you were expected to find your own water. We used to catch water off our hootchies by placing our little tin mug underneath the corner and that filled our water bottles up. If it didn't rain

03:30 you had to take water out of the creeks. Now round about when we first went over there around about the July/August the monsoon is still developing and all the creeks and the pools are green slime. We had to take water from green slimy pools that had been lying there for possibly six or eight months. We used to brush the slime away and then fill our water bottles and put in chlorine tablets to purify the water. After a while you didn't know whether you were drinking water or slime and it didn't really make

04:00 any difference and most of your water you consumed was by coffee or some other beverage. It's one of those sort of things that it sounds extreme hardship but we were trained and expected to do that. Now that was the infantryman. The other arms that supported us and remember that everyone there is to look after the infantryman. The artillery is there to look after the infantryman and so on. It's a two way street because when the artillery are out in the bush we have to

04:30 put a cordon around them and protect them. There is always a company of soldiers protecting the battery of guns in a fire support base. When they move away out of camp and they set up to give us artillery support they require infantrymen around them to patrol out and to protect their base just like any other base. But when the infantrymen were walking and we could walk anything up to eight to ten hours a day, our total gear and equipment including ammunition, and if you carried a machine gun

05:00 you most probably would be carrying possibly fifty to sixty kilos. If you carried a rifle you're most probably carrying forty to fifty kilos. And this is day in day out for weeks and weeks on end. So you develop very strong back muscles. As you get older your knees fall apart and most of the young fellows who were not professional soldiers were more than happy to see the end of Vietnam because they could put their rifle away and take the pack off their back which would have been on their, which they would have been

05:30 carrying for three hundred and sixty five days a year because you never went anywhere in Vietnam without your weapon. Even in camp you carried your rifle around with you. And as I say you know you carried your home, the infantryman carried his home for possibly three hundred days out of three hundred and sixty five days. That is about the time that we spent in the bush in the year, three hundred



and sixty, about three hundred days out of three hundred and sixty five days. So there wasn't any great time for sunbaking and you know

06:00 taking in the sights and things like this. It is one of those things. As I said we accepted it, a lot of people didn't but infantrymen do.

**Finally just touch on R&R [rest and recreation]. I mean at Vung Tau you would be surfing with Viet Cong?**

Nui Dat base itself in fact was, all Vietnamese were excluded from Nui Dat base. The Americans used to have them in or

06:30 just outside their camp selling soft drinks and stuff but we had an area that no Vietnamese were allowed in and that was task force base at Nui Dat. One of our earliest support group down at Vung Tau in fact was set up in a Vietnamese city or town and they had a lot more contact. We used to go down to Vung Tau for a day off. When I mean a day off, you'd get, possibly go down at eight o'clock in the morning in the truck, there'd be twenty

07:00 of you in a truck, one truck all the way down to Vung Tau and you'd get a day down there and you'd drink and carry on and be normal men for a day. Your leave, you didn't get any leave for six months. You were not allowed to get what they call rest and recreation leave, which is leaving out of Vietnam to a place like Singapore, Hong Kong and later back to Australia. But you had to be there six months and you then had five days off. Five days from the time you left your base to the time you came

07:30 back in a place like Singapore, Hong Kong or Taipei. They were the three destinations and Bangkok, were the four destinations available when I was over there. There was also what they called rest and convalescent leave, R&C. This was down at Vung Tau for three days. So some of the guys used to go down there when it was their turn to spend a similar type of thing down in Vung Tau. They'd lock their weapons up in the villa down there and

08:00 they'd go into town and carry on. There was always a curfew. There was always military police everywhere. There was VC because they also used Vung Tau as an R&C centre and if you were down in a bar having a beer you didn't know if the other guy was a bad guy that shot at you yesterday or you shot at him and if you're down on the Back Beach, the Australians had their own swimming area. No VC were allowed into any part that was controlled by Australians or Americans. But if you happened to wander somewhere else and go for a swim

08:30 you were bloody stupid firstly for doing it, but you were most probably sitting down sunbaking next to a VC or his girlfriend or whatever the case may be. So Vietnam not only was different to everywhere else because the threat of danger, and I'm not saying deadly danger, but there was danger every day of the year every hour of the day. It made no difference where you were in-country, that was what happened. That was where Vietnam was

09:00 different. There was no line of demarcation between them and us. It was all in and that's the way it was. As a platoon sergeant and regular soldier my personal task that I took on myself was to keep as many of my soldiers alive as possible. This was becoming more and more difficult

09:30 because when the pressure is on you, and on all of us you tend to become slack and idle and not concentrate on the most important things and that is doing your job properly. I was starting to become a little bit uneasy after Hobart when B Company got shot up and then things started to develop. The intelligence reports we were getting about the VC moving around the place. The

10:00 patrols from the battalion, of the 5th Battalion and also the 6th Battalion were in fact having more frequent contacts. I didn't put a lot of thought into it but there was an uneasiness there. This came to a culmination on the night, I think it was the 16th or 17th [August 1966] when A Company 6RAR was out on a patrol and my platoon, 11 Platoon was over in A Company, looking after A Company's area of defence on the perimeter

10:30 and it, this was the night that the VC decided that they would mortar the task force. Now they were in fact falling some kilometre, kilometre and a half away from where A Company was, where I was located but this was not in the script. This was not supposed to happen and yet old Charlie's out there with a couple of, most probably three or four mortar tubes, and I don't know, I suppose he would have dropped possibly eighty to a hundred, eighty two millimetre mortar bombs that landed in the artillery and engineers

11:00 and around task force headquarters, a long way from me, as I said about a kilometre and a half or possibly two kilometres away. We did not know if we were going to be attacked that night, if this was a prelude for attack, so in fact all of a sudden the war had come to our own home, in our own backyard. Something that I had never thought would ever happen. Nothing did happen that night. The next day, the next afternoon I received two reinforcements who were subsequently killed twenty four hours later

11:30 and on the morning of the 18th of August, that is when A Company is returning from their patrol 11 Platoon went back to D Company and we were most probably a kilometre and a half away so we had to walk down and go back to D Company. We got there round about half past nine I suppose, nine o'clock, half past nine and then we got the word that D Company was going to go out that day. We weren't

planned to go out on the 18th, we were all going to go up and see Col Joye and Little Pattie [Australian entertainers]

