Australians at War Film Archive

H. Hamilton (Murray) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:36 **Okay Murray, could we please get that introduction, a brief introduction starting with where you were born?**

Yes. I was born in Wonthaggi in South Gippsland on 17 March 1918, St. Patrick's Day. Lived there for a couple of years, went to Sale. My father was an Anglican clergyman and

01:00 he was an archdeacon in Sale. And then moved to Maffra where I did my schooling up to about year eight or nine. Then moved to Orbost, a couple of years there. And from Orbost, I went to boarding school in 1934, had two years at Caulfield Grammar. Left Caulfield Grammar,

01:30 began work with the Bank of New South Wales in 1936. By then it was evident that Hitler was going to have a war whether we wanted it or not. So I joined the CMF [Citizens Military Force], militia and worked, studied as a machine gun member and was commissioned

02:00 in November 1940, just after war broke out. I enlisted in the, or you don't enlist in the army as an officer, you're appointed. And I applied for an appointment. I knew a colonel who told me he'd been given command of a battalion and he would be glad to take me, and a couple

02:30 of my friends as junior officers. So we went to the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion in May 1940 and started the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] life then. 2nd Pioneers was corps troops and in a sense had nobody looking after them, not like an infantry battalion, which comes under a brigade. And it happened, we were left in Puckapunyal for

03:00 most of 1940. Early '41 they moved us down to Mount Martha, to the camp there and eventually, in April, we embarked on the [HMS] Queen Mary to go overseas. Went from Sydney. I was appointed

03:30 ship's postal officer, a minor post that didn't take much work. And went to Fremantle, had an interesting experience in Fremantle. The Queen Mary's a huge ship, I was going ashore, the vessel was anchored well out in the roads or whatever it is and

04:00 I had to climb down a Jacob's ladder to get into a small boat to go ashore and as I was hanging on the end of this Jacob's ladder a wave washed the boat away and to the amusement of the troops lining the rail up top, I was left hanging in mid air about eight feet below the, more that eighty feet below the rail. But managed to get into the little boat to get ashore. From there we went to Trincomalee

04:30 and then to Kantara or really to Suez, I think it was, trans shipped into a small boat and to Kantara where we landed and slept the night on the sand. There was an air-raid that night, didn't wake me, I slept. And we were trained the next day, early

05:00 the next morning for Palestine. We only had about a month's training in Palestine before we moved up to the invasion of Syria. Most of the month was spent in route marching to fitten everyone up again. One amusing episode, we were on

05:30 a route march one day and there was an air-raid alarm sounded, we'd instructed the troops what to do and they made for the nearest slit trench. And I noticed one group, they virtually swallow dived into the slit trench and then seemed to come up just as quickly and then the next I saw was my platoon charging across the sand with bayonets drawn. I couldn't see what was going on

06:00 but I caught up with them eventually and there was one of the horrible looking horned snakes. And apparently when they dived into the slit trench the snake was there and they left before it could react I think and then they chased it across the desert, it went pretty fast too. But our troops crossed the board into Syria on 8 June. My company was

06:30 held back in reserve. We went up to a place called Er Rama [?] and from there I went across to Baniyas with the platoon, or the company really on an outpost job. They told us, they thought there were five

hundred enemy there but we didn't see any of them. On 12th we were withdrawn, as pioneers, a pioneer battalion was an infantry

07:00 battalion trained in light engineering and they employed us then on engineering works. The French had blown a road leading into the Litani River and they'd blown a bridge across the Litani. My company was rebuilding the road that was blown and then we moved down to build a road leading into a bridge, the engineers were putting across the river.

07:30 The fort (UNCLEAR) was probably one or two kilometres to the east of where we were. The other side of the Litani rose in a precipitous slope to a very high mountain of which there was an ancient crusader or Roman castle, Chateau De Beaufort it was called.

Actually Murray, that's fantastic

08:00 **detail but just for the introduction, actually just for the introduction, just try to forget the experiences for now, which I know is very difficult to ask but just the raw facts of where you were deployed and how?**

Yeah, well righto. Well then we built the road across, leading to the Litani. We were moved up to a road leading to a town north call

08:30 Jezzine where we worked on road bends there that were so sharp that they couldn't get the guns around them and we had to widen them to get the guns around. And really the operational life started there. I was on one corner, heard shell fire and looked several miles away, through the binoculars, I saw the French attacking.

09:00 I didn't realise what was going on but they'd moved in behind us and captured the fort at Mount Urine [?], or recaptured it. But in the small hours of the morning, that was 16 June, we were suddenly wakened and had to march back and take up positions in case they were coming further on the Litani River.

09:30 The next day we moved further forward and on 17th two of our companies attacked the fort but were knocked back in a rather difficult situation when two tanks came out and they didn't have proper anti-tank weapons, so they rounded up about a hundred prisoners.

10:00 My company then moved forward to a position facing the fort. On 19, the 2/25th Battalion attacked from the north and again they were stopped, they didn't get the fort.

How long, your entire campaign experience in Syria, how long did it go for?

10:30 My campaign experience finished on 27th, when I was wounded.

But your overall involvement?

Yeah, well from then on I took up a position then on the west of the fort. The fort was very strong, thick stone walls that

11:00 the artillery shells just bounced off. You could see them hitting and bouncing off. And down in the bottom on ground level they had slips with machine guns firing, which covered the whole sides of the Fort, you simple couldn't get near it. I was holding this position probably about a thousand yards from the Fort.

11:30 On 19th, my company commander arrived, he was a First World War man, he's served in the light horse and transferred to the camel corps and finished as an observer in the No 1 Squadron, the Australian Flying Squadron. He and the battalion second in command Major Joe Land, who was also a First World War man, they arrived,

12:00 they took two or three of my platoon and said "They were going on a patrol". They patrol a bit to the left forward of where I was. There were a number of vineyards in terraced section and they, vineyards had quite a few snipers in them and they started rustling up these snipers and sending back to get more troops from me and I finally had half my platoon there.

12:30 They operated I'd say for several hours. Finally, they captured an enemy eighty millimetre mortar. One of my troops had had some experience with mortars, so they got him to fire it. They were aiming at a house some distance away where there were enemy. And

13:00 Joe Lang stuck his head, and he was a very big man, six foot four and very big, went around the corner of the house, they were sheltering behind to observe the effect of the mortar shell and he was hit in the rump by a sniper. So then they had to carry him out. They found a ladder and used that as a stretcher.

13:30 They had also taken by the time a number of prisoners. And they'd caught up with some of the 2/25th Battalion, they were attacking and they had about twenty prisoners so altogether. They'd carried Joe Lang, they made the prisoners carry him back to the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] with about thirty, thirty five prisoners.

Murray, just before you

proceed on the Vichy French campaign, the problem is we are quite outside our chronology. So what I can ask of you is to, we'll go back to your youth first and we'll work up systematically towards the Vichy France campaign.

Righto. What do you want to know about my youth?

Well, I'd like you to give us a bit of an explanation about your parents, their background and

what they did.

Yes. Well my, as I said, my father was a clergyman. He was the rector at Wonthaggi when I was born and then was appointed an archdeacon in Sale, didn't want to be an archdeacon. He'd started his life as a missionary in Southern Sudan and he was only interested

in parish work. And so he changed over with the rector at Maffra and we went to live in Maffra for eight years. And then, as I say, a couple of years in Orbost and I went to boarding school. I joined the Bank of New South Wales when I left school, worked in a

branch in Flinders Street to begin with and moved around there. I spent sometime at Abbotsford and then they moved me to Colac. I'd been a member of the Melbourne University Rifles, as I said, I joined the CMF in about '36. I transferred

to the 23rd Battalion in Colac.

Actually, that's great. I'd like to ask you some questions now. Regarding your religious background, I take it you were Protestant background.

Yes.

Your father, did he have any involvement in the First World War?

No, no. No, he was, as a clergyman, it was a case of

who could be released and who was staying and the bishop wouldn't allow my father to go because he had young children. I was the third son, my first brother was born in March 1915 and my second in July 1916 and

he had no part in the war at all other than delivering telegrams. They advised casualties by telegram and in those days the telegrams for the ones who were killed were delivered by the clergy as far as I could make out. When you joined the army you had to state what your religion was and

presumably they handed it to the particular representative of that denomination. But I remember my father saying that wasn't a very happy time, delivering those telegrams. In Maffra he went back to being an ordinary parish rector. I did my primary and started my secondary schooling there

and then to Orbost where I went up to year ten. I wasn't a very successful student. To me, life was a battle, you fought against your teachers and I wasn't properly motivated, unfortunately. You realise this when it's too late. But then I went to Caulfield Grammar. Managed to play in both the football and cricket teams,

which was about the summit of my ambitions in those days.

So Caulfield Grammar would have been a boarding school?

Yes, yes, I was a boarder there.

How long were you a boarder for?

Two years. Then my father came down to live in Melbourne, he was appointed the vicar of South Melbourne. And I finished the last few months as a day student living in South Melbourne.

As I say, I went to Colac in about early '38 it would be, transferred into the battalion there and studied and was promoted to sergeant there.

Now, your upbringing religiously - I mean, obviously your father being a clergyman would have had a fairly serious

impact on your spiritual guidance, tell us how it impacted on you in your youth?

Well looking back on the religious aspect of my life, I never had any, shall I say doubts about religious faith. I don't know that I was a very good practicing Christian in

those days but underneath it all, as I say, I never had any doubts. I think a couple of years at the war started to show me that there was more to life than just enjoying yourself. And since then I've grown as a practicing Christian.

Since the war, you say?

Yes, yes.

When you were young as well, in your youth, you were quite strong in your beliefs with Christianity?

Yes I was. I never had any doubts, put it that way, although as a practicing Christian I wouldn't say I was a very good example. But it always came back to, or when it came back to a question of faith, I always erred on the side of faith, that's what it amounted

21:00 to. Yeah.

Your family, did you have any relatives that were involved in the First World War?

Oh yes. Yes. I had two uncles who served in the infantry in First World War as well as fairly close family friends.

21:30 One became quite distinguished, he served in World War One starting as a private and was commissioned, worked in intelligence and finished as a major, I think, in intelligence. Second World War, he came back. He had worked with General Blamey

22:00 in World War I, he came back as liaison officer and then back into intelligence and became director of military intelligence. He was Brigadier John Rogers, a close family friend. His father was a Methodist Clergyman, Edward Saggy, and the houses ...

22:30 his house and my family's house were back to back and they had a quite a close friendship. The two uncles, I think they'd best be described as renegades. I'm not too sure but they seemed to enjoy their life and both survived.

23:00 Then I had a cousin, a female, married a returned aviator who was a bit of a, what shall I say, daredevil? But he was a clergyman, he went into the church and served in various

23:30 New South Wales parishes for most of his life. He'd been shot down in flames in World War I and I think that affected his health a good deal. That seems to be the sum of family associations.

Did you have much contact with the World War I veterans outside your own family?

24:00 Yes and no. They were rather a tenuous contacts. Living in a country town in Maffra there were plenty of returned servicemen but there was of course a big generational gap apart from the affect of the war, so

24:30 there was no, sort of intimate contact really with them. Yeah. I can't think of any that, one in particular, their daughter were friends of my family's. He was a captain in World War I

25:00 but like a lot of World War I he had become an alcoholic. He was editor of the local paper and half the time he was not quite with it. But a very, what shall I say, aristocratic type of person,

25:30 yes.

Well, he must have written some interesting articles if that's the case?

Well, I don't remember them, I can't say, I didn't read the local paper, not at my age then. Yes, back to Orbost, the company at Orbost was a medium machine gun company and I studied the

26:00 use of medium machine gun, tactical and practical. And as I say, they made me a sergeant. Then I had started a part time university course in '37 doing commerce part time and when they moved me

26:30 to Colac I said to the band staff man that "This would handicap my attempts to get a degree and would he bring me back when the opportunity occurred?" He said, "I promise you that." And in January '39 I was transferred back to Moonee Ponds branch and worked there when war broke out.

27:00 As I say, I was doing a part time course at uni [university] and my father had said to me, "You'll want to go to the war, I haven't any doubt about that." But he said, "Will you finish this year at the university?" So I said, "Okay." And I finished the year. Was commissioned, which meant that

27:30 I couldn't just enlist. Nominated and had to wait for an appointment and then was invited by Colonel Wellington to join the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion.

Then before the war began, what did Empire mean to you?

Oh, that was an important thing.

28:00 It's not realised today the extent to which the ties with Britain existed. Most people talked of going home if they were going to England or the home country. King and country was a very important factor in the First World War, much more

28:30 so, even in the Second World War but it was still quite strong in Second World War. If you look back, I think it's true to say that today probably America is the sort of policeman, in a sense, of the world.

Before World War II, it was England and had been for many years. Such things, for instance, as

29:00 piracy in the Mediterranean, there was piracy along the North Africa coast and the British Navy finished that. They simply, whenever they picked up a pirate, they didn't even bother to try them, they just hung them. And they finished piracy along the Barbary Coast, as it was called, very quickly. I've not read the details

29:30 of the intervention of the Boxer Rebellion and things like that, but they were involved in, the British Navy in that, in keeping the seas open. There was a famous case that I only vaguely recollect, the Japanese of course attacked China and

30:00 the British destroyer sailed up the Yangtze River, I think it was, and the Japanese moved in artillery and prevented it from getting out for some time. That was the sort of thing that went on. When there was trouble the British used to send a gun boat and that had,

30:30 well general approval through Australia.

But it was important to yourself as well?

Oh yes, oh yes.

What did the Empire represent? Stability?

Yes, yes.

What else?

You couldn't imagine a world without Britain. It was the number one power. It stood for the things that mattered.

31:00 There was a sort of, because moralities all derived from the Christian and Jewish, Judaeo-Christian religious law really. And morality, even today, is built on that and when we depart from it we get into trouble. But Britain stood for that. Some of the British leaders were noted for their Christian

31:30 commitment. The famous Gordon of, General Gordon of Khartoum and he was known as Chinese Gordon because of his work in China. Britain occupied a very special position in the King, Queen Victoria in her

32:00 day and George V in my day were more than just figure heads, they were looked up to and greatly admired mostly in Australia. There were descending elements but personally I was brought up to have great belief in Britain. And my father had

32:30 worked in England for some time before he went into the ministry. Yeah.

When the war began, I suppose you must have had some idea well before that, that there was something brewing?

Oh look, as far back as, while I was still at school Hitler was then starting to emerge and it was quite evident that he was

33:00 intent on going to war eventually. And he was pressing. Today we call it brinkmanship, that he was involved in brinkmanship in his annexation of Austria, Czechoslovakia. There was the two

33:30 provinces, French, on the French border, Alsace-Lorraine, I think it was, which had been passed to France after World War I as part of the settlement and claimed by Germany and, of course, he reoccupied them. And then when Chamberlain made that infamous trip and came back

34:00 waving a piece of paper saying, "Peace in our time." I think Chamberlain was the only one that believed it because nobody here, that I knew, in Australia believed it. It was so evident that Hitler was intent on war. And Poland seems rather remote from Britain but when he invaded Poland that was the last straw. The British and French had actually signed some sort of

34:30 agreement with Poland and they moved immediately to support them. Oh, there was no question in my mind, by the time I left school, that trouble was brewing. And as I say, that was probably the main reason I joined the army.