- 12:00 but all of a sudden get your gear on we're going out to relieve B Company, because B Company had been out on the day of the 17th and overnight the 17th and 18th looking for where the VC had fired their mortars from and what damage had been done on account of bombardments from the Australian artillery. This is what it was. We were going out to go and find out where Charlie's gone. We had no idea how many were out there. We thought, oh well, this is going to be normal. He had fired a few bombs. He shot at
- 12:30 us and now he's going to rack off. 'Shoot and scoot' as the Yanks used to say. Anyway just after lunch a hundred and eight guys from D Company walked out carrying all their gear for a three day patrol. We met B Company, exchanged pleasantries with B Company while the commanders changed over intelligence information and various things. I spoke to one or two blokes I knew and after about an hour and a half we had lunch and we decided B Company was to go back home and we were
- 13:00 going to take over. We left our harbour position and that's the position that we were in and all around the fence during the exchange over from B taking over, D taking over from B. We had moved out...
- 13:30 In Vietnam when you're moving around, particularly on patrols there is requirement to have protection all around. We had protection all around in the base at task force and the only way the VC could do any damage was in fact by mortaring us because they could not really come in and attack us, or we didn't think so at the time. When you're out on patrol and I'll talk about this patrol that we did on the 18th. You're always protecting the whole three hundred and sixty degrees.
- 14:00 All around everyone's got a job to do and everyone's got an arc to search on. When we started to move away from our lunch break with B Company, and B Company at that stage of the game consisted of a platoon of thirty and a company headquarters of about eight or nine. The rest of the company, of B Company had gone back to Nui Dat which is about three to four kilometres away. We were out about three or four kilometres outside the wire. They had gone back early in the morning to go to Vung Tau for a day
- 14:30 leave, a bit of an R&C. So B Company was going to go back, about forty altogether and D Company was going to go the other way to the east. We have various formations in infantry that allow us to establish all round protection but also to give us maximum coverage in width and depth because that's all, and depending on what the country and the vegetation is depend on what formation is followed.
- 15:00 When we moved away, we moved in, one platoon up which is a group of thirty guys and they were in arrowhead formation like that, if you're going that way you move in an arrowhead formation and you've got three sections of around about, it varies from six to eight guys in each section. So each section would be an arrowhead and there'd be one here and next door would be another one, so you had two fingers like that as you were going forward.
- 15:30 We'd come to a track that's split and it had footprints on it and Company Commander Harry Smith decided that he would follow a certain track and going from one formation, one platoon up there's two platoons. So if you can imagine you had two platoons and then you had arrowheads within each section all the way through and then your headquarters in behind that and then the third platoon which happened to be 12 Platoon, again were all, all the platoons were about thirty strong,
- 16:00 down behind. Now the forward two sections of 11 Platoon had crossed over a north south road in the rubber plantation. Any road or fence line is considered an obstacle because it gives a good view up and down. It also gives an excellent fire lane where there's no trees and if someone wants to set up a machine gun they can in fact, they've got a clear fire lane right down the road. 11 Platoon had to cross
- 16:30 this road so the first two sections crossed the road and so did Gordon Sharp the platoon commander with his radio operator. I then followed with a bloke by the name of Barry Meller, name's slip backwards and forwards, Old Custard and as we...
- I then started to cross over the track and I waited for the rest of headquarters to
- 17:00 get across this road. It was around about three metres wide, two and a half to three metres wide. I looked up and all of a sudden on my right hand side were six or eight VC dressed in greens that didn't make, you know that didn't twig at the time. They were going along quite nonchalant. They weren't bloody, seemed to be all interested and I thought, hang on these guys are walking in between the forward sections, in behind them and me and behind me was a section, these guys are walking straight into the
- 17:30 middle of the company. Anyway I fired a couple of rounds and knocked over a bloke and of course confusion reigned supreme for the next three or four minutes because we are not expecting the company to be hit in the middle, particularly in behind the forward elements. You've got two sections out the front; these guys are inside that, inside that umbrella. So it took around about two or three minutes I suppose for people to realise, you know, what the shit's going on here?
- 18:00 Charlie didn't know. He went to ground and I couldn't see him anymore because the vegetation was some half a metre to a metre high and they were down in a bit of a hollow in this road. There was a lot

of yelling going on. Everyone wanted to know what was going on. We passed a message it was VC and all. The VC then got their act together, picked up their wounded guy and ran away to the east right past a forward right hand element of the forward right hand section; they bolted out to the east.

- 18:30 It took us another say four or five minutes to gather the thoughts and to pass information to the commander and Harry Smith before he could make a decision. And he then gave Gordon Sharp, the 11th Platoon commander, the orders, well, you know, follow up. So we went off gung-ho in extended line, which in fact is three sections all together in one big long line all going the same way. So we followed the direction that these
- 19:00 VC went into. We were about eight to ten metres apart and there's about twenty eight of us, say twenty on the front line. So we covered an area of about two hundred to two hundred and fifty metres across the frontage. We had no depth; it was all one thin line. We continued down there. We cleared a little hut, which in fact was a rubber tapper's collection, a native's collection point. Nothing was there. We thought we heard movement and we cleared it, nothing there.
- 19:30 So we continued towards the east. Now on our left hand side everything is flat and we're going slowly down a very long sloping hill. The rubber trees are similar to what we had at Nui Dat. They were round about six metres high and a diameter of around about fifteen to twenty centimetres. On our left hand side was a large hill called Nui Dat as well. Now Nui Dat in Vietnam means hill or something like that.
- 20:00 This particular Nui Dat had been called Nui Dat too. As we were progressing I wasn't thinking of anything because I said, "Oh well these blokes have shot through again." You know this has been the story of every contact we've had for weeks on end and I really, I suppose was like everyone else you know where have these bastards gone, you know can't we get into a decent fight. And all this and all of a sudden on our left side, on my left side, our left flank, all hell broke loose and
- 20:30 we got fired on by at least two machine guns, a number of rifles. They hit three or four guys in the left-hand section. There was only six in that section so they hit these guys. We immediately went to ground. Gordon Sharp was getting information from Johnny Robbins, who was the section commander on the left hand side. I then bolted across to the right hand side and picked up the right hand section to move them around to form an L shape
- 21:00 to give us a bit of fire on to where the enemy where. This worked out and suppressed a little bit of the VC fire and we were there for I suppose about ten or fifteen minutes and all of a sudden a large group of VC came out of the east directly into us, and these bastards were attacking us and shit, this is not, you know, this doesn't happen. We were not expecting this. So we had to pull back the right-hand section and form
- 21:30 a reverse L from what we had before and within twenty minutes of coming under fire and these from our east flank, we were being attacked by possibly eighty to a hundred VC. Now we were only twenty eight strong and we're down most probably three or four guys, a couple are dead and a couple are wounded at this stage of the game. Now there's not much you can do in a situation like this because you don't leave when you've got dead and wounded. You stay there right to the
- 22:00 end and you only leave if there's no other thing to do, and I, and I suppose the rest of the platoon expected the company to come to our help. We had no idea what they were. We knew they were at least a company, so you know a company can hold a company. Their companies were around about the same size as ours, around about a hundred. Their formation or their system was about the same as ours. Most armies work on the same system, three platoons in a company,
- 22:30 so many companies in a battalion, so many battalions in the next highest thing, which is a regiment and a division and so on. So we had around about, as I saw it at that stage of the game a hundred against a hundred, a reasonable sort of fight. We had artillery available to us. We had aircraft available to us. We were going to have a nice old blue here. It didn't turn out that way. After about another ten or fifteen
- 23:00 minutes and we were really starting to get in the shit. The air was absolutely thick with tracer and they were cracking the rounds and the foliage was starting to come off the trees and we were starting to take casualties all the way through. Blokes getting shot and I didn't know how many were killed. You could not move any more than three or four metres without attracting attention. As soon as you moved Charlie saw you and starting to bloody open up. It was at this stage of the game 10 Platoon tried to come down
- 23:30 and give us a hand. We didn't even know they were there. It was about the same time as Gordon Sharp got killed. He was on his hands and knees trying to find out where the artillery was because he had called for artillery support and it was landing too far away. They didn't know where we were exactly and of course we can't just fire artillery. They have to start from somewhere and work in. Gordon Sharp got hit in the throat and died instantly. That dropped me in a big bucket of shit because of all a sudden
- 24:00 I'm looking after this group. So you have to take everything into consideration. I had been trained for this. I had been in the army for six or eight years, as it was at this stage of the game. I was a platoon sergeant, a professional soldier so you've got to do a job when a job comes. Our radio antenna got shot off. Now we only had a very short antenna. The fire was that intensive it shot the radio antenna off. We all got holes in our shirts and our little bush hats. There were guys being

- 24:30 hit. There was no yelling, no screaming. Everyone was just doing their job, lining up old Charlie where he could see him and knock him over. And when we were, Alan Grice was putting the antenna back on the radio he saw a bunch of VC trying to get around our left side. Now this is the side they originally opened up on and they tried to sneak around the left. Fortunately we were lucky enough that Harry Smith had sent 10 Platoon and they clashed. VC came in this way and
- 25:00 10 Platoon came in this way and they had a bit of a fire fight. 10 Platoon got a few casualties. VC got a big fright and pissed off back again where they came from, which didn't do us any good because our radio had been out. We had no idea what was going on. So eventually I got on the radio and spoke to Morrie Stanley. Morrie Stanley was the FO, the artillery officer that controlled all the guns. Told him that we were in deep shit right and he'd better get some crap down close to us.
- 25:30 He had a job now of putting artillery all over the place and I went back to doing what had to be done. And for the next hour or so as far as 11 Platoon was concerned, and that's from around about half past four, quarter to five until around about the quarter to six mark, six o'clock we lay in the scrub. And it was only very light scrub amongst the rubber trees with a monsoon had broke over our head about this time, about half past four
- 26:00 and it was raining that hard you could not see any more than about seventy five to a hundred metres. Now when it rains that hard, as some of you might know, the rain hits the ground then bounces up and you get a mist form. We were lying on the ground in the mist and I reckon old Charlie couldn't see us. He didn't really know exactly where we were and he kept on attacking to find out and as he got closer of course we knocked him arse over turkey.
- 26:30 There was one Charlie got within thirty metres of me and most of them were about fifty or sixty metres away because I was still a little bit behind the forward line. Barry Meller was talking to me and he opened his mouth and he got shot straight through the mouth and blew out the side of his cheek on the left hand side. If he'd had his mouth closed it would have taken all his teeth out. Anyway between us we sighted up where it came from and he was in behind a rubber tree. He was giving
- 27:00 Barry and I a hard time. Between us we knocked this bastard arse over turkey. Now the thing was at this stage of the game it was all small arms. There was no artillery helping us at this stage of the game. It wasn't until artillery came in closer which would have been possibly after about thirty five or forty minutes from, so it was round about five o'clock, quarter past five we started to get the artillery in closer and closer. In the meantime the VC had moved around to our south or our
- 27:30 right flank because they had tried the left and they couldn't get anything so they went around to the right flank and we couldn't do anything about that. Our right flank shot a few as they went past and stuff like that but we couldn't stop them because at this stage of the game our perimeter had shrunk from around about two hundred metres to about a hundred, maybe a little bit less. So we had formed in a very tight little ball with nowhere to go with dead and wounded and we still
- 28:00 couldn't leave because we couldn't move. We had to wait until the enemy was neutralised. At last I had said to Morrie Stanley that you better put the stuff on top of us because there was only about a dozen of us left out of twenty eight that were still capable of firing and if you're going to go you might as well go that way instead of getting captured or taken wounded or whatever the case may be. Morrie being a good artilleryman and a Kiwi wasn't prepared to shoot
- 28:30 his guns onto Australians, but we did achieve something from that little exchange. We were fortunate to get the guns, or the artillery impact closer and closer to us and I was able to adjust the fire until it landed exactly where I wanted it. Now when you've got thirty, twenty eight, thirty Australians lying out in the open with rubber trees six metres high the artillery is coming over
- 29:00 the top of your head, because that's where they were. Their base was around about five or six kilometres behind us. The artillery was coming over and landing about fifty metres in front of us. The whole ground was shaking. You could feel the blast on the side of the face. It was lots of flash, lots of smoke, lots of noise. It was, oh I suppose,
- 29:30 if you have a look at the worst war is, and they can never ever get the same affect of being on the ground. Film, film gives you a visual thing but it's not the same as lying on the ground with people trying to kill you and you trying to kill people. It's a totally different concept. Eventually with artillery falling in the right place and we found something like about a hundred and thirty bodies the next day and bits of bodies, it was
- 30:00 bloody terrible. All of a sudden I could do something, at last I could do something. I had a break in the pressure of the VC attacking us. We would then have to do something. I had made a decision that there is no way the company or anyone was going to come and get us and I had to make a decision, oh shit, that I've lived with all the time. You know it's a decision I made at the time, I decided to get as many out as possible.
- 30:30 Now I had no idea where anyone was. I had possibly six to eight to a dozen people who were alive. We had no ammunition. All the ammunition had been expended. Some of the guys had their grenades out in front. Some guy had a machete in his hand. He was going to take off the head off if a Charlie came close to him. But there was absolutely nothing we could do. We'd exhausted our ammunition. We had in fact taken as many casualties as we could.

- 31:00 It was time to piss off. What to do? You know I thought, do you attack? It's one of the things that crossed my mind. Do I go forward straight through these bastards and keep on running? That wasn't a real good idea. So I decided we'll go back the way we came and if necessary I'd go all the way back to Nui Dat. If I couldn't find any friendlies, any Australians, I'd go back and hide in the river, which was about two kilometres behind me and wait until daylight and then we'd bloody make our way back. Fortunately
- 31:30 when we made the break, and there's around about a dozen of us made the break, I saw some yellow smoke so the group that was with me went into the yellow smoke which happened to be 12 Platoon. The other four or five that got separated because we all left at about the same time, we all, when I yelled out go, we all up and ran, someone missed the call, someone
- 32:00 didn't, someone said, 'every man for himself'. I didn't, all this sort of thing. The things that happen, happen. So we left at that stage of the game all our dead. As far as I was concerned all our wounded got out. It wasn't until the next night, or that night that we found out who the names were because we had to call the roll. I had fifteen guys missing. There was only thirteen with me or back in Nui Dat, or back in the company. There were fifteen out of the twenty eight
- 32:30 left out in the battlefield. So that's something that we had to contend with. When we got back to 12 Platoon you know I talked to Paddy Todd, the platoon sergeant. We had a cigarette. Could you imagine sitting down and having a cigarette with this all this crap flying around but we did and Paddy said, "You know I think I've been hit." because he couldn't move his legs. I checked his leg, couldn't find himself, anyway, and I made the comment, "Paddy
- 33:00 you know fair dinkum you're getting too old for this shit." He went to Korea and got wounded and now he's gone to Vietnam and he's got wounded. So you know that's the way it was. But Dave Sabben and 12 Platoon now had to get us back to where the rest of the company was.

## Tape 12

- 00:37 So we saw the yellow smoke. Now I knew that we had yellow smoke. I didn't know if Charlie had yellow smoke but if you're going to go anywhere you go to where you best think your haven is. So there was about five or six of us all scrambled into what was to be turned out Dave Sabben's 12 Platoon. Now he had come around in behind us to
- 01:00 try and get to us and help us but he in fact ran into the VC which is around about of another company strength and over eight to a hundred VC had moved around to our southern or right flank and Dave had run into them. So poor old Charlie at this stage of the game he'd outflanked us to the left or to the north and ran into 10 Platoon of around about thirty guys, he shot them up and bloody Christ knows what else. Then he, half an hour later he goes around to the right flank, my right flank or the south and he runs into Dave Sabben.
- 01:30 Now poor old Charlie no matter where he went he got bloody shot at by Australians and also had our artillery brought down on him. This is one of the reasons why they never ever infiltrated behind 11 Platoon. It's one of the reasons that our back door or 11 Platoon's back door remained open and allowed us to get out without too much problem. I remember back that my personal feelings at that stage of the game, I don't think I ever thought about dying
- 02:00 because you had too much to do. I do know that your mind is totally focused. Everything you hear and everything you see is clear. There's so much to think about. It is one of those sort of situations where if you're ever in danger you know exactly what has to be done and you're looking around you. There's no time for panic. I was trained for this and there's a job to be done. I was thinking of a thousand things at the same time.
- 02:30 You know they say the brain is like a computer circuit board. Well I think the circuit board is like the brain because the brain, I was just going through so many thoughts and so focused on what had to be done at the time that I never thought about my personal safety and I don't think anyone who's been under fire or any life or death situation considers of the outcome. If they think about the outcome they have lost the plot. They have in fact given up and we
- 03:00 never gave up for one minute out there. The individual guy lying on the ground looking for Charlie to drop him thought of one thing. "I have to kill that bastard if I see him." So I think the great thing about the human body, and possibly for all soldiers irrespective of who they are they tend to concentrate on what's got to be done. My job now was to get my bloody guys back home. You know I couldn't do anything about the dead.
- 03:30 If I lost a few more on the way, and I knew I would that's just one of those things that happen, you know bloody good chance I was going to get bloody killed. And in fact if I hadn't run into a bloke by the name of Ron Cahn[?] and we both hit each other just as a fifty cal, fifty, half a, its a big machine gun, a heavy machine gun, fires a bullet that's around about half an inch in diameter and as Ron, as we went down and slid in the mud Ron got hit in the arse, one of the cheeks of his bum