When you were at Caulfield Grammar, what were you taught about history, politics, geography,

35:00 **what sort of things would they teach in the spectrum?**

In what way? What sort of things do you mean?

Well, subjects.

Oh yes, you studied British history in history. You didn't study continental or American history or a broader view of history. Your text books were British history and you learned

35:30 history and a bit of political history. Going back to the early wars with the French, you know, Agin-court and all those wars. Then moving on to Egyptian war and South Africa, we studied all that

36:00 and learned about the British political debates, the Cornwalls, I remember, stick in my mind. We used to hear a lot about the Cornwalls, which were at one stage very important in British political life. And I suppose we also learned

36:30 a good deal about parliamentary democracy and how it had grown up from Magna Carta and the 1660s revolution, the, what's his name, Oliver Cromwell and the importance that that placed on parliament

37:00 as distinct from the autocratic ruler of the sovereign up till then. At that stage we certainly learned that parliament had become the important source of government.

Were you taught much about the First World War?

Not a great deal because it was so

37:30 recent. We learned a bit about it but most history books only had brief reference to it, very little detail. I suppose you learned more about that from the little bit you saw in the press, you'd read some about General Monash, for instance, and

38:00 learned that the Australian troops were the main assault force that broke the Hindenburg Line. But not much detail either political or military.

So Caulfield Grammar would have had a fairly established cadet tradition, I would imagine?

No it didn't, it didn't have any cadets. We made some

38:30 moves while I was there to try and establish it but there were a few difficulties not the least of which the army itself wasn't very keen on it. But no, it didn't have a cadet tradition at all.

It's a bit surprising actually, I would expect the Grammars of that period to have a cadet tradition.

Some of them did but

39:00 not by any means all of them.

And how did the Depression impact on you life?

Oh that was, although I was very young it did have an impact in various ways. Firstly in

39:30 Maffra there were three factories, there was a sugar beet factory, the only place where they made sugar from beet in, certainly in Australia and I think in the southern hemisphere. There were two co-operatives processing milk, one was as we called it then, Nestles, now it's fashionable to call it Nestle,

40:00 but one of them closed down, which threw a lot of people out of work. The sugar beet factory was seasonal, when the sugar beet ripened. And for a small country town, the closing of one co-operative factory was, oh,

40:30 Nestle was not co-operation but it had a big impact and there was a lot of people out of work of course. Personally its biggest effect on me was this constant stream of people coming to the door and wanting something to eat. I probably was a bit too young to see the real tragedy of

41:00 that but there was a constant stream. I understand that in those days they marked a gate post, the people who were, shall we say, generous, the gate post was marked and the people who were carrying the swag, humping the bluey, they used to come in and ask for

41:30 some help. Occasionally, my father got them to split a bit of wood for us for a fire.

Tape 2

00:34 **We were talking about the Depression and you mentioned some of the blokes that had come to the door, can you tell us a little bit more about the general affect that the Depression had on society?**

It's very hard to look back on it because I was quite young then, say

01:00 '32.

Were you a fourteen year old?

Mmm?

When were you thirteen or fourteen?

Yes. We left Maffra in ’32 and we went to Orbost and, for instance, there was a gentleman there, and I call him a gentleman, sweeping the gutters, that was his job. And my father got into conversation with him, he was a

01:30 school principal who’d lost his job. And he found a great deal of happiness in moving around the town sweeping the gutters. You and I would probably think that was a level to sink to, that people avoided. But to him, he was getting paid and he had a job and an opportunity to talk to people and he seemed very happy

02:00 doing it. And my father used to say he was a most interesting man to talk to, he was well educated being a school principal. But I think that was typical of the Depression years, he was one that got a job. A lot of them couldn’t get a job of any sort. And I’m not sure when they brought in the unemployment allowance but people

02:30 had to live on, you know, sort of a pound a week, which sounds terrible today but when you could buy a leg of lamb for less than two shillings it wasn’t all that bad. It was enough to keep them alive. And of course, they had the idea of work for the dole, as they call it,

03:00 and a couple of our state attractions were built by them such as the Yarra Boulevard and the famous road around the west coast, what’s it called?

The Great Ocean Road.

The Great Ocean Road, that’s right, I couldn’t think of it. That was built by

03:30 people working for the dole. And there were other projects too but by and large the amount of misery was enormous, the little I could see. We moved down to live in South Melbourne, which was very much an industrial area in those days and,

04:00 yeah, there was an awful lot of people just existing. How they existed, I don’t know in many cases, yeah. But at that age you don’t really appreciate what’s going on, not fully. Yeah.

What about some of the other kids at school,

04:30 **did you notice that some kids were doing it harder than others?**

Looking back, I did in the case of the country school, the high school and the primary school but I didn’t notice it so much in Caulfield Grammar and I suppose that’s understandable because people who were there were paying for it and obviously had some means.

05:00 In fact my family, living on the salary of a county clergyman, we were probably worse off than most of them and I was very conscious of that. I know my father when he went to Orbost had been offered a much more, shall I say,

05:30 lucrative appointment in Melbourne. And the Bishop persuaded him to go to Orbost for a particular reason, the clergyman who was at Orbost had been playing up and the Bishop persuaded my father to go to try and set things straight. I didn’t know that till years afterwards. I knew he had been

06:00 approached about going to the city and was at one stage fairly confident that he would be going, but went to Orbost and dropped salary to go there. And the salary they got was small enough, how he dropped it I don’t know.

When you say playing up, what do you mean?

Oh, I understand he was getting a bit too close to some of the girls.

06:30 As an unkind remark, when I saw his wife I wasn’t surprised. But that was 1930s.

So how was your own family getting by in the Depression, what sort of foods did you eat and?

Well,

07:00 as a clergyman we got enough to live on. We didn’t get any luxuries in life and I remember for instance, if you had a piece of bread you could have butter on it or you could have jam, you couldn’t have both, that was expensive. Just a little thing but those are the sort of things that happened.

07:30 Yeah.

What sort of things did you do for fun, you know, I’m talking now about earlier than the Depression as a child?

Don’t remember much before the Depression of course, which really began ’29. I remember a bit about

08:00 schooling then and even in those days I still enjoyed a game of cricket and a game of football. I didn’t have the luxury of playing that much with my brothers because my elder brother went off to Caulfield Grammar early,

08:30 the one next to me developed polio quite early and I recall, you know, for quite a long time he had his leg in plaster and went through the treatment in those days. I think he had twenty two or twenty four operations, the last one

09:00 moving the ankle bone which had been distorted through the polio. But he finished up, the muscle in his left leg had wasted right away. He still talked his way into the AIF eventually in 1941, I think, or '42.

09:30 Finished up in intelligence as a warrant officer, he did quite well considering. Because he started out in the army service corps in the armoured division and then General Robertson took command of the armoured division and wouldn't have anyone who wasn't A-one. And brother John was turfed out, had a terrible job

10:00 at a kits store at Singleton. He'd had a stripe, he'd lost the stripe. And I was talking about Brigadier Rogers a while ago, he rescued him quite by accident. My mother ran into Brigadier Rogers' sister and she was asking about the family and my mother said, "Oh, poor John, he's most unhappy, he's been pitched out of the armoured division and is

10:30 languishing in a kits store." Thought no more about it and out of the blue, brother John got a command to go to this intelligence school at South Port. The officer in charge of the kits store was a First World War lieutenant who said, "Who do you know in the hierarchy?" Brother John said, "Nobody." Well he said, "I've got orders that you're to go to an intelligence school." He got up there and saw Brigadier

11:00 Rogers when he arrived who said to him, "I've brought you here, it's up to you now, if you pass the course you're in intelligence, if you don't pass, you're back to the kit store." So he got through, yeah.

All right, just getting a little ahead of us also. Let's get back to your childhood, I'm wondering, sort of, apart from the organised

11:30 **sports that you did, what did you do in your spare time with your brothers?**

Well in Maffra, I had a couple of very good friends and life was a bit different from today. You didn't worry about your kids being out, we just wandered around. I'd go down to my friend's place and we'd go

12:00 off. I don't know what we did really but we'd play a bit of cricket or a bit of football and go walking. Sometimes, my father had an old bicycle that was so heavy I could hardly lift the thing and in my young days, I couldn't sit on the seat of course, it was, and

12:30 the bar was too high, it couldn't reach the pedals but I learned to ride it by putting my foot in through the frame, my right foot, and sort of holding the thing upright with my foot and leg through the frame, working it that way. And I learned to ride that way. And I'd sometimes ride out on

13:00 the road to Sale or to Bairnsdale or somewhere like that, in the local area. But we were kept pretty occupied but I'm not sure what at.

Did you go fishing or hunting at all?

Did a bit of fishing and, I didn't go, shall we say hunting until I went to

13:30 Orbost. And I used to borrow a 22 rifle and go shooting occasionally, try and knock over a rabbit. I wasn't in the group that, I knew a girl as a matter of fact, after the war, her father used to give her two 22 bullets

14:00 in the Depression years and she was required to come back with two rabbits and she mostly did.

So that's quite an average. Were you a good shot?

I was a better shot than most. When I joined the CMF in the Melbourne University Rifles, we had a day, one day at the rifle

14:30 range at Williamstown and I'd never fired a 303 but I got down on the range and my first two shots, one was an inner and the other was a bull and the next I knew a sergeant had come up beside me and was whispering about joining the University Rifles Club. But yeah, I could shoot reasonably well.

15:00 **Now, I missed which denomination your father was.**

Anglican. Church of England in those days.

And it seems a silly question to ask when your father was a padre but was your family very devout?

Oh, yes,

15:30 oh yes. My father was an evangelical, which seems to have altered a bit these days but in those days it meant that everything was by the bible, you couldn't question the bible. And I remember it was, if the bible was on a table

16:00 you couldn't put anything on it, it was not right. And Sunday was observed as Sunday. Yeah, he was a very strict evangelical.

Was he a fire and brimstone man?

Not so much fire and brimstone and he was very broad in another sense. In those days,

16:30 of course, there was very much controversy between the Protestants and the Catholics. He didn't agree with that and quite often somebody would come to him and say, "Oh, my son or my daughter's going to marry a Catholic." And they'd be terribly upset and he'd look at them and say, "Well, that's a good thing." And they'd look a bit surprised and he'd say, "Well, he never came to church, now he's

17:00 going to be a Catholic, he'll have to go to mass and that's better than nothing." And looking back on that it was very broad for those days, very broad.

Do you remember much of the conflict between the Protestants and the Catholics?

I was always aware of it but he

17:30 and my mother discouraged it. Similarly there was always criticism of the Jews. If ever I saw anything about the Jews my mother would look at me very sternly and say, "They're God's chosen people." And that was the end of it. Yeah.

Very liberal.

Oh yes, yeah. And

18:00 looking back now, of course, the Christian religion is dependant on the Jewish faith. One in the culmination of the other.

But not everyone sees it that way.

No, I know, I know. The way events came is the way they were prophesised and the more I read

18:30 it the more I realise that you can't separate the two.

Do you remember much, seeing any discrimination against Jews or did you know any Jews?

Oh yes, I've known Jews but I can't say I remember any discrimination. And in the war I had some good

19:00 Jewish friends. One was a doctor, a very nice blokes, died a couple of years ago. He was a broad minded Jew anyway, he'd be eating pork saying "This is beautiful chicken". But no, I was brought up, as I say, with a fairly tolerant view on those particular things.

19:30 As far as Catholics were concerned, a great aunt of mine married a Catholic. He was a broadminded Catholic. Although he was the pillar of a country church and very great power in the church apparently, because he had a priest moved, which was an unheard of thing in those days. But he was the main contributor and virtually paid for the church they built. They had a row because the priest wouldn't disclose

20:00 the accounts and so he got the priest moved. And his son was seriously ill at one stage, he lived in a country town in Pakenham actually, which is not a country town any longer but I remember him ringing my father and asking him to pray

20:30 for him, which again would have been, in those days wouldn't have been approved by the Catholic Church. Yeah, but that uncle was quite broad and didn't agree with what the nuns were teaching his children quite often.

Did your father sort of talk to you about other religions and?

No really, not

21:00 really, no. No, I knew very little about them. In fact for various reasons, today I spend most Sundays going to other churches. And I must say I've been quite surprised and pleased. I went to Church of Christ last Sunday and the Sunday before I went

21:30 to the Baptists and the Sundays before that I went to the Assembly of God, which is a wide variety. But I'm doing that because I'm convinced we've got to break down the barriers and work together. There's a movement afoot called the Melbourne Pastors Network.

22:00 It's run by an Anglican clergyman but the idea is to try and bring them all in together. And they do have groups meeting, which include even the Roman Catholics, which you wouldn't have got twenty years ago. And they've got a wide variety from Assembly of God and

22:30 Presbyterians and Methodists, Baptists. Baptists are one of the strongest churches today and they're growing.

All right, now just remind me again, where were you living in the 1930s?

1930s, well as I said I went to Caulfield Grammar in ’34

23:00 and ’35. My family moved down to South Melbourne in the latter stage of ’35. I worked in Melbourne ’36 and most of ’37 and went to Colac in early ’38 or late ’37.

23:30 Had about twelve or eighteen months there and came back to Melbourne early in ’39. So I was living at home in ’39 when I joined the AIF.

And you said that you were fairly aware of the war that was brewing in Europe, how early would you say that

24:00 **you started taking an interest in affairs there?**

Well, I used to get into arguments about it at school, at Caulfield Grammar. We had a, I remember one particular fellow who was about my age and he was very much a pacifist. And all the anti-war arguments were going on at that stage because

24:30 people were beginning to realise that war was on the horizon. And they had some fatuous arguments, one argument was that if somebody attacked you, you didn’t resist, if you resisted you caused trouble but if you didn’t resist they couldn’t do anything to you. Well of course Hitler showed that that was a myth anyway and if you look at history, going back to Gandhi’s

25:00 and people like that, it didn’t matter whether you resisted or not. But that was the sort of argument you got. And the other great argument, of course, was that the World War I was so destructive that the next war would be worse and destroy everything. Well in a sense it did too.

In the time you were at Caulfield,

25:30 **Australia and most of the world was struggling out of a depression and Germany was doing better than most and Hitler was doing some remarkable things. Do you remember people commenting on that or what views people had of Hitler?**

Well generally, of course, I don’t think the economics was fully appreciated but German economy

26:00 boomed because of the reconstruction. But don’t forget that in the ‘30s they got into that terrible inflationary period where a postage stamp cost twenty thousand marks or something silly like that.

Wasn’t that earlier on?

It was in the ‘30s, the early ‘30s [actually 1923]. I think that would be before Hitler came

26:30 in, I’m not sure of the

That’s what I thought. So by about the mid ‘30s, the autobahns and so on and of course the armaments was really pulling them out.

Rebuilding after World War I because you saw the same thing after World War II. The German economy flourished for years, it was regarded as the strongest in Europe and it was largely based

27:00 on reconstruction.

Unfortunately, war’s very good for business.

Yeah, well now of course, they’re in the doldrums, probably the worst economy in Europe.

Was Hitler ever discussed in a positive way?

Hitler? No. Except just occasionally, I mean, there were some

27:30 supporters of Hitler, I mean, it was reported in the press here, people like Unity Mitford, the daughter of some aristocrat in England who went to Germany and became a great fan of Hitler.

I don’t think she ever recanted either.

I don’t know, I don’t know what happened to here, I wasn’t interested.