- 04:00 with a fifty cal round. Now if we hadn't have run into each other we both would have been hit by the fifty cal but that's what happened. Ron got hit in the arse and I didn't. We scrambled up and continued on. When, as I said when I got back to 12 Platoon there wasn't much I could do, except gather what blokes I could. Our main job was now was to get back to D Company, back to the company headquarters, back to where 10 Platoon was and back to where there were more people
- 04:30 than in our little group. David had only two sections and part of his headquarters, David had in 12 Platoon most probably about eighteen guys there. The five or six with me had no ammunition. I grabbed some ammunition off a bloke by the name of Paul Large, who was subsequently killed later because his rifle had jammed. Some of the other guys got a bit of ammunition off other blokes but 12 Platoon was also getting short of ammunition because they'd
- 05:00 been there for, I don't know most probably half an hour, three quarters of an hour and they were going through exactly the same thing as we in 11 Platoon had been going through for the previous hour or so and we only, we didn't carry buckets and buckets of ammunition. We carried most probably sixty to eighty bullets or rounds each. That's all we had loaded in magazines. You couldn't, when you're under fire you can't go round popping little brass casings in a magazine. You don't have time. You need to pick
- 05:30 up your rifle and shoot. The ammunition system changed. Anyway we eventually got back to 12 Platoon. We had to get from 12 Platoon back to company headquarters. This is where Dave Sabben came in. Paddy Todd started to get the wounded back and he went because he was wounded which left myself and David with some of his platoon there to hold off the yellow hordes, if you want to call them that, the VC who had now started to
- 06:00 mount another attack onto David's platoon. So we went out and we all eventually got back into the headquarters. I walked past Geoff Kendall who in fact was the platoon commander of 10 Platoon. He was, it was his platoon that tried to come round to my left to help me. He asked me where Gordon Sharp was. I told him he had been killed a long time back and it worked out there was only seven of us, seven or eight of us who were in 11 Platoon out of twenty eight.
- 06:30 I was missing, I had twenty or twenty one killed or wounded and there's seven or eight of us who are still capable of fighting. We picked up some ammunition and we went to a sector on the total perimeter to take up our defensive position there. Gathering on a reverse slope of a hill, the enemy was out this way. This is where the front was, we went over the backside of the hill and all the bullets were going straight over the top of our heads. So we could just sit there and watch the tracer flick amongst the trees. It was
- 07:00 quite fascinating. Like, you know when you're sitting down doing nothing just watching your front and you're not worried about looking for people, and that's what it was because the pressure is right off me, you tend to look at these things you know these tracer, these green tracer flying all over the place you know hitting trees and spinning off and you know the noise was still there. The small arms noise, the crack of the round was still there. The artillery was not. The thumping and the banging and the bloody screaming of shrapnel through the trees and the foliage falling down wasn't there back at company
- 07:30 because I was out of the actual killing ground. But 10 and 11 Platoon, 10 and 12 Platoon were in the killing ground at this stage of the game because that's where the enemy is coming from. I was on the backside. So for the first time I started to relax. Relax the position of command. I had nothing to do except just look after my little sector with eight, seven or eight guys and that's all I was interested in. What was happening over the shoulder I really couldn't care a shit.
- 08:00 My job was to look after this sector. Their job was to look after theirs. They were now taking the crap that we had been taking, 11 Platoon had been taking for the previous hour and a half. The VC were mounting numerous attacks. Morrie Stanley was putting the artillery in, but at last 10 Platoon and particularly Bob Buick didn't have to worry about that shit. That is someone else's problem and I suppose when I look back, you know there was a lot of luck
- 08:30 on my behalf, a lot of luck on each individual's behalf. A lot of luck on the platoon. There was a lot of luck because Harry Smith did what he did. There was a lot of luck because the artillery came in at the right place at the right time to allow us to get out. Theoretically when you look back on it there were about two thousand VC. There was only a hundred of us. We were outnumbered twenty to one. Under every circumstance
- 09:00 we should have been knocked arse over turkey and there should have been a hundred percent bloody killed, Australians killed. It had happened to the Americans. It had happened to the Vietnamese. It's the first time that the VC had hit the Australians with any size. We had held our ground. We didn't run away. We'd still had, we were still shooting at them after twenty minutes where the VC, where the Vietnamese and the Americans, I don't think had any ammunition after twenty minutes. You know I say that as a broad statement because
- 09:30 some units did, but the Vietnamese it was only a year or so before the same mob had hit us, they'd knocked over an American ranger battalion at a place called Binh Gia which is about fifteen or twenty kilometres up the road and I think that took out three or four hundred Vietnamese and yet a hundred and eight Australians had rolled into this place and bloody stood our ground and said, "Oh screw you mate you know we're here to bloody do you in." and you know we did it.