28:00 But there was Lord Haw Haw of course, Joyce. They were individuals but there was, and it’s emerged since the war, a strong element of pro German feeling even in the British Cabinet. And Churchill really had to carry the cabinet.

28:30 I still class Churchill as the greatest man of the twentieth century. I don’t think we would have continued with the war if it hadn’t been for Churchill. After 1940, the collapse of the French and things had reached the lowest possible level, he lifted the whole country up and with it the whole

29:00 Empire.

Yeah, he was certainly a great wartime leader.

Oh, I don't think anyone today can realise the extent to which he held the place together. But a lot of very powerful politicians were very much in favour of signing some sort of agreement with Germany.

29:30 Because France, there were two things in France, a lot of them hated England, it was an ancient tradition, you didn't like England going back to the Seven Years War and those before that. But for instance, the French appointed Weygand as

30:00 the Commander in Chief and he was Commander at the time the French collapsed. He disliked England intensely, so much so that when he went to visit one military area he came back the long way around rather than pass through an area where the British were occupying and were in charge. And I've always

30:30 felt the French didn't really put up a stiff resistance to Germany partly because they were a bit of, what shall I say, not entirely convinced that they had to oppose Germany. I think there was a lot of support for Germany in France.

Yeah, it's difficult because we know

31:00 **so much more now about what happened then and it affects our views. I'm just wondering, in the '30s from your experience how much you knew of what was happening in Germany and particularly did you know anything about the persecutions of the Jews?**

Not really. Although I did know, it sort of emerged in little

31:30 bits here and there about his ideas of disposing of the gypsies and he was certainly anti Jewish, we knew that. The extent to which he had gone with it, we didn't know. Even during the war years I think the British intelligence and British leaders began to learn about it but I think they

32:00 decided it was best not to publicise it for some reason, I don't know. But what we did know is the aggressive movements by Germany which were reported in full. Such as the argument leading up to the occupation of the Sudetenland and the,

32:30 first the occupation of Alsace-Lorraine, the reoccupation of Austria. All those were fully reported in the press and those who worried about Hitler and his intentions saw in them a pointer to what was happening, there's no question about that.

So to you, you were quite clear that he was on the march?

Oh yes, I never

33:00 had any doubt from about '35 on, certainly.

So you say that you and some of the other blokes at school would sort of argue back and forth about pacifism and different ways of dealing with it. But other than that what affect did it have on you as young men who knew that war was coming?

Yeah, well I think that was the thing you accepted.

33:30 One of the reasons, and I joined the CMF and worked to get promotion is that I thought if there's going to be a war, I'm not going to be a private solider, I wanted to be an officer, so I studied. And it was the inevitability of it that drove me to it really. Plus the general belief

34:00 that it had to be done, that Hitler was definitely bad, no question about that. How bad emerged after the war. We now know he was a Satanist for instance and pursued a philosophy of,

34:30 you know, what is it, God is dead and we have killed him. I think that's Nietzsche but he embraced Nietzsche.

Do you remember where you were when war was declared?

Yes, I was in my front room at the vicarage in South Melbourne listening to the radio when Bob Menzies

35:00 made that solemn announcement, I think he said, "It is my melancholy duty." I think that's the way he put it. "To announce that we are at war with Germany or that England has declared war and we are at war with Germany." But it was really the culmination of events of the attack on Poland

35:30 and he was really only saying what everyone knew had to happen.

So your reaction when you heard that was that it was no great surprise?

No. No great surprise at all. And as I say, my father came to me that evening and said, "Will you please finish your university year?" So

36:00 I promised him that, yeah. Managed to pass two subjects I think, yeah.

Funny how parents think, isn't it?

Yes, yes. I'd have done the same thing. But at the same time I knew that the life of a young lieutenant in the infantry

36:30 was nil, very few survived. Either through wounds or through death and it was a very high casualty rate in lieutenants. To a lesser extent on company commanders but they still didn't escape. And

37:00 I recall in 1942, '43, '42 a brigadier was killed, a couple of brigadiers killed that I know.

Well at that point, as you say, the life expectancy of a young officer wasn't good and as you said Germany was fairly fit and strong

37:30 **in those days, they were marching across Europe virtually unopposed?**

Yes, yes.

Were you scared?

Mmm?

Were you scared?

No, I suppose not, you live with it. The same with, the first time I came under any shellfire, we had a company quartermaster who'd won a VC [Victoria Cross]

38:00 in World War I, a very nice fellow, Wally Peeler, and he knew that the shells were falling and he appeared walking around with his pipe in his mouth and saying, "Don't run, if it's going to hit you, it'll hit you anyway." He cooled the boys down a lot. A certain amount of fatalism in it I think, you know, if your number's on it,

38:30 you'll get it.

Now, you joined the CMF first off, the citizen army and you were in university rifles as well?

I started with the university rifles. I did a camp at Ballarat with them

39:00 as private then I went to Colac and transferred into the 23/21st Battalion, a local company there, it was centred on Geelong but there was a company in Colac, which was a machine gun company. I got to the rank of sergeant there and then I couldn't go into their camp because that occurred at the

39:30 time of the university exams, they were bobbing up again. And I went to what they called a casual camp as an alternative and found myself with the Royal Melbourne regiment. I did a camp with them early in '39, January it must have been, and the company commander, a very fine fellow

40:00 by the name of Roy Gordon, a captain then, when the camp was breaking up, he said to me, "I understand you're working with the railways." I said, "No, I'm in the bank." And he said, "Oh, I've heard you were with the railways, I was going to have you brought to Melbourne, so that you could join my company." Which I took as a great compliment. And I said, "Well I'm expecting to be moved to Melbourne in which case I'll be glad to join

40:30 the company." Which I did. Roy Gordon, incidentally, went on to become a Major General. He was a very able man, very able.

Tape 3

00:30 I was only twelve months there and it was, at the most, very raw recruit learning. We did one camp at Ballarat.

You've just mentioned the university rifles?

With the university

01:00 rifle, Melbourne University Rifles B Company, which was mostly people not fully undergoing education at the university, business people mainly which made up B Company. And yes, I met some interesting people but I was a very raw recruit.

So is it like cadets

01:30 **or ...?**

Oh, it was a stage ahead of cadets. Cadets vary of course, today they don't seem to be, shall I say, very war like in their training. But oh, no, we did one battalion exercise and things were so

02:00 scarce in the way of military equipment and supplies and people. I was with a sergeant, Sergeant Renan [?] was his name and we had to lay out pieces of rope to represent sections of men that were on the

ground. We'd go and say, 'Well a section here." And we'd lay out a long stretch of rope.

02:30 We didn't have a great deal in the way of supplies. We all had a rifle and bayonet mainly for drill purposes. And then of course, we had that one day on the rifle range at Williamstown, I enjoyed that, an opportunity

03:00 to try my skill. You have to teach people to shoot straight but the average country boy does it automatically. You tell them to keep the sights upright and to get the foresight in the centre of the V on the backsight and all those sort of things,

03:30 the country boy does that automatically. I've always had a feeling that one of the great successes of the AIF was the number of people from the country who provided skills that were almost unique to the country. The ability to

04:00 use ground, to understand ground, the ability to pick up movement very quickly. The country boy can tell you where there's a rabbit in a tussock, he picks up the movement. When I was in the AIF, if we were on a route march, one of my troops used to suddenly veer off and go up quietly to a tussock and

04:30 pull out a rabbit. Nobody else knew it was there but he did.

By hand?

Yeah. Yeah.

So would you say you took to guns and the life of the army man like a duck to water?

Oh, I could handle a rifle, shooting. Drill,

05:00 I had to learn but shooting, I could do that. I'd grown up as a youngster with a 22 rifle and knew how to use it.

You say you had to learn things like drill, how did you find that experience and the sort of general discipline and regimentation of the army?

I didn't find that (UNCLEAR) or anything, I felt that was necessary

05:30 and so all right. And drill, you can get interested in that, it might sound boring and look boring but it's not when you're doing it. I had a very good platoon in the AIF, very varied background,

06:00 from one who'd been acquitted on a charge of murder and had several high court convictions for serious offences, or supreme court. Another was a petty criminal, they came to me and said "He ought to be discharged, he's got twenty nine civil convictions under eighteen different aliases". And I said, "Well he's making a good soldier, so we'll keep him and make him a good citizen." Which we did.

06:30 And then I had a young fellow who'd been a Melbourne Grammar boy. In fact he held some sort of light weight boxing championship at Melbourne Grammar in his day. Very varied but they came together very well and we used to win a lot of competitions, both

07:00 drill competitions and sporting competitions. In fact, one day we all got a day's leave because we won a sporting competition. Yeah.

So tell me the steps that you took from the citizen army and militia through to AIF?

07:30 Well, as I said, I transferred from the University Rifles to the 23/21st City of Geelong Regiment - it was called. Where I was in a machine gun - medium machine gun company, the Vickers machine gun. I studied that, the use of it, both technically and tactically.

08:00 I used to go to bed with a text book by my side and read it for half an hour before I went to sleep, most nights. I got to the rank of sergeant there, came back to the city and as I mentioned, I transferred back into the 6th Battalion, the Royal Melbourne Regiment. And

08:30 the company commander was preparing me, in a sense, for a commission but I hadn't started any real studies. You're supposed to study administrative stuff, military law, etcetera as well as military history, a bit of knowledge of military history. I'd read a few

09:00 military history books but hadn't started on a course of study when war broke out. And immediately the company commander said to me, "Examinations are not held now, I'm recommending you for a commission straight away." And three of us, I think it was, were put up. We were interviewed by the brigade commander and

09:30 papers went forward and we were gazetted in November.

Well tell me, when you were with, was it the 6th, what was the general mix of the blokes, what sort of backgrounds did they have?

6th Battalion drew a large number of their people from around the Carlton, Fitzroy

10:00 area but they also came from a wider circle. I remember one used to arrive on parade night in a chauffeur driven Rolls, he was one of the Nichols' family.

Who are the Nichols?

The Aspro people.

10:30 And oh, there were varying people. My particular friend that I'd developed there was the son of a former lord mayor of Melbourne. And, yeah, they drew a lot from a wider circle but the majority of other ranks seemed to come from around Carlton

11:00 and Fitzroy.

How did you get on with them generally?

How did I get there?

No, how did you get on with them, did you make friends?

Yeah, oh, all right, yeah, I got on all right. The officers, again, were a mixed lot. We had a Baillieu, which was part of the family that owned that magnificent

11:30 house down at Portsea. He was a lieutenant at the time I joined but I remember later a couple of the officers saying they'd gone down with him to this place at Portsea one evening and sat on the balcony while the butler supplied them with drinks, they were rather impressed.

12:00 **I wanted to ask you, earlier you mentioned working on the Vickers, what did you think of this gun, it was a World War I weapon and it was much berated.**

Oh no, it was still effectively used in World War II.

12:30 It was a medium machine gun, you could use it for night, set it up providing you could set it up in the day. It was fairly cumbersome, it sat on a tripod and the tripod weighed a fair bit, somebody had to carry it and you also had a

13:00 can of water to cool it. But it was very effective and with the development of a particular type of ammunition, which they used from fairly early in the war, you could claim to have an effective range of two thousand yards. I don't know that it was ever used at such extreme ranges

13:30 but anything up to a thousand yards would be quite effective.

Were you working on it physically, breaking it down and setting it up?

Oh yes, yes, you learned to strip it. You reached the stage where, or you should have reached the stage where you could strip it and reassemble it in the dark. Well, you had to be able to do that to use it

14:00 at night time. And you also had to study the various stoppages that could occur. Most of these guns, for varying reasons, had a stoppage and they were fairly well documented and you studied the various movements to rectify a stoppage, rapidly,

14:30 if it needed to be.

Now, from the point that your CC (UNCLEAR) two others out, where did you go to from there, you went to the AIF?

Three of us went to the

15:00 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion as lieutenants.

Where were they based?

Where were they based? In Puckapunyal, we went up, I think, 19 May or 17 May was the first day. We had to go for a physical examination at

15:30 Caulfield. The doctor looked at me, I've got very high insteps and small feet, he looked at me and said, "You won't do in the infantry with those feet." And I said, 'Well I've just finished a 144 mile route march around the Mornington Peninsular." And he said, "Oh, well you'll be all right." But I didn't tell him I did it all on horseback. But I still

16:00 never fell out on a route march in the whole time I was in the army.

You were keen though?

Oh well, I suppose you had to be, didn't you, yeah. I didn't want to be ruled out because of my feet.

I wouldn't want to be put on a route march when, in fact, I hadn't been able to that speed up until then.

Oh, I

16:30 could do it. Used to hurt like the very Dickens when on a route march, you stopped ten minutes to the hour, for ten minutes and you try and put your feet up somewhere on a wire fence or something and you get on your feet again and the blood would start coursing through your feet and it was agony for the first

17:00 five minutes but then it settled down, yeah.

Tell me what they, conditions were like at Pukka?

Oh reasonable. We had huts and the troops mostly slept in a long hut, I don't know how many would

17:30 be on each side but it would be at least ten each side. And the officers had young subalterns, two to a cubicle sort of business, sometimes more. And then as you progressed, the major had a cubicle to himself, so did the colonel.

18:00 Oh no, the messing arrangements were reasonable particularly in the early days you had to get, we didn't have a catering corps, so you looked around amongst your troops to find if somebody had been working in a shearing group as a cook or a

18:30 somebody working on cattle as a drover. Most of them knew a little bit about bush cooking and you'd pick out a couple and they'd be the cooks and if they didn't work too well they'd be thrown out and somebody else come in but mostly they got by. And then they established the catering corps and taught

19:00 them and some of them finished up very good cooks.

So what sort of training were you doing?

Infantry training with, first and then engineer, light engineering training, building bridges and learning to use explosives, sort of light engineering stuff.

How did you

19:30 **find the engineering training?**

Oh, interesting, yeah. I didn't know anything about engineering and had a lot to learn but mostly we had, I can't remember how many but there were two or three actual engineers in the battalion in amongst the officers

20:00 who were practical engineers by profession. Our training left a lot to be desired when I look back on it. We were corps troops. In an

20:30 infantry battalion you've got a brigade who's responsible for your training and they watch it very closely and then on top of that there's a division which they produce training instructions and set out a carefully produced pattern of training. Corps troops, that doesn't happen and I'm afraid we were left to our own

21:00 devices to some extent although the commandant at Puckapunyal did set down, I gather, some general instructions. But looking back now or even during the war I realised that our training lacked an awful lot. A lot depended on the company commander and while I had a very fine company commander,

21:30 his infantry experience was very limited and our training was largely our own doing. And I was a very raw lieutenant, a good deal of that showed up quite early in our operations. My first attack was a shambles

22:00 really.

All right, we won't get too far ahead of ourselves here. I'm interested to know, at that time at Puckapunyal did you have or did you wonder about where you would be sent? Did you have any idea about where you might be sent?

The general impression initially was we expected

22:30 to go to England and France. When the French collapsed we were on our way I think but it was when Mussolini came into the war, when Italy came into the war, North Africa became important and 6th Division went there in January

23:00 1940. And the rest of the AIF, of course, were virtually destined to follow. So at that stage we knew we'd be going to North Africa. One convoy, at least, went to England because England was in desperate straights after Dunkirk.

23:30 The convoy consisted mainly of reinforcements. But they built a couple of battalions in England, I'm not sure, I think there was at least a battalion in the convoy but I don't really know the details of that but I know they came back to the Middle East and,

24:00 which brigade? Some of them, two battalions became the 25th Brigade, which was part of 7th Division, the third battalion in that brigade was a Queensland Battalion, the 2/25th which went overseas in the

24:30 same convoy that we went in.

Did your training change at all to take in the skills that were specific to the desert?

Not really at that stage. Most of us were trying to get information from people who

25:00 were there but it was very difficult. There were a couple of early books published, which were dealing with conditions that applied, not so much the desert but France I think, if I remember rightly.

25:30 I'm trying to remember. I've got one book that came out early, which had a fair bit about early training. And of course, as a famous German General or Field Marshall von Ludendorff remarked, "The British had the best text books in the world and made the worse use of them". They had a series, one two and three, called Field Service Regulations which set out

26:00 a good deal. Then in the late 1930s the British War Office set up a committee to produce a new training text book. Montgomery was the secretary of that and he virtually took it over and wrote the book himself which was, oh, I've forgotten what it was called but it was quite a good book and that was

26:30 mainly what we worked on at that stage I suppose. Well, we didn't know at that stage that it had been written by a man called Montgomery who afterwards became the GOC [General Officer Commanding] of the 8th Army and Field Marshall and had an Australian connection. His father was a bishop of Tasmania.

27:00 **In a lot of ways the British army and their tactics were deeply rooted in the previous century, did you have a feeling at that point that it was a bit old fashioned?**

Not really. That's open to question in that by the time we got to

27:30 the Middle East there were generals there who were pretty good and knew their stuff. There were some who I would question. There was a great argument went on after the war based on Field Marshall Orchardlake [?]. Now

28:00 when Rommel came back in '42, drove the British back to the Egyptian border and then back to the Alamein Line or boxes, as it was called then, the area in the north which we subsequently occupied, the forward positions were

28:30 in low lying area overlooked by a couple of features that dominated the area. When the Australians were moved down in '42 to help block Rommel, they took one look at these features and said we've got to capture them and the 26th Brigade launched a series of very costly attacks but they captured those that high ground and held

29:00 it. And it became the key of our defensive area. Somehow or other there was a feeling that Orchardlake wanted to withdraw into the Alamein box, in that low lying ground. That's denied by a lot of people

29:30 but I know it was true because I was a junior staff officer and was receiving instructions to provision the box for the section that we would be responsible for. Montgomery took command and he came up to see the forward

30:00 commanders. I wasn't present when he came but the staff captain, I was assistant staff captain, the staff captain was a fellow named Bill Young and he was telling me about this fellow, Montgomery, who'd taken command of the 8th Army and he said he turned to General Morshead and he said, "They want to go back into the Alamein box." He said, "You had to fight for this, didn't you?" And General Morshead said, "Yes." He said, "Well make him fight for it if he wants

30:30 to get it back." And that was the end of the idea of going back. Now, I've got a book there which actually defends Orchardlake and says "He never intended to go back". But my personal experience was that he did. But that came out of your question about some English generals fighting the last

31:00 century war.

I take that back actually, that's probably a bit harsh.

Well not entirely, not entirely, there were some. But for instance, the first desert campaign was lead by General O'Connor and while I wasn't involved and know very little about it, those who were had a very high opinion of O'Connor but he was captured in the retreat that followed. They used to talk about the Benghazi

31:30 Handicap, our troops would go forward, get as far as Benghazi and then they'd be counter attacked and then they'd all go back again, it was always a bit of a shemozzle. Nothing's worse than a withdrawal. General Blamey took over the withdrawal in Greece when General Wilson, Jumbo Wilson, the British commander who I think might have belonged to the previous

32:00 century, he bailed out and left Blamey to conduct the withdrawal. And in view of, you know, the

problems that are enormous in a withdrawal like that, which is really a rout, Blamey conducted a masterly withdrawal. Blamey's very under rated, very under rated.

32:30 There are a lot of people on fairly good grounds that believe that a lot of Monash's success was due to Blamey. He was his principle staff officer, his BGS as they call it, brigadier general staff and he apparently was virtually responsible for the famous Battle of Hamel, which of course Monash gets full credit for as the commander and so he should but the

33:00 detail was Blamey's. And then of course he became C-in-C [Commander in Chief] of the Australian forces. The politicians, some of them, didn't like Blamey for a number of reasons, I won't go into all of those but when General Morshead, he was our most successful field commander, arrived back from the Middle East,

33:30 a deputation of politicians including at least one minister, met him and asked him if he would be prepared to assume command of the Australian forces as C-in-C to replace Blamey. Morshead gave them a very simple answer, "There's only one man can to that job and that's Tom Blamey, I couldn't do it, full stop." That I didn't get from Morshead but I got from someone who did get it from Morshead, a Brigade Commander.

34:00 And that's a measure of Blamey's ability.

All right. I want to move back from generalities and ask particularly, at Puckapunyal, you were there for what seems like quite a while?

A long time.

Yeah, was that frustrating for you?

Yes. And we were referred to as the Puckapunyal caretakers. But it was frustrating.

34:30 As young soldiers I suppose we wanted to get away, get over there and do our bit but nobody seemed to care. And again, it's because we were corps troops. Then they discovered that they needed us, so they got us over there in a hurry but it was almost twelve months after the unit was formed.

Were you still at

35:00 **Puckapunyal when Pearl Harbour was attacked?**

Oh no, no. We were in the Middle East then. We left for the Middle East in April '41, Pearl Harbour, of course, was December '41. No, we'd been through the Syrian campaign by then.

All right. Well look, tell us about your, when you finally got to go overseas,

35:30 **you went on the Queen Mary, was it?**

Yes.

Tell us about that trip.

Very comfortable trip, very comfortable. The Queen Mary, of course, and the [HMS] Queen Elizabeth were the two biggest liners in the world and it was the first convoy in which the two of them had been together. I was ship's postal officer and three of us shared a cabin, which

36:00 had not been altered from its peacetime run at all. It had been occupied by three people on the last run across the Atlantic before the war. We had this huge cabin, and it really was huge and there was a box room outside, just at the door, which subsequently they turned into, they built

36:30 bunks in them and I think they had two bunks, two sets of six bunks each. So they had at least a dozen people in the box room. But the dining rooms, the bars were still the same as they had been from the peace time run. We used to have to, well not have to but we used to go to the

37:00 cocktail bar, I've forgotten what they called it but it was very lavish. The whole trip was very comfortable.

You were travelling in style.

Yes we were, we were on that trip. But then of course they stripped them down and

37:30 when America came into the war they moved American troops across the Atlantic. And they used to have two shifts, one up on deck and one resting I believe and they literally moved thousands on each voyage. We had our battalion

38:00 and a lot of smaller groups. There was an air force squadron, I can't remember but we probably had the best part of two thousand troops on the ship, yeah.

How did you occupy yourself during that long journey?

Well,

38:30 mostly they were engaged in sort of special training, lectures and talks and that sort of thing. But I was occupied as the postal officer and I spent most of my time in the day time down in the postal offices. I had a sergeant and a couple of corporals working there, so

39:00 I didn't have anything physically to do except to see that it ran. And take them mails ashore when we got to Fremantle, receive the mails that came in. I remember, looking through my diary, apparently I got a mass of telegrams that were to be dispatched when we

39:30 got to Fremantle, so I suppose all the troops were sending telegrams to tell their families that they were on their way and so on, yeah. The convoy was escorted from Fremantle to Trincomalee by HMAS Australia, from Trincomalee

40:00 for some reason, it was a naval reason, most of the convoy left ahead of the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth I think, and of course, they could steam at a much greater speed than the normal convoy and they just set out twenty nine, thirty knots and picked up the convoy

40:30 before they reached Suez. But I don't know why they didn't all go together.

Tape 4

00:34 **Okay, can you tell us about your first operational combat experience?**

Yes, well Syria was the first operation I was involved in. The British forces crossed the Syrian frontier on the 8th and two of our companies were supporting them. My company moved up from the camp in Palestine on 8

01:00 June, 1941 and we camped or bivouacked at a place caller Er Rama [?]. On the 10th the company was moved to a right flank outpost role. They told us there were probably five hundred enemy in the area. There was a town less than ten kilometres

01:30 away called Quenitra, which subsequently the British forces coming up from Iraq captured and then the French drove them out, but that was later. I stayed there till the 12th when we were withdrawn and put onto light engineering duties, the French had blown a couple

02:00 of the roads and the bridges over the Litani and we were repairing that when we were moved up north to improve road facilities. The roads were terrible, the bends were so sharp they couldn't get the guns and tractors around them and we were increasing that, widening it. And from there I saw

02:30 the French counter attack behind us, I didn't fully realise what was going on at the time but they attacked and recaptured the fort at Merdjayoun where we'd been in occupation or British forces were occupying it, the Scots Greys. About middle of the night, round about midnight we were awakened from our bivouac

03:00 and told to march back to the Litani River and take up a position there. We took up, marched until daylight really. I had a bit of trouble, the little village near where we had been bivouacked had water running through it through brick channels and it looked crystal clear but they don't trust water in those areas and I said to my troops, "Don't touch that water

03:30 whatever you do." But apparently some of them did and as we started marching they got terribly sick. I had a one ton truck attached to the platoon, I had three in the back of it and couldn't get any more. I had one draped over the bonnet and I put a couple more up over the canopy of the truck. And we continued the march,

04:00 I think I was carrying three rifles at that stage, but we got there and they recovered quickly. Set up a position overlooking the river in case the French came further out. That was the 16th. On the 17th, two of our companies, A and B Company attacked the fort but they had no hope of breaking into it. It was terribly strong, built of

04:30 huge stone walls which the artillery just bounced off. They had machine guns posted in the ground level slits, almost impossible to get at. And two tanks appeared and rounded up about a hundred of our troops and took them in. My company was then moved up to take over the position and hold it

05:00 and subsequently I was moved around the left flank. On the 18th, yes, we moved, I'm not sure of the date, yeah, the 24th.

05:30 The French withdrew and we occupied the fort. My platoon went right through the fort and took up a position on the other side. That was a very big day, I was tired, we didn't get any food, we were told the fort was unoccupied before breakfast and we got straight up and moved forward so we missed breakfast.

06:00 Unfortunately our company second in command whose job is to look after the sort of administrative

details, he was a light horseman and he didn't know much about infantry stuff, we learned, of course, as we went. And we didn't get a meal until late that night. The quartermaster was looking for us and couldn't find us but we'd taken up a position the other side of the (UNCLEAR) village, north of it in slit trenches that

06:30 the French had dug. There were several killed, Frenchmen who had been killed in it, French Foreign Legion. And our boys pulled them out and buried them. And I remember sinking exhausted into a slit trench that stank, it'd had a dead Frenchman in it, I didn't even bother about that, I just went to sleep. And we'd been, I'd been on my feet all day and the last thing I had

07:00 to do was go around the various sections and see that they had good positions and so on. Apparently the artillery moved in behind us during the night and fired from about a hundred, a hundred and fifty yards behind us, straight over us and made an awful racket and I slept right through that. I didn't hear a thing until the sergeant woke me and I said, "You didn't call me for stand too."

07:30 He said, "No, I thought you'd be tired out." He said, "I didn't think you'd get any sleep." I said, "Why?" And just then the guns opened up again. He said, "That's why, it's been going on all night." Anyway that was the 24th and on 26th we were given a warning order for an attack and we were moved to a bivouac site near Bellarty [?] village,

08:00 about a couple of miles from where the attack was to be. In the afternoon the company commander took the platoon commanders to the position overlooking the hill we were to attack. The feature we were to attack and capture was more than eight hundred and fifty yards long which was a battalion objective, not a company, far too big, which was the first

08:30 fault in the planning. The second fault was there were four distinct knolls on the top of this hill, two close together on the right, which he gave me as my objective. The other two spread over the rest of it. Each platoon, there were three platoons in the company and each platoon was given one knoll as an objective. And the second weakness in the plan

09:00 was that we were so spread out, we didn't lack of experience and training, we didn't realise the danger of the French infiltrating between platoons, which became a death trap later. It was a bad plan, no hope of success. But looking at the objectives you could see a few Frenchmen walking around in their positions

09:30 through the binoculars and I said to Dick Cam, the company commander, "The position's fairly strongly held Dick, it's more that a company." He said, "Yes, I know. But we couldn't say any more about it, those were our orders." At one o'clock the next morning, the 27th, we were awakened and given a hot meal. Lead by guides down to the start line

10:00 which was a dry creek bed about a thousand yards from the objective. The start time was 0415, four fifteen that morning. The artillery was to open at five past four on selected to targets and then switch to a barrage, they called it a barrage but there weren't enough guns to make a proper barrage of it, to lead us up the hill. It was a fairly steep hill and as we walked

10:30 over it was apparent it was terraced and there were lots of huge rocks and boulders. The knoll on the left, I'd allocated one section to that. I'd put two sections to the one on the right because I thought that was the key position. The road circled around below this hill and I thought if there was any reaction by the French it would be

11:00 on my area, particularly on that right hand knoll which overlooked that road. As we got up the hill we were told to take a reverse slope position from about fifty yards from the top but that was impossible firstly because it was just rocky, you could never have dug even six inches into it. And secondly it was dotted with these huge boulders and rocks.

11:30 So I moved forward right up to the top of the hill and a most extraordinary sight from the top, the other side fell away, almost a precipice, straight down. And I could see the country side for miles, I stood up looking and taking it all in, I could see where their artillery was firing from and all the useful information I was gathering when a sniper got onto me and

12:00 put a bullet through my steel helmet. Fortunately, it didn't hit me but it knocked my helmet off and I remember quite clearly lying on the ground in a firing position. Next to me was a young bloke named Billy Muir. Billy had been a sportsman, he was opening bat for Prahran Pennant Cricket Club and had played second Victorian team, possible may have made the Victorian

12:30 firsts if it hadn't have been for the war. But anyway, Billy looked up and said, "That hit your helmet, didn't it?" And I said, "Yes." I was bending down to pick it up and he said, "Get down you silly bugger, you'll get shot again." I said, "Yeah, I might." So I lay down then. But I could see the French were working up for a counter attack. Soon after that I got a message from the left hand

13:00 section that they were out of grenades and I said to the runner who's brought the information, "Why are they out of grenades?" And he said, "It's so rocky that the only way that we can fight is with grenades." And he said, "They're bombing us and we're bombing them and we've run out, we haven't got any left." And so sent every grenade I could get back. Shortly afterwards the company

13:30 second in command, Clive Mason arrived, he was fighting the battle instead of looking after the administration. And he said, “Are you alright?” I said, “Yes, I’m quite alright but we’re running light on ammunition and we badly need a resupply.” And he said, “Okay.” And I said, “We need it urgently Clive.” He took off, I didn’t watch where he went, I didn’t take any further notice, I thought we were going to get ammunition.