- 10:00 With any sort of war, I don't care a bugger where it is, it's like driving a car. If you're luck's out a bus is going to come round a corner and take you right out. There's a time and a place where each one of us is going to die. I'm still alive. That place wasn't my place to die. You know I've had a few narrow escapes with buses too, but the thing was that I consider the Australian soldier and his, this
- 10:30 mateship, this camaraderie, no-one deserts his mate and you know this is, this has been going on for many, many years with the Australian Army. A mate of mine, old Dasher Wheatley got a VC [Victoria Cross] because he wouldn't let Bob Swanton go, so it's there all the time and it happened subsequently again in D Company and again in other companies in the battalion. It had happened in other battalions where there were some
- 11:00 pretty big fire fights. Not as big as Long Tan, but they were bloody big and let's face it anything where old Charlie wants to have a go he'll, it's a serious bloody job you know. I am grateful I didn't have to attack any bunkers. I'm bloody glad I wasn't at [the Battle of] Coral in the middle of the night. At least I could see my enemy. All these sort of things. Different places, different situations, different outcomes. I can say that no matter what happened in Vietnam the Australians
- 11:30 did it right and we did what we were supposed to do and within about three years of occupation of Phuoc Tuy Province you could walk around Phuoc Tuy Province without a rifle. There were no main force VC operational units operating in Phuoc Tuy Province. The Australians had hunted them all out and they were all sitting around the perimeter of Phuoc Tuy Province and from around about 1969, the last two or three years
- 12:00 in country the Australians were operating not in Phuoc Tuy Province but in Long Tan, Bien Hoa and all the neighbouring provinces because we had shot all the Charlie out and Charlie didn't want to stay around. And in fact I was told a few years ago that a courier was knocked over, a VC courier and the courier and his documents had some sort of documentation to say that they were not to deliberately engage Australians. I think that was after [the Battles of] Coral and Balmoral.
- 12:30 It was around about '69 where one of the battalions knocked over this VC courier and, you know, so I think if the Americans had possibly considered the way we did things Vietnam might have been a different story. We were trained in a counter revolutionary warfare environment in Malaya, modified a little bit to suit the Australians. We were trained for a war against the Asians
- 13:00 in South East Asia. We were not trained as part of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] forces against the Russians and the Eastern Bloc countries. Taking all this into consideration I honestly and personally believe that the Australian soldier was the best soldier in Vietnam. We might have been let down by some commanders and the political scene but the individual guy that dragged on the green suit and particularly the guy that put his pack on his back, his house on his back
- 13:30 and went out and walked the weeds, right top bloke.
- The period of time when Gordon Sharp, when he came under fire and it started off on our left, built up and then died away
- 14:00 when we counter fired. We brought our own counter fire onto the enemy. Then it increased again when they started to attack us and this is when I started to get a little bit worried because like B Company, in B Company 6RAR got attacked by D445. All of a sudden my platoon, by itself, because we were about three hundred metres in front of anyone is getting attacked by a group of possibly three times our size. Now this is
- 14:30 bad news. When I moved the right hand section back around to form a reverse L I then went back to the headquarters and, you know most probably six or eight feet away from Gordon Sharp and we, you know were saying a few words between ourselves. You know Gordon said, "You know what the hell is going on?" I said, "Shit I don't know mate, the crap is coming in everywhere." They hadn't really zoned in on us. They were firing possibly two feet above the ground.
- 15:00 We weren't taking all that many casualties then because they were still too far away to really get a hold of us. Gordon Sharp was killed by one of these bullets as he got up on his hands and knees to find out where this bloody artillery was because it was becoming extremely dangerous on the block of dirt we were sitting on and you know when you're outnumbered three to one, you know that's not good news. Every army in the world if you're going to attack something
- 15:30 you should attack with superiority of a minimum of three to one and that still goes today. So these guys were attacking with a company to take out my platoon and my platoon commander got knocked arse over turkey. This kind of puts you in a position where well what do you bloody well do now. You have to concentrate and grab everything that's around you; work out how you're going to do it,
- 16:00 think of what needs to be done and try and get it done in the most simplest way because you can't make anything too complicated. The problems we had, the antenna on our radio had been shot away. You could not talk in a normal voice. Even screaming at the top of your lungs you might make voice communication to a guy who was say two or three or four metres away. Everything had to be relayed from one to another all the way down the line.
- 16:30 Everyone was doing what they were doing in their own ten foot square block of dirt, because that's about as much dirt that you owned when you've got a rifle. I was shooting the VC. How many did I shoot

that day? Geez I don't know, most probably thirty. Who knows? All I know is that you happened to aim at some bastard and I hit him, he went down. I ended up with holes in my little bush hat, holes in my shirt, holes in my trousers, holes in my webbing. I think some of those

- 17:00 arrived later. When I think about the artillery when it started to land so close, they only had to be half a degree out in their sights or the bubble, because they used bubbles to level everything, just a little bit out and a round could have hit the tree right above me and got me and five guys close but they were doing their job and it was absolutely pissing down rain.
- 17:30 They got hit by lightening on the gun line, blew out all their telephones. They were loading ammunition that was unknown as far as, how good it is because Americans make ammunition in different parts of the country and they're not all exactly the same. The propellant is not exactly the same even if it's got specifications. So there we were about bloody, about eighteen of us left at this stage of the game
- 18:00 trying to bloody survive, waiting for some bastard to come and help us. That didn't look like a real good idea because I don't think they were going to come to help us although I kept on yelling out that they're coming in the APCs, they're coming out. You say anything for your own, to build your own strength up and you can tell people all sorts of lies when they don't know what's going on, even convince yourself at times. And there wasn't
- 18:30 a hell of a lot we could do. We were stuck there. We were getting blokes killed. The ammunition, the ammunition was getting low. We didn't get any ammunition coming in. It was one of those sort of things where you had to hang in there, do what you have to do and you know when the tide turns that's when you can do something. You know you wait until the tide either comes in or goes out before you launch the boat. So we stayed there.
- 19:00 The VC fire was excellent. When he got closer he was starting to bloody miss us by only a matter of inches because the closer the round passes your ear the louder the crack is. They tell me you never hear the round that hits you. I can understand that. So when you're in a very, very serious fire fight and the air is literally full of ammunition, full of, there was tracer everywhere. Now for one tracer there's
- 19:30 generally five what they call bore rounds. Bore rounds are the normal metal, brass metal jacket. There's no tracer, so for every tracer you see there's five rounds between them. So when you see a movie, when you see one spark go up there there's five rounds in another spark so one in five is a normal tracer. And the tracer was like fireflies. They were just everywhere. They were buzzing around your heads all over the place. You could not move. If you moved you became
- 20:00 a target. Once you became a target you were dead. If you lay there slowly taking aim and finding out where your target was and going bang and hopefully you killed him before he killed you. It was one of those sort of things that I know that the soldiers of 11 Platoon were all most probably thinking exactly the same as I was. I think you'll find if you talk to anyone else who's been in a similar situation and would probably say the same thing.
- 20:30 It's extremely difficult to actually recall the actual feelings at the time. It is hard to explain the physical environment where it's absolutely raining, lightening and thunder, artillery around you exploding thirty to forty metres away and not one, twenty or thirty you know one is bad enough but when you've got twenty or thirty spread over an area
- 21:00 of about thirty or forty metres and they covered an area of thirty or forty metres by say fifteen or twenty metres, and that's the block that they were shooting in, that's where we found in excess of a hundred and thirty bodies the next day and that's where all the trees and everything were just shattered. It looked like a big giant had just stomped on the ground and just shattered all the trees. Trees around us were exploding and I thought at the time that they were using high explosive anti aircraft
- 21:30 rounds you know twenty millimetre stuff, but it turned out that they had what they called rocket propelled grenades, the RPGs. These were an anti-tank gun and they used fire them off the shoulder one at a time and they were hitting the trees and just blowing the trees off about this far off the ground some of them, some six or eight feet up. But you know, the movie people will never get it right. They will never actually get the actual emotion, the actual environment
- 22:00 right because you can never ever build something that is real. You can only build an image. And this is the most difficult thing to try and explain to people what it's like to be involved in something as big as it was for 11 Platoon. It was one of those things that every man will remember different things. Every man will see something that will stick in his mind. Another bloke will see the same thing but he'll have a different vision of it. So it's one of those
- 22:30 very personal things that I don't think anyone can really explain in great detail. If I put you in a room and made it full of noise and sent bees in that room you'd be dodging the bees and you'd be trying to block out the sound and trying to think what you had to do next. I suppose that's most probably the closest I can come to. It is organised chaos I suppose. There is chaos around you but you've got to be organised
- 23:00 to control the chaos and that's what I tried to do.

**Talk to me about the wash up, about when you actually became aware of the loss of mates. Because at the time you were saying you're just trying to survive, in your own words?**



I really started to think about what

- 23:30 happened later that night. I had remained focused the whole period right until we moved out of the rubber and with helicopters coming in and we got our dead and wounded out and then it was stand down. It was relax, sit on your arse, have a cigarette, have a cup of coffee and so on. Call the roll to find out who's missing because we had no chance to find out who had been missing in 11 Platoon all the way through and I walked around 11 Platoon and there
- 24:00 were fifteen missing. The next day there were thirteen of them dead and we found two wounded. On the left hand section there were six guys there and there was only two survived, Jimmy Richmond and Johnny Robbins. The rest were killed. The thirteen dead, not much you can do for those. We had guys who had some very, very serious wounds. They had gone back to 36 Medivac down at Vung Tau. 36 Medivac was the American Med Evacuation
- 24:30 Hospital where all the casualties went to initially until the Australians set up their own hospital. Remember we'd only been in country at this stage of the game about three months and settled in, in Phuoc Tuy Province for three months. It got a little bit easier later on when they developed Nui Dat into a very large town of about five thousand people. I went through and I had to give a report to the company headquarters, who's missing and who's dead and we put them down all as missing, although I knew Gordon Sharp was
- 25:00 dead I didn't know who else was dead. The guys told me so and so's dead and so on but you know I suppose I had some hope that they were alive. So our initial report or my initial report to company headquarters at around about one o'clock, half past one in the morning was that there were fifteen MIAs, missing in action. That means out of twenty-eight I had thirteen I had accounted for. Of that thirteen
- 25:30 there's only seven that weren't hit. So out of twenty-eight guys we had something like seventy percent casualties and they weren't to come back. There was a couple of blokes only got a scratch, a bit of shrapnel in their head or in the arm, nothing serious. They stayed with the platoon and they saw the whole twelve months out, but all the others came home. The guys who were killed came home in body bags, that's the way it is and those
- 26:00 others survived they were still in the army, they came home. The majority were National Servicemen so you know these poor bastards they'd been balloted out right. Interesting thing, National Service was never intended for Vietnam. It was intended against Indonesia and the confrontation back in '64. Vietnam rolled on over the top of that and of course the National Service Act had already been in and it was already on the roll, so you know
- 26:30 not what people tell you today. National Service was not introduced for Vietnam. National Service was introduced prior to Vietnam. That doesn't help the poor bastards that got called up. It's okay for me as a regular soldier. I had a job to do. That was my job. I took pride in my job and I did my job the way it had to be done. So the thing here is that after Long Tan I decided not to get close to anybody. Before that I tried to get close and understanding.
- 27:00 After Long Tan I said, "No I'm not going to get close." Then when a mate of mine was killed later in the year, we had a mine incident in 11 Platoon, that took out another thirteen, then a mate of mine was killed in the February and by this stage of the game I decided bugger this right, mark the roll, so and so marched in right, if he was killed or wounded, so and so marched out, they actually, to me became a number. It got so bad that even
- 27:30 years later blokes said to me, "Do you remember me?" "No who are you?" and he'd mention a name. "Oh yeah how are you going?" And that bastard turned around and said, "You know you're nothing but a bloody arsehole mate. I was in your platoon and you don't remember me." But I consciously made the decision that I wasn't going to get too close to anyone after Long Tan. Now people say that that's the wrong thing to do. You're the platoon sergeant, you're their mother, you're their father, you know the big brother and all that. Sit in my shoes mate and you don't get
- 28:00 too friendly with any bastard because you never know how long they're going to be with you. They're here today, as I said I got two reinforcements on the 17th at around about five o'clock in the afternoon, the next day both those kids were killed, so why would you want to get close to anyone? I still don't get too close to people thirty years after the event but that's the way I controlled my life, that's the way I do my things. Other people do it their way. I don't criticise them, they shouldn't criticise me.
- 28:30 **Talk to me about the conscripts, what they were like as fighters?**
- I had done six years in the army and got back in, in July of '65. I went back to Kapooka, which is a recruit training place just outside of Wagga just as the first intake of National Servicemen were arriving. It is amazing that some of the blokes who were two
- 29:00 huts down ended up in my platoon, in my company and I didn't know that until I saw a photograph around about '97 and '98 and this guy had taken a photograph and I said, "Where was that taken?" and he told me and I said, "Well I was two huts up." He said, "We remember you because you didn't do anything." These kids had come in the army. I'd been in the army for six years. I was a qualified

sergeant when I got back in again so I knew the ropes and I didn't do anything at Kapooka. They then marched into D Company. We trained,

- 29:30 the 5th Battalion and the 6th Battalion trained their National Servicemen to go to Vietnam. After that the army set itself up in Kapooka and Puckapunyal where they trained the National Servicemen in those two places. But for the first intake of National Servicemen they were trained, 6RAR trained their own guys to take them to war and so did 5RAR. So we had formed a good bond and they got used to the 6RAR system. From
- 30:00 around about the September '65, '66, '65 when they marched into us at Enoggera [camp] through to December. So we trained these bloody kids and that's all they were. Okay they were twenty years old but they were bloody kids when it came to bloody being a soldier. In the December they went into their companies. We'd given them the infantry training and how to shoot and kill and bloody eat out of a bloody, out of a plastic bag and how to cook your brew and all this sort of thing, how to live in the bush,
- 30:30 how to shoot and kill people, all those sort of things that we've got to learn as infantrymen. Then we had them from January through to, until we left around about the May. This is when we had moulded the platoons and the companies together into fighting units. These kids and I say kids because I was twenty-five and these guys are twenty, these kids are like every other Australian. I can take any Australian off the street including
- 31:00 our little cameraman over here and I can turn around in six months, if he wants to learn how to be a soldier I can train him in six months how to be a good soldier. Now a lot of these National Servicemen want to be good soldiers and they tried their arse out to be good soldiers and they were bloody good soldiers. Those who did not want to be killed or shot at got another job in the battalion. They were not ever forced to go into, if they made it known they were moved, some of them even moved out of the battalion. Some of them didn't go to Vietnam.
- 31:30 I don't know of anyone who went to Vietnam who really didn't want to go. Everyone was given the opportunity to back out. Now peer pressure, right if I say to you do you want to go, oh yeah I want to go because if you say no I don't want to go, oh you're a scabby arse you know what I mean. So peer pressure and I believe that's where the army worked it right because we all lined up on parade. "We're at war with Vietnam; you're going to leave within three months, who wants to go?" No-one put their hand up. Who doesn't want to go? No-one put their hand up,
- 32:00 you know what I mean. It's that type of thing. There were in fact a few in Delta Company 6RAR when they were told we were going to Vietnam backed off. Now that included regular army guys and some of those were corporals. Right, so that's, but these guys, these kids mate, they were just like your fathers, their grandfathers. You take Gallipoli, you take the desert, you take Papua New Guinea, take anywhere you like, the kids out of Australia, the men of Australia plus their girlfriends and all these other things, all part
- 32:30 of the whole network that is Australian. We are a little bit different to most people and I don't know why and I was born in South Africa for Christ's sake, from an Irish father and a Pommie [English] mother and here I am Australian. Why? I still haven't answered the question and I'm nearly sixty.

## Tape 13

- 00:39 The National Servicemen situation in the Australian Army was about fifty, fifty. About half the kids were National Servicemen and half were regular army. The point is that the National Servicemen because they weren't professional soldiers they were the diggers in the front line. The regular army soldiers were the corporals and the sergeants and the clerks
- 01:00 and the drivers and the officers and so on because they had been in and had the skills to do those jobs where the National Service kids were just plain riflemen. They were trained to fire machine guns. They were trained to do all sorts of things that they had to do. If they went to artillery they were trained to shoot guns and do all those sorts. The infantry National Serviceman was trained to do the job and do it well.
- 01:30 He didn't walk around with a flak jacket on. He walked around with a shirt, same thickness as this which doesn't stop anything. It doesn't even stop mozzie [mosquito] bites and when you get into a situation like Long Tan where out of twenty-eight soldiers about half, about thirteen or fourteen were National Servicemen and the rest were regular army. Your casualties in 11 Platoon at Long Tan would have been about sixty percent,
- 02:00 for 11 Platoon about sixty percent National Service and about forty percent, so of the thirteen killed in 11 Platoon there was about eight or nine who were National Service and the others were regular soldiers. Now I can remember all the kids' faces and their names that were killed in 11 Platoon for the whole twelve months. Most of them came from Brisbane because Brisbane being a, 6RAR
- 02:30 being a Brisbane company, a Brisbane raised battalion, most of our National Service first intake came

from Brisbane. So we had lots of boys who went to Vietnam as National Servicemen who were Brisbane based. Unfortunately because that happened there were a lot of guys in 11 Platoon were Brisbane boys and were killed and therefore there was a large spate of military funerals around about the end of August, beginning of September in '66. I

03:00 spoke to some of the parents when I came home. I can't remember the actual persons I spoke to. We spoke about their son in some detail...