14:00 And it must have been a good half hour later, one of the section commanders came and said, “I’m almost out of ammunition, troops have only got one or two rounds left.” And I said, “Oh, Clive Mason’s going to get some.” He said, ‘Well he’s not, he’s just over there behind a rock.” And about fifty yards away Clive was sheltering behind a rock. So I called out to him and he said, “I can’t move, there’s a machine gun firing over my head.” And I said, ‘Well I want ammunition

14:30 or we’re finished.” He said, “Well, I can’t get it yet.” And so I didn’t know what to do, I just sort of went away and worried about that. And about time seems to, it doesn’t matter in those circumstances, it just goes. And I didn’t look at my watch but I got a message from the left hand section to say they were in deep trouble. I’d provided

15:00 them with a captured machine gun, apparently they were using it with fairly good effect when it jammed and of course they didn’t know anything about immediate treatment and they were both killed, the two operating it. The message I got was that the section had been almost completely wiped out. I picked up two or three, three I think, that

15:30 were near me and I said, “We’ve got to restore this, come with me.” And I started to run with them, I was carrying a rifle and bayonet, ran ahead of them across to this section to try and fix it up if I could, which a machine gun started on me. I’ve never told anyone the story of this. The first thing was it shot the rifle out of my hand,

16:00 fell about ten yards away. I felt, I was wearing a haversack on my back and I felt a couple go through that, part of my web equipment was shot away and I got a couple through my shirt, back and front and then I got one through the hip which went right through, came out in my groin and chewed a bit out of here, out of the thigh. And I’ve just bowled over like a rabbit

16:30 and the other three all following me all got knocked. The French came through, I could see them massing for a counter attack and they came through at that stage. And they were short of ammunition, they kept picking up our rifles and using them. One big burley Frenchman came up and apparently he didn’t know how to load one of our 303s and he was making signs,

17:00 wanted me to show him how to load. I wasn’t going to show him how to load it. And I kept saying, “Je suis blessé,” (UNCLEAR) which in French is, “I’m wounded.” He took no notice, he was going to bayonet me. And an NCO [Non Commissioned Officer] came along in the nick of time and showed him how to do it. By that time my troops had, I should have mentioned two things.

17:30 After I was bowled over I realised what had happened, the French had infiltrated a machine gun between my platoon and the next platoon and had set up, down on my left, down below. So they were firing up at us from behind really. The second thing was that

18:00 just as I was knocked one of my troops, Dave Jackson, came running around the hill and from down the cover of the hill he called out, “Are you alright?” And I said, “I’ve stopped one but you better tell Joe Hand”, who was my acting sergeant, “To take the platoon out.” And he said, “Why?” And I said, “Well you’ve run out of ammunition and there’s a counter attack developing and you can’t handle it.” And he said, “Well, we’ll come and get you first.” And I said,

18:30 “You can’t, there’s a machine gun firing over my head.” So anyway, by the time the counter attack came through, he’d said, “Well, do we have to go?” And I said, “It’s an order, tell Joe Hand that’s an order, to take the platoon out while you can.” So they were well down the hill by the time the French came through. I don’t think they suffered any casualties through being fired at there and they got away.

19:00 I was left on the hill with three other wounded troops. The French picked us up and as they started to walk us back, and I couldn’t walk too well and neither could the others, the artillery opened, our artillery. They saw our troops withdrawing and opened fire. And the French just dropped us where we were and took off over the hill. And of course it dropped so steeply,

19:30 they were safe from the artillery there, the artillery shells just went over and burst down in the valley several hundred yards away. We stayed there all day. We got ourselves into a little slight hollow with rocks around a couple of side and every now and then the artillery would give it a belting. I remember at one stage a large chunk

20:00 of metal which I think must have been the driving band from one of the shells, fell on my leg and I realised it was red hot, I kicked it off in a hurry because it was red hot. And we had several close bursts but none of us suffered any damage from the shelling fortunately. Dusk, I thought I’d better do something about getting away, wasn’t sure how I could walk.

20:30 I got up and started looking around and limping up the hill a bit to where I could see but it was dusk, couldn’t see far but all of a sudden a Frenchman came running out and grabbed me, took me back over the hill. And a company commander came up and spoke good English and I said, “There were three

others of my troops out there where I was,

21:00 they're injured, I don't know whether they can walk or not." He said, "We'll send a patrol out." So they sent a patrol. Came back and said, "No luck, they couldn't find them." Gave me something to eat and drink, asked a few questions but in terms of rules of war, a prisoner of war is only required to give his number, rank and name and that's it. So

21:30 I did and told him I couldn't tell him anything else. So he said, "Well, we can't evacuate you now in the conditions." But, he said, "We can arrange for you to sleep up here, I'll give you a cover on condition you undertake not to try to escape." I said, "Well, I don't think I could anyway, so I'll give you that undertaking."

22:00 And he told me to sleep in this position. I didn't realise it was on a thorny bush, when I came to the next morning I began to realise something was sticking into me and it was a very thorny bush. And he gave me a ground sheet as cover and it was a freezing night, I froze, but I didn't sleep much anyway. During the night I heard a lot of firing and I guessed what had happened, the battalion had sent

22:30 out a patrol looking for us and the others from the other platoons who were wounded. And it turned out our company commander was killed. The commander of the platoon next to me had been killed and also his sergeant. My platoon, when we went into the attack, was less than thirty. I think no more that twenty eight at the most. Ten were killed and seven wounded

23:00 and a lot of it was just that bad planning.

Was your colleague, Clive?

Clive Nason.

The one who was trapped by machine gun fire?

Yeah, yeah, he was the second in command of the company.

Was he killed as well?

No, he got away when my troops started withdrawing. The machine gun switched apparently and he was able to get, but he should have had

23:30 opportunities, machine doesn't fire all the time. The other fault in the planning, at the orders conference, when we were looking at the target and given the orders by the company commander, he told us that C Company was to support us. And I took that at its face value and one of the things I was banking on when we were running out of ammunition was that C

24:00 Company would arrive shortly. In fact I said to the sergeant, "Well C Company's supporting us, they should arrive shortly bringing up reserve stores, which is a job, and ammunition." None of it eventuated and I could never work this out. Years later I was up on the Gold Coast and I knew the OC of C Company was living up there, so I went to see him. And I mentioned this, he said, "We were never given

24:30 those orders." He said, "That's the first time I've ever heard it, we didn't know we were supposed to be supporting you." So it was a shemozzle, wasn't it? Anyway.

Before you talk about your prisoner of war experiences there's a few questions I'd like to ask you from what you've already said. In the assault towards the hills, was there actually a gap between each platoon?

Yes. Yes.

How big was this gap?

25:00 I don't really know but we were spread over eight hundred and fifty yards. It was, be quite an appreciable gap. And once we took position it would be more than a hundred yards. See, in the ground was so rocky and broken that they had ample opportunity

25:30 to infiltrate.

It seems to be a little bit strange that an attack was conducted with the potential for enemy infiltration?

An ordinary principle is you ensure your flanks are covered. But being a very junior and young lieutenant without much experience, you rely on your company commander. And of course when I started thinking about it afterwards

26:00 I realised his training was for the light horseman in World War I and then in the air force in No 1 Squadron flying corps. It was a bad plan. It was a bad plan from the battalion's point of view, who should never have given it to one company only. It was a bad plan from his point of view. Now from my point of view, I made the mistake,

26:30 which he did too, I didn't have a reserve, I thought I had to cover so much ground I couldn't have a

reserve. With the benefit of experience and hindsight I should have had a reserve and so should he. And I've often thought about that attack, what should have happened was that two platoons should have attacked the two knolls that I was directed on, we should have secured that, put the reserve platoon through

27:00 along the crest to the hill to start to collect the rest of it if we could get along it. Now, when we were attacking, the left hand section took two prisoners, they over ran a machine gun position which, as far as I know, hadn't fired on them. They brought the two prisoners to me, one was an NCO, possibly a warrant officer, and he's jumping up and down saying, "Deux mille, deux mille."

27:30 My schoolboy French wasn't up to that and it wasn't till afterwards when I was lying on the ground reflecting, I suddenly thought, "Deux mille", two thousand - the hill's held by two thousand Foreign Legion. We had an under strength company.

One company, against two thousand Foreign Legion?

Yeah, yeah.

Tell us about the French forces, I mean, were these exclusively, to your knowledge, exclusively Foreign

28:00 **Legionnaires?**

At that area, yeah.

Well, tell us about the French Foreign Legion, what you knew about them before this took place?

Not much. Not much. We'd picked up the odd prisoner. We knew it was Foreign Legion. I suppose like most young people I'd read a bit about the Foreign Legion. What were the famous books about the Foreign Legion? Beau Jest

28:30 and all that sort of stuff. But they were pretty good soldiers, they knew what they were doing, they were experienced soldiers. We were not experienced, we were just cannon fodder as it turned out. The planning and the execution of that attack was terrible. And of course over the

29:00 years I've had a lot of experience and a lot of academic knowledge of military science or military warfare and I would never have ventured into that. Even as a captain I'd realised how badly it was done. But that all goes back to our training. You see, you're normally taught, in platoon

29:30 attack, the first and most important thing after you've attacked and captured your objective is consolidation, be ready to resist the counter attack that's almost inevitable. That means you've got to get ammunition up, you've got to have entrenching tools and you've got to be in a position to defend the position. Well, we couldn't possibly, we didn't have the resources, we didn't have the ammunition, yeah,

30:00 so we lost a lot of good men, very good men, yeah. Anyway.

The Foreign Legion, sorry, before you proceed, the Foreign Legion is, I understand they were a mixed bunch of people?

Yes, yes, they mostly seemed French but I couldn't be sure. The company commander spoke good English, somebody told me that

30:30 there was another situation where some of our prisoners, I think in our first battalion attack, were being marched away and the French that was escorting them was making a bit of a fuss and a voice came from a haystack speaking good English as though he was an Englishman saying, "Don't take any notice of him, Monty, he's scared of you." And it was the Foreign Legion

31:00 soldier who was obviously an Englishman, yeah. But no, we, I think, inflicted fairly heavy casualties on them but I never found out what the results were. I half attempted to get the company commander to tell

31:30 me what had happened but he wasn't saying anything.

I haven't heard, I'm not sure if this is a rumour or just a, simply just speculation, but there were some Australians in the Foreign Legion?

Oh, could well be, I don't know. I didn't have any direct knowledge of that but could well be. Next morning they

32:00 sent a patrol out and brought in my other three. The evacuation from that hill was a very difficult problem and the way they solved the problem was with donkeys with two bucket seats, one each side and they sat me on one and a fellow named Cornish who was shot in the leg, sat on

32:30 the other side. And they got us down this precipitous slope where we were loaded into an ambulance, taken back to a CCS [Casualty Clearing Station] or what we call a CCS. And then took us to Beirut to the, the hospital was Maurice Dompierre Hospital in Beirut. That was the 28th. When we arrived at the hospital

33:00 we were on stretchers from the ambulance and put on the ground in front of the hospital and a young girl from the, there's an American university in Beirut and obviously she was from there and spoke quite good English. And she tried to question us. And I realised at the time I'd never instructed my troops on their behaviour if they were captured. They were always in ear shot,

33:30 I said, "You're only allowed to give your number, your rank and your name." And one of them said, "Why?" And I said, "We don't give any information to the enemy." And this girl was most upset, she said, "Oh, you can, I want to ask them questions." And so I said, "Well you can ask questions but they're not allowed to answer you." Anyway, they took me into x-ray, operated, I woke up in a ward all on my own, quite comfortable.

34:00 Stayed there for three days, five days. Left on the third, they took us to a French prison hospital in the mission like Eliposs VAIQUE [?]. And we were nursed by French nuns who were very caring and kind and looked after us extremely well.

34:30 I suspected their sympathies were with us rather than with their Vichy French. When we left there after the armistice the little nun who looked after my particular ward said, "Oh, goodbye and do hurry up and beat that man Hitler, he is such a bad man." So they were obviously not Vichy French.

35:00 But in the CCS place I was questioned briefly by an intelligence officer who didn't get any information. He came back when I was in the mission Vaique [?] one day and tried to get information from me, you know, the usual stuff. "Now, your battalion was the 2nd Pioneer Battalion over here and such and such a battalion was over

35:30 there". And I said, "Oh, were they?" I said, "I didn't know." That's all he got, he was very annoyed. Yes, so we stayed in the mission. When I got there, there were two other officers from my battalion there who'd been wounded in the earlier attack. There was an officer from the 25th, 2/25th Battalion, Arch Barnett. There was a young lieutenant from

36:00 the Royal Fusiliers and a major from the Royal Fusiliers. They were captured at that place, Kantara, I mentioned. The French did the same thing there, they produced two tanks and the British didn't have any anti-tank weapons, neither did we. While the engagement was going on around the fort though, they produced what they called sticky bombs. You were supposed

36:30 to sort of get up against a tank and throw the sticky bomb and it sticks on the side and blows a hole in it. But the few times we were able to try it, it didn't stick anyway. Yeah. They gave us a boy's anti-tank rifle. The first attack that A and B Company launched, they were on the start line when a truck rolled up and said "You might need these" and

37:00 distributed about half a dozen boy's anti-tank rifles. Well, they fired a .55 missile or shell or whatever you call it. Joe Lang, the battalion second in command I mentioned earlier, had a, he was a very big man, six foot four

37:21 and strongly build, World War I, and Joe sort of picked up one of these boy's anti-tank rifles. He said, "that's

37:30 my size". He went in with the attack, and when the tank appeared, he stood up, and took a bead on it, and let fly. You could see the bullet bounce off it apparently, and he flung it a mile away. He said "the bloody thing's no good". Take more than a boy's anti-tank rifle to bore a hole in ... it was a medium tank, it wasn't a heavy tank. But

38:00 yes, the armistice was signed. We knew things were happening, but we couldn't get information. When I was in the hospital, a religious delegation visited us. There was a Cardinal, and a Bishop, and a French-Canadian priest who acted as an interpreter, spoke very good English. And two or three others. And the French-Canadian came in at the mission while we were there, but we couldn't get any

38:30 information until he came in one day and said ... we knew that our forces were getting close, in fact we could hear the artillery fire, and he said, well, you know, they're getting close. Then he said, I understand there's an armistice being arranged, and it's to be signed in 2 days time. That was about the fourteenth of ... yeah ...

39:00 twelfth ... on the twelfth of July. He told us the armistice had been declared, and on the fifteenth, the British forces marched in, which was really a 2nd 16th battalion. They had fought up along the coast, and our battalion was moved over from the central sector to join them.

39:30 Subsequently, the G1 of 9 Div told me that they regarded the work my battalion did very highly. They performed very well. They must have learned in a hurry after the lack of skill they showed up to the stage I was wounded. And they did, I think. Yeah, I was evacuated then to

40:00 a casuality clearing station of our own, 3rd CCS in Beirut. And then from there, later on ... when ... on the 22nd of July by the look of it ... yes, on the 22nd of July, I was evacuated,

40:30 and on the 25th, on the 22nd, they evacuated us to Haifa, to a British CCS, and on the 25th by train down to Gaza. On that trip, we tried to persuade the OC of the train to let us off at Rehovot, where

there was an Australian hospital, the 2nd 7th AGH.

41:00 We knew the 2nd 7th AGH very well. They'd been in camp in Pukka with us, and we'd entertained both the officers and the nurses, knew them very well. We wanted to get into 7th AGH, but they wouldn't agree, and finally the OC troop said, well, alright, if there's an ambulance there, we'll stop, and let you off. But there was no ambulance, so we went down to Gaza to the hospital. But the Matron of 2nd

41:30 7th AGH heard we were in Gaza. In fact a couple of the nurses came down to see us. They heard we were there.

I'll have to stop you there because we've run out of tape.