**I want you to go back to Long Tan and talk about Kenny...?**

03:30 Just after Gordon Sharp was killed and Gordon was a National Service officer, to my right were three or four blokes, and I think one of those was Kenny Gant. Now he was a Brisbane boy. And I can remember, I can still see, you know these guys sitting there and talking to each other

04:00 and you see the odd guy who was just lying there and motionless so you didn't really know what happened to him. He's like the rest of them. He stayed there and stayed there until the death. You know he died at his post defending his mates. He was a fun loving sort of boy if I remember him rightly. He was a bit of a larrikin, most of the kids were larrikins. Most of them didn't really understand the military system

04:30 but they fitted in and that's the most important thing. He fitted in and he did his job and he did his job well and you know he was just one of those poor bastards that got killed. Now I saw his mother on a video that was done some years ago and you know my heart bled for his mother because she was the first mother I'd ever seen on TV speaking about her son that I knew who had been killed and it still brings back

05:00 some emotions that I bloody won't get into right now. It's very, very hard to talk about individuals. It's very difficult to go back and actually see these guys on the morning of the 19th and although I didn't personally wrap them up I knew every one of them. It becomes a bit heart wrenching and I've tried to stay out of all of that as much as possible. I do crack up now and again but I hope not to here.

05:30 So Ken with all the other kids that went to Vietnam, National Service or regular, I think Australia should be very, very proud of those kids. They did a bloody marvellous job and they will keep on, the Australian guys will keep on doing it. When the time comes and when they have to perform they'll perform.

06:00 We were trained to, to kill people and let's face it you know it's one of those sort of things that's extremely difficult to kill another human but you know you are trained psychologically and everything to do it. What they don't train you for is when you've got to back into a battlefield. They don't train you for the carnage. They don't train you for what you witness when you go in there. Long Tan, I had no idea just what happened at Long Tan. I knew what happened in my little

06:30 bloody paddock but I had no idea what happened thirty or forty metres away behind me, a hundred metres behind me and so on. So therefore as we went back in the next morning and you know at this stage of the game we had amassed a battalion of soldiers, we had three or four companies there, there's three or four hundred Australians, armoured personnel carriers, clear skies, we had aircraft on call, we had helicopters available but I really didn't want to go back in again because I did not want to go in

07:00 there where all these kids had been killed or missing but I had to go in. I had to go in because they were my soldiers...The advance into the battlefield was okay. We saw lots and lots of

07:30 dead VC. All they were was meat. They were people before, the day before, they were not now, they were limbs here, limbs there. I came across one VC who was twitching with half a head and his intestines out, rice in his intestines was spilling out on the ground. He was put out of his misery the poor bastard but nothing prepared me for when I arrived back at 11 Platoon. We had found

08:00 Custard Meller who had been the guy that had been shot in the mouth the day before, he got hit on the way out but when I arrived back in 11 Platoon there was just guys there looked like they'd been asleep. Now this is getting to around about half past nine in the morning and the heat was starting to build up and the stench that comes off rotting human flesh is worse than the stench off any dead kangaroo or any beast. The human flesh has got a totally different smell about it

08:30 and the whole place was like a perfumed garden if you can, you know there's a charnel house with its own sickly pungent smell. I was very glad it had been raining so hard because it washed all the blood and everything away off the Australians. I walked up there and I saw these guys and I was very numb. And I heard my name being called out. It was Jimmy Richmond. I walked over there, found him and then called

09:00 for a medic and Geordie Richardson came over and we tended to Jim until such time as the doctor arrived. I couldn't come to the act of wrapping up my blokes. I couldn't do that. I don't think anyone in D Company handled their own guys. I think someone else did it. I didn't really notice. I just walked round in a daze.

09:30 Very angry, extremely angry because once we had secured the battle area in came the helicopters with officers, the task force commander, majors and captains, all these bastards that had cold beer every night and never walked the weeds. All the staff officers all of a sudden came out to have a look around.

One major, I don't remember his name but I've got a fair idea who it was said something that bloody

- 10:00 pissed me right off and I dropped him. In fact he's lucky I didn't shoot him with my Armalite. The RSM bloody grabbed me and bloody hunted me off. The newspaperman bloody wanted to take statements off me. I can remember his name. His name was Fox and Jack Kirby the CSM grabbed hold of him and hung him up in a tree by the scruff of his neck, about this far off the ground so he couldn't touch the ground. I was totally emotionally drained. I was
- 10:30 not prepared to see what I saw. I was not prepared to handle bodies late in the day. They were flyblown. You grab hold of an arm and you pull them into a hole and their arm would come off and his whole body would be full of maggots. These types of things. Many years later I saw a movie called Catch 22 and there's a scene in there, a guy opened up a flying suit and the whole lot was maggots and flyblown.
- 11:00 That went on for two days, two days. We got rid of our guys. We wrapped them up in ponchos and we put them in APCs and we sent them back to Nui Dat. Richmond and Meller went out by chopper. For days after you can't get the stench, you know if you handle someone who's dead you can't get the stench off your hands. If you're a smoker like I was in those days every time you lit up a cigarette you could smell death. It's another one of those things you can't explain. If you've witnessed it and been there and
- 11:30 done it you'll remember it but then you try not to remember it and this is the whole thing. I have been trying not to remember and I think we all do that. Years and years later my kids asked me, "Dad
- 12:00 what is Vietnam like?" and I don't suppose I could answer them you know until I recently put pen to paper and it's a lot easier doing that because I can sit by myself and think about these things... Yeah I shed a tear and I laugh a lot and that's it, thank you,
- 12:30 I can't give anymore. Harry Smith was a jovial short fellow. He was, he enjoyed the Special Forces type of thing. He was a qualified parachutist. He was a
- 13:00 commander who knew exactly what he wanted. He knew how to get it out of his men and stuff like that. If you didn't perform to Harry's standard, which was bloody high you were hunted out or you were never promoted. I was very lucky that I stayed the whole twelve months or two years with Harry's company because he sacked a few. He was cool. He was calculating in what to do. He was most
- 13:30 probably one of the top two company commanders I ever served with or majors that I knew in twenty years of service. Now I'm not blowing his whistle for his, himself, I am saying that Harry Smith, I am more than happy to go to war with Harry Smith and I'm extremely glad he was my company commander at Long Tan. We had trained the company together to his standard and therefore we all knew exactly what was expected of us. He knew what he could expect
- 14:00 from his men. We knew what we could expect from him and I have always felt that if we hadn't trained like we did to Harry's standards it would be a different story, you'd be speaking to a different bloke because I wouldn't be here.

#### **Talk about Jimmy Richmond?**

Jimmy Richmond. Jimmy Richmond. Poor old Jim. You know possibly the first guy hit in Long Tan. He was right out in the left flank. He was the closest

- 14:30 to the VC when they opened up fire. As much as I was in shock on the morning of the 19th to see my blokes dead and that, the voice that called my name was Jimmy Richmond and we raced over there. Jim should never have survived the war because he had a serious wound to his left side of his body that filled his lung up with
- 15:00 blood and he was lying on his right hand side. According to all the medical people he should have, the blood should have drained from his left lung into his right and he should have suffocated but Jim didn't. He's a discharged National Serviceman and it's many, many years later that you know some of the blokes tracked him down. He was put in contact with the Department of Veterans' Affairs. He was immediately made a totally and permanently incapacitated serviceman
- 15:30 and he's now living up on the Sunshine Coast area. He is still not very well but he is still around and it's good to know that they're still around.