41:43 **END OF TAPE**

Tape 5

00:31 There's a hope that the

This is about the Free French?

Yes. Well there was a hope when we went into Syria that the French there would welcome us but no, they fought very hard but the Free French were there also in the hope that they could take advantage of that and as it turned out they had to fight, and they had to fight very hard because they took an extra special hatred to them. This fellow, Harry

01:00 Voudree or some name like that, they flew him to France. We expected he'd be court martialled and shot but a few days after the armistice before we left the hospital, they brought him in. Had a sheet over him and this fella was shuffling in and they said, "Look, who we've got", and whipped the sheet off and it was Harry flown back. He said "He hadn't even got to the court martial but they were arranging it when

01:30 under the terms of the armistice they had to bring them back" but anyway, we were at Gaza. The matron of the hospital, 7th AGH [Australian General Hospital] sent an ambulance down or she persuaded the CO, Colonel Wally Summons to, sent an ambulance down and we were moved back to the 7th AGH, which suited us because they were a lovely lot of girls. We knew them all pretty well and the doctors we knew. They were very good and good friends of ours,

02:00 so I had a reasonable time there.

Now there's a another question I have for you on the Free French, oh

Yeah.

Sorry the French Foreign Legion.

Yeah.

Were they a part of the Free French as well, the Foreign Legionnaires?

Oh yes, yes. No, the Foreign Legion was the Vichy French. The Free French were different altogether. They were on our side,

02:30 yeah.

They had no Legionnaires within their ranks?

They could have, I don't know.

What about the Senegalese? There was

Yeah.

African soldiers?

There were some Senegalese. I saw them several times. I don't quite know what they were doing. They had 'em in camp in Palestine and I think I saw a few of them in Syria in the few, short time I was

03:00 there. Don't know whether they were any good.

You didn't know if you fought against them?

No. No we were, opposed by the Foreign Legion entirely.

The Foreign Legion's of course all mixed as well, isn't it?

Oh yes. Yeah.

At that stage?

03:30 **And what was the name of this actual battle?**

Well the objective was known as Col's Knoll. The feature we attacked.

As in coal?

Yeah. C-O-L apostrophe S. Col's Knoll.

Col's Knoll.

04:00 **Yes okay.**

Okay.

Yeah.

Well I stayed in the hospital until the 27th August and I had physiotherapy but I had a lot of trouble with my knee.

04:30 Well, I was wounded in the knee. It ached continuously and I think it was a muscular thing. The damage to the muscle was affecting the knee but on the 27th, 28th, 27th, I was sent down to Cairo to the house-boat on the river Nile. A house boat called the Victoria, which was

05:00 moored at Gazera Island and Gazera Island was one beautiful big Gazera club, a sporting club. They had a racecourse, a cricket ground, a golf course, swimming pool and I was ordered to swim twice a day in the pool as my treatment for the muscular development.

05:30 They had tennis courts, bowling greens, croquet lawns, the whole lot. It was a beautiful place and the first time I went over there I saw an officer I knew swimming up and down in the swimming pool and he called out to a steward who was nearby and the next I saw he's swimming up and down holding a gin squash up while he's in the swimming pool, but it was very pleasant.

06:00 I saw a few well-known cricketers playing a cricket match. Bob Crisp, who had been captain of the South Africans and Freddie Brown, who had been captain of the English test team. They were both playing there and

They weren't enlisted in any way were they?

Oh yes. They were in the army. Bob Crisp I think was in the tanks. African. I think and Freddie Brown was in the army. I'm not sure what he was

06:30 and I think Lindsay Hassett played there too. I'm not sure but yeah, there were a quite a few well-known faces around but I stayed there for about a month. Didn't get around as much as I should have, and what I know now I should have got down to the Valley of the Kings and Memphis and Sakara. Some of those historical places,

07:00 but I had a trip around the pyramids and a river boat trip down to the Baris down the Nile and of course there was a lot to see in Cairo, so as well as having my swim regularly for muscle development. I didn't swim as much as I should actually. It went all right

07:30 and in due course the fellow we called the Admiral, the officer who ran the house boat, was a chap by the name of Crawker [?] who'd been the medical officer of the 6th Battalion when before the war when I was in it, and Syd Crawker [?] went on leave and a couple of doctors I knew took over to run the place and there were doctors everywhere, very nice people.

08:00 They ran it for a week or so but then on about the 24 September I was told I was on my way back to 7th AGH to have, check x-rays and so on. So I caught the train to Kantara and when I got to Kantara I was told I couldn't go any further. That all the rail traffic

08:30 had been taken over for the movement of a convoy of reinforcements that had arrived and there was a hospital at Kantara and some of the doctors I knew were there, so I went up to the hospital and I said "Give me a bed for the night." So they did and then the next day I got the train back to Rehovot to the hospital where they x-rayed me and told me I was right to go back to the unit

09:00 but when I got to the unit, the doctor there wouldn't pass me as fit. I'd, when I say I got to the unit, I should say I got to the training battalion, which is the first move back, and the doctor at the training battalion wouldn't pass me as fit, so I spent several weeks there and the CO, who was one of our original officers, said "I've nominated you for a staff course."

09:30 So the next I knew I was at the junior staff course at Sarafan, where I spent two and a half months learning to be a staff officer. Worked very hard there, most nights until midnight, at least. While I was there my brother arrived, was a reinforcement officer, and he came and had lunch at the school a couple of

10:00 times and I went down to see him on the weekend once or twice, so I saw a good bit of him and then the unit all packed up and the Japs came into the war and the unit all went to Java. Got put in the bag. All finished up on the Burma railway, yeah. I missed that fortunately. I don't think I'd have survived it. I

10:30 did the staff course, got a good report from the CI [Chief Instructor] of the course, and was posted as a liaison officer to 20 Brigade. 20 Brigade had just come out of Tobruk. They were part of the defence of Tobruk and they were in Aleppo in North Syria. Had quite an interesting trip up there.

11:00 When I left from round the Gaza area, headquarters called me over one day and gave me a special despatch and said "I want you to give that personally to the GI of 9th Div at Tripoli," at yeah Tripoli, "And it's a secret plan, so look after it." So I had to sleep with it and do whatever

11:30 was necessary to make sure that nobody pinched it. There were a lot of spies around there incidentally.

In Syria?

Yeah. Oh yeah.

What do you mean by spies?

Enemy agents.

This is after it was cleared?

No. Oh yes, yes. Yeah, that's when we were in occupation. I'll tell you a story about that shortly but anyway I went up to Tripoli and duly delivered it to Colonel Wells, the GI of 9th Div. Spent the night in the officer

12:00 club and Colonel Wells had told me that Colonel Notan [?] was going by car to Aleppo the next day and I could have a lift with him, so I hopped in with Colonel Notan [?] and had a very interesting trip up. We didn't go through Damascus but we went through Homs and Hamas and along the Orontes River Valley and it's a very interesting trip. Got to Aleppo and it was snowing. Heavy snow everywhere.

12:30 While we were there, I think it was on that trip, or was it later? Anyway, we were talking about spies. We went from Aleppo in March when the weather picked up across to Latakia on the coast to do training there,

13:00 brigade training. Both day and night operations and I saw then that the high level of training of 9th Division, very high level. They'd fought the war in Tobruk, etcetera. They knew, they knew what counted and after a few weeks training there, about a month, we marched down to Tripoli. We were busy

13:30 constructing defences in Tripoli when Rommel charged back to Alamein. The New Zealanders who were in Aleppo were then ordered down to the Western Desert and we went up to replace them and we were there until July and in July we were ordered down to the

14:00 desert. Now on one of those visits to Aleppo, we were visited by a major from the royal tank regiment, who was also involved in intelligence. He told us he'd been involved in blowing up the oil wells in Romania and got out. They had a special lecture one day

14:30 in Aleppo. They had guards posted for a hundred yards everywhere around the lecture theatre and they had every officer in the brigade for the lecture and this fellow walked out on the stage and he said "Gentlemen. There are sixty three known enemy agents operating within a mile of this building." He said "It's not the ones we know about that worry us, it's the ones we don't." So

15:00 you talk about spies. They were there. There were a couple of interesting experiences. The brigade intelligence officer used to be called around to intelligence, British or French intelligence, every now and again. One occasion he told me he was called around and they'd apprehended a

15:30 German Gestapo member. The first that had ever been taken by the British or any of the allies and he was carrying his Gestapo pass, which they immediately photographed and then sent the original to England and I said "What happened to him?" He said "Oh the French shot him." Just like that and

16:00 there was one member of British intelligence. He was a rugby player. He'd been capped several times for England and big fellow, about six foot two. Very strongly built. He did a lot of the questioning and he was pretty tough I gather but when we got orders to move down to the desert, the first thing that happened the brigade commander was called to a conference at Tripoli or

16:30 Beirut, I'm not sure which, and then we knew something was happening 'cause we knew that the French, the Germans had got through to Alamein and that things were looking a bit sticky. Then one night there was a French officers' club in Aleppo called the Circle Dorient and we used to go there for dinner sometimes and spend

17:00 a quiet night there and I was called back to brigade from there and told that I had to take a despatch across to Latakia, which I suppose was two hundred miles across to the coast but I for whatever reason it was, I don't know, but it wasn't ready until 1am and or later and they gave me the staff car with the fastest

17:30 driver known for fast driving. I got across to Latakia at 4am, woke the CO and the adjutant, handed over the despatch and the CO was a gentleman, a real gentleman. His name was Baston, Colonel Baston, who'd served in World War I. He'd been adjutant of the 7th Battalion and I'd known his name of

course but he insisted

18:00 on, he said "You've had a long tiring trip." He said "You'll need to wash up" and his batman brought me a basin of water and a towel and I had a wash up and that was the measure of the colonel. In fact, when we were in camp at Mount Martha before we left for the Middle East, his bat, his regiment, the 9th Div Cav [Cavalry] was next door to us and we had them over

18:30 to a mess night one night and the colonel was there and I was secretary of our mess and I said to him before we went in to dinner. He'd had a whisky. I said "Would you care for another whisky sir?" He said "No, thank you." Turned away. One of his officers came quietly up to me and said "Never ask the colonel to have another whiskey. Ask him if he'd like a whisky" and I twigged. I went up to him and I said "Oh colonel would you care for a whisky?" "Oh yes, thank you very much."

19:00 Yeah. Big difference, isn't there? "Have another." "No, I won't have another" but we drove back immediately from Latakia. Bob Dutton, the driver, kept running off the road by this time. I had to stay awake to keep him on track and one very interesting part about that trip, crossing the

19:30 Orontes River at a place called Jisi ash Shighur. The bridge doesn't go straight across the river. It takes a couple of sharp turns and goes this way and then that way and then to the other bank. It's most extraordinary. I presume it goes from one rock to another. I don't know but you've got to take that very carefully. We then got our orders to move. We had a convoy

20:00 of three battalions moving. Stopped at Baalbek the first night, at Gaza the second night and the canal at Kantara the third night. We got to Amiriya in the desert, a base that had been in operation for many years, British base, moved on from there.

20:30 Had a difficult couple of days and the commander in chief ordered the brigade to a position on Rue St Ridge bit to the south and what I didn't know, and nobody else did then, was that General Morshead immediately objected because under the terms of the agreement between the British and the Australian government they were not

21:00 to separate us and they couldn't use us as a separate brigade. We had to fight as a division, which was very wise, and apparently they had quite an acrimonious debate, General Morshead and General Auchinleck, although he was the senior by a long way, but Morshead won. He had to because of the agreement and we were then sent back to the division to rejoin it.

21:30 The division, meanwhile as I mentioned earlier this morning, when we got to the desert, the Alamein box, our end of it was on low ground overlooked by a, it wasn't a terribly high feature but it overlooked the whole area and General Morshead decided we had to take it and 26 Brigade launched a series of attacks and we took

22:00 the whole feature and it was the key to our defensive area from then on.

This was against the Germans or the Italians?

Yes, against well there were Italians there but mostly German. As I was still a liaison officer and there was a story came and I don't know whether it came from this ultra intelligence, but whatever the source was we weren't told but we were told that it was believed a new German

22:30 division was in the area, so we were trying to get prisoners and one of the most experienced company commanders, Captain Cobb, took a special patrol out and they got a wounded prisoner, brought him back but Cobb was wounded and then a couple of nights later they tried again and I used to go up as liaison officer to, they got a German again.

23:00 A couple of nights they got nothing but then the third night they got a German and he provided very interesting information. I'm going to go in there if you'll like to check that for a moment.

Part of the trouble was that the tank defences had been dismantled, but I'm not sure. Um

Now where were we before?

Well

You'd just taken that hill.

We're down to the desert, yes.

That's right and you captured a German prisoner.

Captured, yeah. That

23:30 was

What sort of information did he give?

Oh we found out that it was a new German division, 164 Light Division I think it was from memory, and he told us what his company was etcetera, so we got the information we really wanted.

And how did he give that sort of information if he could only give name, rank and number?

Well, a lot of prisoners talk you know, without any inducement actually. Yeah.

But how seriously I mean

24:00 **this is wartime**

Yes.

And people get bashed for interrogations and things like that

Well they could, yeah. They wouldn't need to with those mostly though. Often it's pure ignorance. They don't realise.

How would have you witnessed interrogations yourself?

Not like that, no. I've seen a prisoner brought in and asked the odd question but on brigade but they send them back to intelligence to question them. As a matter

24:30 of fact, while we're in the desert there we'd moved up to occupy that high ground and we were the forward brigade and they got a prisoner and brought him in and he was standing looking very awkward in the brigade command post in the middle of the night and all of a sudden the guard started laughing and then we'd smelled it. He'd pooed himself. I think he'd gotten frightened.

25:00 We got him out quickly but while we were there, I was starting to think "Well I must be the senior lieutenant in the AIF" because my battalion from early '42 were in the bag and promotion lists depend on your regimental seniority and I didn't have any of course and I mentioned it one day to the brigade commander

25:30 at lunch or dinner one night and nothing was said but a few days later I got a message to say that I was being posted to the 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion, who were with our division at the time. So anyway that happened and then I got a message from or the staff captain at the time told me that my captaincy was coming through but unfortunately it might mean I'd have to leave

26:00 brigade and go to the battalion but he said, "The brigade commander wants to keep you on brigade. He doesn't want you to go to battalion." So then a few days later it came through, when? I don't know. Anyway, they decided they would make me a captain and

26:30 they apparently moved the staff captain learner and appointed me as staff captain learner. So yeah, posted to 2/3rd Pioneers on the 7th July, 8th August promotion to captain

27:00 came through in 1942. I lost some seniority in the transfer but only six or eight months and I became staff captain learner, Battle of Alamein. As staff captain learner my job was rear headquarters, so I didn't see much of it. First hand that is. I had to go up to headquarters now and again. I didn't like

27:30 the shelling and those 88mm guns. They were terrible. Normally

This is a German gun?

Yeah. It's really an anti-air craft gun but they developed it as an anti-tank weapon and general weapon and they fire at very high muzzle velocity, so it bursts over here before you know it's even been fired. Normally with artillery you can

28:00 hear them coming unless there's a barrage or something, when you can't, but you've got no hope with the 88mm. They frightened me and the other experience I had of course, I arranged with signals when I went back to take over and open a rear headquarters and I had to look after the rear of the brigade. They had all the cooks and administrative arrangements

28:30 back in an area and I was responsible for it all. I arranged for signals to give me a radio, so I could hear what was going on and they tuned it to the operational frequency. The only trouble was, as soon as the battle started Gerry started signalling high grade cipher on the same wavelength, so I didn't get a single message but

29:00 I remember one night of course the artillery was going flat out the whole time and I went to visit I think an anti-tank show some distance away and they were dug in with curtains to stop the light getting out and of course I went in and I had

29:30 a whiskey or something with them and then took off to go back to my own little dug out and I came out of their dug out and I was disoriented. I wasn't sure whether I went that way or this way and I started going the wrong way and I suddenly thought, "The guns are getting closer. I can hear the artillery." So I sat down for about ten minutes and just made sure, then I

30:00 picked up a couple of stars that I recognised and found my way back to my own little douvret but it taught me you've got to be a bit careful. We had one colonel, one captain, whom I knew quite well actually drive through to the enemy when we first got down to the desert. Should never have happened. I've got

30:30 a photo in my photo album of a big notice on the side of the road, "Hey, do you know where you are?" and then a bit further on, a hundred yards further on, "If going much further, take one" and it had a whole lot of crosses. Just to remind people. Um

So he'd accidentally driven to German lines?

Yeah, yeah. They didn't realise it.

And got captured?

Yes, they grabbed him and he was a colonel, lieutenant colonel commanding a battalion. Yeah

31:00 and then the other was a liaison officer from one of the brigades, son of a brigadier from World War I, Peter Tivey. Peter died while he was a prisoner of war of some illness. I'm not sure what happened but yeah I didn't have much to do in Alamein but when we came out of Alamein, I suddenly got a message that

31:30 the staff captain had been promoted and appointed somewhere else. Then he hadn't left and he told me that the brigadier wanted me as his staff captain and he'd spoken to General Morshead and General Morshead thought I was a bit young, to deal with the colonels particularly of the battalions, and the brigadier assured him that I had a very

32:00 pleasant way of dealing with the colonels so I, they made me staff captain and that's a pretty responsible office. You're responsible for the whole of the administration of a brigade. Now they call it logistics but whatever it was, we moved back to Ger to [?]

32:30 Palestine, spent some time there then moved back to Australia. We arrived back in Australia I think in February '43. I was appointed staff captain on the 20 December 1942. December. I,

33:00 before that in December was the review of the whole division, which is a most spectacular event. They had the whole of the 9th Division on parade and all the base troops, reinforcements and all the rest sort of lined the side. There were over twenty thousand on parade that day and a division marched past the reviewing officer, who was the commander in chief Middle East,

33:30 General Alexander, and at one stage yeah, there are certain procedures in a formal review and you march past in quick time and you march past in slow time. Well we didn't march past in slow time and they did it in close column of companies,

34:00 which is a battalion, would have its four companies or five companies all in line with three in a rank three ranks. Quite spectacular and then they all form up in a long line. It was on the Gaza airport. It was a huge line by the time you get a whole division there. Nine infantry battalions, cavalry, engineers,

34:30 field ambulance, all that and they interposed one extra. Normally when they back on the line they then advance nine paces. That's a salute to the general and before that they had a salute to fallen comrades. I think it's probably the first time I've heard

35:00 “Australia Fair” played and the mass band for the whole division for that salute. Played “Advance Australia Fair”. Began with a great roll of all the drums and then I'll tell you what, you don't forget it.

It was an extraordinary sight.

Yeah, most and

Sorry, where was this parade conducted again?

35:30 The Gaza airport. Yeah. January or December '42. General Alexander spoke very well. Reminded us of what we'd been already realised. We were on the right of the line at Alamein. The whole of the corps, thirty corps gun line was behind the 9th Division and had the enemy broken through,

36:00 would have been hell to pay. The main road by which he could evacuate ran from our area so it was a vital position and they held it, counter attacks by the enemy and one day there were about twenty counter attacks

36:30 launched against us. Gerry concentrated the whole of his armour against an area where my brigade was holding and one day they let him get within two hundred yards before they opened fire and then they just wiped 'em. Yeah.

You saw that battle?

No, I didn't see it. I was still in rear

37:00 but yeah. I was I had to go forward occasionally on administrative matters but I was in the rear headquarters attending to administration as a staff captain learner at that stage. Yeah. One brigade for instance in their sort of dug out,

37:30 shell landed directly in it and the brigadier, the VM [?] and the staff captain were all killed. Yeah. Well

continue, we came home, arrived home in March I think it was.

It was March '43.

1 March 1943 we arrived home.

38:00 No sorry, we arrived home on 27 February. Entered Sydney Harbour. We were on the Aquitania, which is a pretty old but very nice boat. We had the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth in the convoy. I think I told you, coming through the Indian Ocean we were escorted

38:30 for half a day by that whole British battle fleet, most enormous fleet. You've never, you can't conceive it until you see it. We had leave. Twenty one days' leave then reassembled. I went up to Sydney. In the brigade was two battalions were from New South Wales,

39:00 one from Queensland. Well the two New South Wales battalions reassembled at in the camp at Rooty Hill. Then went up north to Queensland to the Tablelands and we did some training up there and then we in July moved to Trinity Beach,

39:30 north of Cairns, to do amphibious training and we did about a fortnight of intensive amphibious training. The brigade was to be used for amphibious work and that was evident. We didn't know where, but on 1 August we left Cairns, convoy

40:00 of nineteen vessels plus escort, we went to New Guinea to Milne Bay. We did further training there, though it rained most of the time. Never stopped raining. I remember the first night I was there it was teeming down and I saw a bright light coming from one of the tents and I thought, "Gee they're looking for trouble if there's an enemy air craft around. I'd better go over

40:30 and tell 'em to close it up." When I went around there, there was a bit of a fuss going on and I took a closer look and there's a bloke with his rifle and bayonet stuck in this huge snake. It was, must have been about seven or eight foot long and somebody else trying to belt it behind the ear and eventually I thought, "I'd better leave 'em." I walked away and hoped no aircraft

41:00 could come over but the snake had gripped somebody's web equipment complete with the pack and was pulling it and they were trying to ahhhh. Yeah. I don't like snakes. Yeah. Anyway,

Tape 6

00:30 **We'd like to go back a bit actually, and go over some of the things we've already spoken about. And take you back to your first action in Syria. As you say, this was your first action, and you're responsible for a lot of men. Can you tell me what it felt like to order this, and as you said, you're fairly under trained?**

01:00 Yeah. I suppose, and I knew it was going to be a tough job. But the thing is, you had a job to do. Full stop. You could query it, but you couldn't go any further. So I just went ahead, and I had enough on my mind, anyway.

01:30 **Well, certainly, I'm not pointing the finger at you.**

Oh, no, no. I realise.

I just want to get a more personal point of view of it.

Yes. As far as I'm concerned, I'd been ordered to capture those two little knolls. That was it. That was my sort of full mind, to concentrate on that. So much so that, as I said, when they captured those two prisoners and tried to warn me, that there were two thousand Foreign Legion there,

02:00 it didn't mean a thing to me. I still had a job to do. I didn't understand it. If I'd sat back and recorded some of my school boy French, I would have realised what he was saying. Yeah.

It was a fairly brutal first encounter.

02:30 Yeah. You've got to expect that. Early in the war there was a good deal of this - sending a boy on a man's errand. We were short on most things. Short on manpower. Short on equipment. For instance, as I said, we didn't have any anti-tank weapon until they produced this stupid boy's rifle.

03:00 You've just got to make do, which we did. The fact that we were evicted from that hill, after capturing it, in itself was a bit of a loss, but at the same time, I'm quite sure the French eventually evacuated, and it was knowing that that pressure was on them.

03:30 There's such a thing in military tactics as keeping the pressure on, and I've seen it in New Guinea, where the brigadier sort of said to the commanding officer of a battalion, "Well, don't attack, but keep the pressure on. Keep building them up", and the Japs would get out quite often.

04:00 And to that extent, looking back, even though that was an unsuccessful attack, it was part of the process of putting pressure on the enemy.

Yes, well, winning the battle is not the same as winning the war?

Oh, no. No.

You mentioned that there was

04:30 **some hand-to-hand combat. Did you come into contact with the enemy yourself?**

In New Guinea?

I thought you said there was some in Syria.

Oh I, it was fairly close. I wasn't particularly involved in that. That was in the section on my left, and it was close quarters but not close enough for a bayonet, with grenades mainly, at thirty and forty yards, sort of business.

05:00 And even less. But, no, they didn't get in with the bayonet there. That didn't often happen. The one case, where I know it happened to any large extent, was in the Finschhafen Operation against the Jap marines.

05:30 **Do you remember the first time you saw a man killed?**

No. No, I don't. I saw plenty that were killed, but seeing a man killed is a bit different. No, I can't say I remember that. I saw a couple die from their wounds.

06:00 When we were out on that hill, after I'd been wounded. I saw a fellow who'd been wounded quite badly, and I couldn't help him, and nobody else could, and he died, because we were lying out in the sun. It was a very hot day, didn't help him. Not nice.

At that point,

06:30 **when you were actually shot through the legs, how did that happen? Did, one bullet went through two legs?**

He was firing from down on my left, firing up at me, and I was running across the line of fire, really, and for a couple of steps got away with it, when it knocked the rifle out of my hand, and then managed to put a few through my haversack and my shirt,

07:00 and knocked off part of my web equipment, but it couldn't go on that way. One had to hit in the middle. Which he did, it wasn't funny at the time. I went over like a rabbit. Have you ever shot a rabbit? When they're running? Oh, they go over and over, and I went like that.

Well, it's a small miracle that it didn't get you a bit higher up.

Yes.

07:30 Matter of fact, one of the doctors on the houseboat said to me one day, "You're very lucky." I said, "Why is that?" "Well", he said, "The bullet went between your bone, your nerve and the femoral artery. If it hit the bone you probably would have been crippled for life, if it hit the nerve, the sciatic nerve, it would have been that you would have lived in pain for the rest of your life, and if it hit the femoral artery, you wouldn't have lasted more than a few minutes."

08:00 He said, "I didn't think there was enough room for a bullet to go through." I think it might have touched the nerve, because I've had, you know, various sorts of troubles, part of which, I think, is slight damage to the nerve.

08:30 **At the point where you were wounded, until the time that you were actually captured, it sounded fairly chaotic, and I'm a little bit confused. Could you run me through that time again?**

Well, the machine gun was firing as they were, the French were actually advancing over the feature,

09:00 and I suppose they were only a bit over fifty yards away, so it was only just a few minutes really, between the time I was wounded and they picked me up. It was time for me to, perhaps a bit longer. Time for me to tell Dave Jackson, who came around, that he couldn't pick me up, firstly. And secondly he was to tell Joe Hann it was an order to withdraw at once.

09:30 And they never questioned it then. Away they went. Again, one of the secrets of the Australian army is wonderful discipline. Best battle discipline of any troops. Even if the leaders are knocked over, somebody else bobs up.

10:00 The interesting thing is, he's never questioned. He takes over the leadership, and that's it. He's the leader and they obey him. After the battle of Alamein, or it was during the Alamein whole occupation of that area, we intercepted, or picked up bits of enemy information,

10:30 and one of the bits was about an Italian general saying that the Australians, how good they were, and saying they attacked with great ferocity. Used their artillery to the utmost and attacked as though they were all drunk. I bet half our troops wished they were. Yeah.

11:00 **Did he mean that as a compliment?**

Then there was the statement that was made after 9th Div was withdrawn. About the division, to say they attacked, no they fought till flesh and blood could stand no more. And then they went on fighting. And that's true.

11:30 They did. Dan Pienaar, the general commanding the South African Division, after the Battle of Alamein, he said "That the 9th Australian Division was the greatest he'd ever seen".

12:00 And he wanted all the officers to have a drink on him. Next we knew Dan Pienaar apparently has got a fairly substantial vineyard in Africa on which he makes a good quality brandy. And these five gallon kegs of brandy arrived. And one was sent to our brigade. I think one to each battalion, I'm not sure.

12:30 Anyway we bottled it, and one night in the mess, somebody opened one of these bottles of Dan Pienaar, as it was called, and it was firewater. The brig was playing dominos with somebody on the marble top of the bar, and he spilt some of Dan Pienaar on the dominos, and it ate all the spots off it.

13:00 Anyway, I'd had a brainwave then. I said to the mess sergeant, "Seal it all up, bottle it, and keep it." We didn't open it for twelve months. When we opened it twelve months later, it was beautiful. Really top class brandy.

Just a little bit of aging.

Yes, just a little bit, made all the difference. Yep.

13:30 **All right, just take you back to after the point where you gave the order for the soldiers to withdraw, you then stayed the night there.**

What?

When you were wounded.

Yes.

You stayed the night on the hill?

On the hill, but I was picked up by the French as I explained. I was sort of nosing around and they picked me up. I stayed the night, over on the reverse slope.

14:00 Where artillery certainly couldn't reach. Sleeping on a spiky bush, when I did sleep. Fortunately the wounds were numb, and I was cold, very cold. Partly from loss of blood, I suppose. I don't know. But anyway I slept fitfully,

14:30 and then next morning they evacuated me, on the donkey.

How did you feel at that time? Was your spirit strong?

I don't recall any great diminution of spirit. I felt a great deal of sadness when I began to recollect what had happened,

15:00 and where we went wrong, and you go through those things in your mind, and I just regretted all the training that I should have done, which I didn't know. We weren't directed in our training by experienced infantry officers.

15:30 Just how far you can go, I don't know, but I think we were a lot less trained than most of the divisions. I know when 9th Div first made contact with the enemy, they were, they'd pushed up the desert, and the story was,

16:00 they were pushed up to cap off their training. They got up around the Algeria area, in the western end of the Western Desert and Libya, and nobody knew that Germany had brought in tanks, or German troops. Up till then it had all been Italians. And these great German tanks suddenly appeared,

16:30 the 2/15th Battalion, I think it was, of the 9th Division, were one of the advanced units, supposed to be holding a very wide area, and they put up a good performance, even though the tanks were something they hadn't dealt with and didn't know how to deal with. They lost at least one platoon, mostly captured,

17:00 but they withdrew the battalion, and then of course the Benghazi handicap started, with everyone bolting back. 9th Div were carefully corralled into the Tobruk fortress, and held it. And they really were, attacked by Rommel a couple of times. But the Easter '41,

17:30 I think it was, the big attack they launched, untried troops, untrained, well, they were trained but up to a point. They had no experience. And the thing was, the German tanks they let go through, stayed in their slit trenches, and when the tanks went through they sat up and dealt with the infantry that were

following them. Well, that was more than just luck.

18:00 That was wonderful battle discipline. And they held Tobruk. They lost a chunk of ground in the area that became known as the Salient, but Gerry was never able to penetrate.

I just wanted to take you back, and ask you about Baniass.

18:30 Baniass? Yes.

Apparently there was an incident there. I don't know much about it, but I've been asked to ask you about it.

Well, Baniass. Not so much an incident there, it was a fascinating place. The French had blown, there was, well, to start at the beginning.