#### **Do you want to mention him as a, you know his role, was he in your, just talk a little bit about him as a...?**

Jim's job was like Kenny

- 16:00 Gant's job. He was there as a rifleman. There are basically, as a private soldier there are six, seven private soldiers in a section of nine. There's a corporal in charge, a lance corporal and then there's seven other guys. These are the riflemen. They are the soldiers who carry the rifles, who assault the enemy and defend against our attack. He was like Kenny Gant and all the other kids, all the other
- 16:30 National Service kids. They were trained well. They were dedicated in doing and they did their job but you know, and he was extremely lucky to survive. He should never have survived Long Tan and he

should have died of the wounds that he had.

- 17:00 When you're in Vietnam the army gives you, the army gives you one egg a day. That's your ration and towards the end of Vietnam everyone was saying, "Oh well, there's seventy eggs to go or seventy breakfasts, fifty breakfasts." and the countdown started around about ninety days or three months before we were due to come home. If you were killed or wounded you came home earlier but otherwise there were so many eggs that you had per day. The day that
- 17:30 2RAR arrived on the [HMAS] Sydney, they flew in by Chinook, which is a big two engine helicopter which the Australian Air Force, Australian Army now have. As they got off we got on. HMAS Sydney is an aircraft carrier that had been converted into a troop carrier and was sitting out in Vung Tau Harbour approximately two or three miles offshore, two miles I suppose and we flew straight in on the flight deck. Now this is the first time since we'd hit
- 18:00 Saigon, about twelve months before that we didn't have any ammunition in our rifles. We had our rifles but we had no ammunition. We had clean starched greens on. Our armpits didn't smell like bloody gorillas' backsides and we knew as soon as we got on there we're going home. Now the navy, I don't know what the navy thought, there were kids on the Sydney who were sixteen years old. They
- 18:30 say the Sydney was never in danger. I say the Sydney, anyone who went to Vietnam even on the Sydney there was always danger, what degree of danger varied. Coming home on the Sydney was bloody great. I had slept in a decent bed for the first time. I got a hot Australian shower. The tucker was great. They cooked bread every day. The navy had big cans of Fosters, didn't like Fosters in the first place but I used to drink the bloody thing. As we got closer to Australia a helicopter
- 19:00 from Darwin came out and gave us mail. But then as we were going down the, through the Barrier Reef and coming from Brisbane and knowing the entrance to Brisbane Harbour a very strange emotion comes over you. You haven't seen your missus, haven't touched her, haven't done anything for over twelve months and in fact even the six months before I didn't see much of her and I've now got a daughter that's
- 19:30 what, twenty-seven months when she was only just over twelve months when I left. I was really looking forward to catching up with these people. We pulled up into Hamilton on the starboard side of the Sydney because that's the side they painted to hide all the rust and you stand there looking down and there's three or four hundred people and you can't see your missus but as you go down the gangplank you see her.
- 20:00 One of the hardest things of life as you get older your memories get broader. Things are still very defined and clear. I look around at my two kids
- 20:30 today who are in their thirties and they have never witnessed anything I have. I think back to 11 Platoon and 11 Platoon whose total strength is one officer and thirty three diggers, thirty three ORs [other ranks] and I lost one officer and thirty three ORs in Vietnam. The whole platoon had gone, I had gone through,
- 21:00 killed and wounded I had fourteen killed and twenty wounded out of, you know a whole platoon. I think back now and you know these guys were only twenty. I was twenty-five. It gets more difficult every year. Ten years ago I could handle something like this quite easily. I think of my life that's been bloody good,
- 21:30 got a great missus and these kids got nothing, and that's what makes it hard. The older you get the worse it becomes. It's one of those things that I suppose everyone in their life reaches, goes through their life and my thirties were the best time of my life. I'm not saying they're no good now
- 22:00 but as you get older your kids grow away from you, your memories dim but the sharp focus is still there on a number of individual people, things that happened. You remember like they happened yesterday. People don't believe you. They say, "Oh that's bullshit." I'll tell you right now it's not bullshit. I have done a number of these
- 22:30 talk fests. It's been getting harder and harder and harder. I hope I've never got to do another one because I don't know if I can keep on doing this. Vietnam for fifty to sixty thousand people plus, I'm not counting their brothers and their sisters and their parents, was ten years long. We went to Vietnam in '62, we pulled out in '72. National Service went there in '66
- 23:00 and pulled out in '72. Six years, six years of war. I'm not going to get into any political argument. I was a professional soldier. I had a job to do. I reckon they did it bloody well. We all did it well. You know the Australian, I think did better than all of them. But I tell you what if it looks like having another war send the frigging politicians.
- 23:30 Send them first then put the army in charge because once you put politicians in charge of armies and war they screw it up every time and I mean that, deadly serious. So they can make all the decisions and take no blame. Even thirty years on they still take no blame. I've got an ongoing blue with the government at the moment that will most probably go on until I'm dead or they are dead.
- 24:00 They have secreted away information that I know is there, that will never be released. I've applied under FOI [freedom of information legislation] after the thirty year rule and they still deny it's there but

we know it's there. So as an old professional digger who worked his arse off, saw more than most people I don't like politicians. I like them...

- 24:30 As we came up the Brisbane River I looked around at the familiar landmarks, looked for Beverley when we pulled up at Hamilton. I didn't see her until I walked down the gangway and there was a bloody great sight to see. We hugged and we kissed and Tracy didn't know what was going on. She didn't know her dad.
- 25:00 We had a beat up old VW [Volkswagen car] in those days and those who had their family there didn't have to get on the buses to go into Botanical Gardens, but Beverley wouldn't let me drive because I hadn't driven for over twelve months. It was good to be home. Vietnam was still going to go on. I had no idea whether I was going to go back or not. I'd go back if I had to go back but I didn't really want to go back and if I went
- 25:30 back I wanted a different job. I wasn't going to go back in the previous job, no way. I remained with 6RAR and we had an addition to the family. Robert was born in Townsville and Tracy was born over in Perth when I had got out of the army before I rejoined. We were starting to build a new family scene. We hadn't had a family really. Tracy was born and
- 26:00 three months later I was back in the army. Left Brisbane when she was around about fifteen months old and came home when she was around about twenty-seven months old so it was one of those sort of things that I missed two and a half, or a year and a half of my daughter's most exciting times when they get up to start walking and all this sort of thing. I had it with my son but not really because I was training soldiers for Vietnam and we just didn't have time. The army was full
- 26:30 bore. We worked six days a week, twenty hours a day even in Australia. These are the sacrifices that soldiers make and yet I've heard derogatory terms like grunt or AJ, army jerks. It's not on. The guys
- 27:00 who volunteer for all the services do it basically for one reason. They want to, they think it's exciting and when it's on it is exciting. They don't need anyone to turn round...
- 27:30 and be called baby killers because we fucking were not... The people of Australia at times get right up my bloody nose. I've a lot of hatred here because of some people...
- 28:00 And I really don't want to say anymore. The wives and the families of people that I have met, army wives, army kids who really didn't know what went on. They never asked any questions.
- 28:30 The wives were there, the mother, the father, the housekeeper, the old man was away, she didn't know whether he was going to be home tomorrow or next week. Didn't know if he was going to come home from Vietnam in a bag or a leg taken away or whatever the case may be and yet they stuck by us, most of them did. My wife did. Some guys their wives didn't have the same fortitude and the bloody guts that my missus had.
- 29:00 She stuck by me, taken a lot of shit from me, still does but I'm now copping it back because she is now on top. It takes a special woman to become a wife of a serviceman. It's more than love. It's more than respect.
- 29:30 It's a soul mate and I've got a beauty. That's it I'm sorry. END OF INTERVIEW