19:00 It was at the foothills of Mt Hermon, and there was a great flow of water coming out of the side of the mountain. It was the, one of the origins of the Palestine River, Jordan. And it just flowed down, out of the side of the mountain. And as I looked,

19:30 I saw these two or three huge columns. The sort of column that you would expect to see in an early history temple, and I thought, "This is interesting." And I checked it up after the war. In fact, after I got out. Baniass was the old Ceasarea Philippi, which is the Roman administrative centre and had a huge temple to Diana erected in it,

20:00 and that was the columns that I saw. I went back there in 1980 and the columns had been removed. There was no sign of them. The water coming out of the mountain had been led through a couple of ponds, and they'd made a bit of a picnic area, although it wasn't much of a picnic area by our standards. I was in a bus on a bus tour,

20:30 and I asked the driver to stop just before he got to the river, and the bridge, of course, had course been rebuilt, and I walked across the bridge and sort of looked around the area where I was, but there was no sign of anything that would remind you. We crossed this bit of a river on rocks that were standing up from the water, because there was no bridge.

21:00 Kantara, the nearest town, was probably less than ten miles to the east. It was held by the French. The British coming up from Damascus had attacked it and captured it, and the French counter-attacked them and used their tanks there. And overran it,

21:30 and that's why there were two British officers in the prison camp. They had been wounded. But they did the same there, as they did to our troops at the fort at Merdjayoun. They simply rounded up the Royal Fusiliers, took away quite a number as prisoners. But there was no engagement. I did have a couple of things that happened,

22:00 and I can appreciate some of the problems that they get in Palestine. One of the principles for any command of any level, even a corporal, is you're responsible for your own security. When I saw what appeared to be refugees approaching the position I'd take at Baniass, I immediately thought, "I've got to have a close look at this." So I sent a patrol out to stop them,

22:30 well in advance of our position. I think from memory, there was a man and two women. Nobody's to know whether the woman's carrying a grenade under her skirt, or the man's trying to look where all our troops are stationed, and take the information back. You don't know that. And you can't take the risk. So anyway, the patrol checked them out. They didn't actually run their hands over them

23:00 to see whether they were carrying any arms. But they seemed harmless enough and we let them go through. But it would be so easy to be caught, and you'd be caught because you weren't doing your job. Then later on we saw what looked like a couple of uniformed people. And they stopped at a telegraph pole. And I went out with the patrol myself.

23:30 They said "They were police repairing the telephone line". I don't know whether they were police or postmaster general or what they were, but they were in uniform. Again, you're running a risk, and I see the problems that these Jewish groups have. You see kids throwing stones at a tank, what is the tank commander to do?

24:00 Is one of those stone's going to turn out to be a grenade? Or when they're approaching a Palestine post and they throw stones at them, if they hit the post commander who may be a corporal, or an officer, knock him out. Well, then the whole post's vulnerable, isn't it? So, I don't think people who criticise the Jews quite realise this.

24:30 It's one of the things in war where you don't know. If you had an enemy in uniform, you could shoot him, or do whatever was necessary. But when you're dealing with civilians, you don't know. And if they take hostile action, you can't say because they're kids we let them go. Do I make my point?

25:00 **Yes. Well like Donald Rumsfeld said, "There's things we know,**

And there're things we don't know. And there are things we ought to know and don't know." Yes.

I want to ask you just a little bit more about the time when you were questioned, as a captive, by the French.

Yes. Well, there was a bit of a question time

25:30 when I got to their field ambulance, or CCS or whatever it was, not much though, they didn't get anything, and then as I said, we got to the hospital and they had this young girl, a couple of young girls questioning us. I don't know whether that was a ruse to get information out or not. I had my suspicions at the time. She was a rather pleasant looking girl, and was very upset

26:00 when I told my three troops they were on no account to give other than their number, rank and name. Well, then, while I was in that mission like, this French intelligence officer came and started to question me, and he tried some of these little ruses of trying to show me that he knew what was going on anyway, and it didn't matter, he just wanted me to confirm what he said, etc, etc.

26:30 And he was very angry when he didn't get anything from me. Now, after the armistice, he came back, and I'm not sure what he was doing, but one of the British troops who was in the mission, came up to Major Oliver Ballisus [?], the officer who was there, and said that was the IO [Intelligence Officer] who questioned some of our people,

27:00 and he actually carried a stick. A nobby stick and he apparently whacked them with the stick. And Major Ballisus [?] immediately set up a court of enquiry, but I don't know what happened about that. And I wasn't interested. I was only interested in getting back to Palestine.

All right. Now I just, at this point I wanted to ask you,

27:30 **having been in battle, and been through some difficult times. How do you feel your religion helped you through?**

Yeah. I don't have any doubt about that. And looking back now, if you ask me, I'm quite certain the hand of God was on me.

28:00 Very interesting that after the war I met another clergyman, and somebody said that "I'm the son of Reverend Hamilton". "Oh," he said, "You're one of the three brothers who were prayed back from the war." All the three of us came safely back. My brother, survived on the Burma railway, and I didn't know until just recently that he had one of those near death experiences. He was thought to be dying, left with the dying.

28:30 But came good. I had a visit from one of my fellow officers a few days after the armistice in Syria. "Oh", he said, "I'm pleased to see you." He said, "The story was you died from your wounds." And I was with Brother Gordon one day, after the war, and one of the ex-prisoners who came from another unit altogether,

29:00 saw him, I think, in Collins Street one day. 'Oh, Gordon," he said, "I thought you died on the railway."

He said my death has been grossly exaggerated.

Grossly. Yeah. That was what's his name, wasn't it?

Oscar Wilde.

Oscar Wilde, that's right, yeah.

But did you pray regularly and often?

29:30 Yes. And of course there were church parades, formal church parades, and there were informal communion services, which I used to go to as much as I could. I wasn't always able to. The chaplains normally are spread through the battalions, three of them.

30:00 Normally there is one Roman Catholic, one Anglican, and one other Protestant. I remember the Roman Catholic priest saying to me one day, "They won't come to Mass now, but you wait till the night before a battle." Sure enough, they all rolled up for mass the night before the battle. And I think the same applied a good deal in the three groups.

30:30 Yes. No, I think religion has carried me through a lot of things. I'm a member of the Gideons. Do you know the Gideons? Well, I've been a member of the Gideons now for about fifteen years, and I suppose, since I've joined them,

31:00 I've studied around the Christian religion, perhaps more than in it, if you know what I mean. I've looked at the proofs of various things. For instance I can tell you that the resurrection of Christ is central to the Christian theology, the Christian belief.

31:30 But the cynic says there's no such thing as the resurrection. Now I can tell you that in the nineteenth century, two leading British lawyers, both separately, who were cynics and rationalists, who said it couldn't possibly happen, conducted a post mortem, a very long while after the death, of course.

32:00 But they could reconstruct things to prove that He didn't rise from the dead. And they investigated it very thoroughly. Both separately, both wrote books, both the books are in the famous what's a name library at Oxford university, Bodleian Library, and both came to the conclusion, the only possible answer,

32:30 was that Jesus rose from the dead. There are a lot of other things, proofs, both archaeological. For instance, two of the great stories in the bible, in the Old Testament, are stories that HG Wells, for instance, rubbished. He was a rationalist. He said "It couldn't have happened".

33:00 One is the story about Jonah being swallowed by a whale. And Wells said, "Whales can't swallow a man." Their throats are constructed to swallow, what do they call it?

Krill.

Krill. And they can't cope with swallowing a large object, and secondly, if the did, you couldn't possibly live in their stomach for three days as Jonah did.

33:30 And when I was a small boy, my father bought me an encyclopaedia, or bought my family an encyclopaedia, Arthur Mees Children's Encyclopaedia. And the story that fascinated me and I didn't realise it had any religious significance. It was the story of James Bartley, who was with a whaling expedition off the Falkland Islands.

34:00 And he fell overboard from one of the little whaling ships, and they searched and couldn't find him, but later on they harpooned a whale and dragged it up on the mother ship's deck and started to cut the blubber off it, on the flensing deck, as they call it, and this was twenty four hours after James Bartley disappeared. They saw movement in the stomach. So they cut it open and out flopped James Bartley.

34:30 He was unconscious when he flopped out, but they threw a bucket of water over him and he came round, and was able to tell them all about his experience. He said "It was very hot and humid in the stomach, but there was plenty of air, and he was all right". And it's believed, but it can't be proved, that a couple of times in the Red Sea, Arab people have fallen overboard and have been swallowed by a cachalot whale, in particular,

35:00 and most Arabs when they go around, they carry a dagger in their belt, and at least one, and possibly more, have cut their way through the whale's ribs to safety. Now that can't be proved, but James Bartley is a known fact.

That's very good, but I think we're a little off the track.

Yes. We got off the track. I could talk for all day on those things.

35:30 **I imagine you could. I was just interested to know how your faith sustained you. I guess we've spoken to a lot of chaps, who also have been through very dark times, and had a lot of trouble getting through the night, so to speak, and I wondered if this was a help to you.**

36:00 Yes. I don't remember any occasion when I didn't feel I was being looked after. Wonderful feeling.

Were you also a fatalist, though, in the sense that, you know, a bullet has your name on it?

Well, I suppose you do. I often think now that was the secret of the first AIF. They got terribly fatalistic, and for that reason,

36:30 Well, before the great battle in August, Lone Pine, people who weren't in the unit that was actually to do the attack, were offering five pounds, which was an enormous sum in those days, to swap places with people who were in it. Hard to believe, isn't it? But they were.

37:00 **When you were a staff captain, you were involved in conducting funerals, or arranging funerals and burials. Can you tell me a bit about that?**

Well, in battle you don't have a formal funeral. You can't. The Australians were very careful. Looked after their dead. But the committal,

37:30 the burial is carried out by the chaplain. My authority, or responsibility, was to designate certain areas for prisoners of war, and for burials, etc, and the battalions themselves did it under their own arrangements. They used to pick up the dead,

38:00 and bring them back to the brigade or divisional cemetery, and conduct their own service. Then usually, at the end of a campaign, or a protracted battle, there might be a battalion parade, or something like that. But there was no actual burial service that is organised

38:30 on a formal basis. It's done by the padre. I'm writing this biography of Tubb, VC, and I spent ages trying to find out the details of his death. A couple of times I got close to it, and I got someone who thought he was at the funeral, and then I spoke to somebody else who said, "No, no."

39:00 That was in the middle of the battle. He'd just be quietly buried probably by a padre and a couple of others. There wouldn't be a formal firing party. I said, "Not even for a Victoria Cross Winner?" "No." By chance, a second hand report, somebody working on the roads, whose name was mentioned, and he

said, “I think I was the stretcher bearer who brought him back.” Yeah.

39:30 However, I’m half way through that biography.

Do you remember any informal funerals, or gatherings, any kind of ritual that would happen when a man died?

Not really. I remember,

40:00 this is out the line, but there was a demonstration involving grenades. And amongst the observers was a major who was sitting, oh, a good hundred yards away, and a splinter of a grenade killed him. I don’t remember any official funeral for that.

Tape 7

00:31 **All right, we'll get onto Finschhafen in a moment. I just wanted to ask you briefly about returning to Australia and just what kind of welcome you got when you got back here and how did it feel for you to come back to the mother country?**

Well it was wonderful coming back. I remember the ship came in to Sydney Harbour and

01:00 by magic people started appearing all 'round Sydney Harbour in thousands, waving and cheering. We docked and didn't get off 'til the next day, but went straight to the train and down to the depot outside Seymour at I've forgotten the name of the place. Anyway, they put us through there very quickly and just

01:30 straight home, so there was no official welcome or anything but after we finished our twenty one days’ leave there was a great parade. We assembled at the usual place down the Alexandra Gardens and marched along Swanston Street, past the Town Hall. 20 Brigade, mostly being New South

02:00 and Queensland we only had a very small detachment, which it was my honour to lead as staff captain, and that was quite an event but that was after twenty one days’ leave but

You would have got an extra big cheer, being from Victoria?

Ah yes. Yes but I remember my mother

02:30 came in and I've forgotten how it was but the wife of the chaplain of the 2/15th Battalion, who was a Victorian, he'd won a military cross at Alamein, she was a very emotional woman apparently but one of her relatives owned London Baby Carriages I think it was, which had windows fronting on Swanston Street on the first floor of

03:00 one of the buildings and of course mother was invited up there and to watch it, but she said, "I couldn't really appreciate it fully" because this other very emotional woman was breaking up the party a bit. So anyway.

In your time on leave did you go home?

Oh I was home, yeah.

How was that?

I walked straight home. I remember walking up

03:30 the path to the vicarage and all of a sudden my young sister apparently saw me coming in the gate, she was coming up the road. I hadn't seen her and she came sneaking up behind me. She was quite a girl. She was an all-Australian hockey player actually and she was just beginning

04:00 to blossom as a hockey player then and yeah but coming home was quite an experience. I, we'd only been away for eighteen months. Some of them had been away for over two years but eighteen months is enough. Yeah.

Well you must have felt a bit strange? I mean it was kind of the you went away a boy and came back a man to

04:30 **use the cliché.**

One of the big problems is that you don't feel quite so comfortable at home. In many ways you do, but in other ways you want to get with your mates again and quite often unfortunately as I say, my battalion had all been taken prisoner in Java but I'd still wander into town and look for some of my friends at times. Yeah.

05:00 Yeah and oh there was a lass I knew very well. There was never anything in it from the emotional point of view but she was a very close friend, probably my best friend. I used to see her quite often. We'd meet and have a cup of coffee at one of the coffee places there and so on. Yeah. Yeah in some ways

you're

05:30 a bit lost. In some ways it is wonderful to get home again, yeah, but also we knew we were going away again. Yeah.

Did you find that the pace and the mood of Australia a bit strange after being in the desert so long?

I was bitterly disappointed by the

06:00 political situation. Strikes. Why should people strike with a war on? I couldn't understand it. That quite a few experiences led me into politics after the war and I was fifteen years a member of parliament in from 1967

06:30 and the thing that got me there was those sort of things that happened. We were running very short of grenades in New Guinea and a ship in Townsville was supposed to be loading them and the wharf labourers went on strike and wouldn't load them until they got danger money. The grenades weren't armed. They couldn't have gone off if

07:00 they'd dropped a bomb on them, I don't think but they demanded danger money. Eventually they marched troops down and loaded them but they were in short supply. That didn't worry the wharfies. I had the experience when I, after we'd, after our home leave then we went up to camp on

07:30 the Atherton Tablelands and a minister for the army came up to see us one day, officially visit us. I've never seen such a pathetic creature in my life. How he could ever be minister for the army I don't know, but General Gaffer Lloyd brought him up. Lloyd was then the adjutant general of the Australian forces and I'd met him. I didn't expect he'd ever remember

08:00 me, but I'd visited a friend of mine who was working in military secretary's branch and it so happened that General Lloyd was sort of looking over mil sec's branch [?] that time and my friend, who's a major, introduced me. Well when General Lloyd arrived, he jumped out of the car, he knew Brigadier Windeyer very well

08:30 because he'd been a G1 [General Staff Officer, Grade 1] in Tobruk when Windeyer was a battalion commander there and they greeted one another very warmly and then he turned around and saw me and said, "Oh Captain Hamilton." I nearly fell over. I didn't expect him to even know me, let alone my name and then he turned to little cough behind him and it was the minister and he turned 'round and he said, "Oh minister this is my opposite number, Captain Hamilton." Then he walked off and left him for dead and

09:00 our troops had just come back from a three day bivouac exercise and we didn't have anything very much to show the minister, but the brigadier had arranged some target shooting in a little miniature range we had and so he started to take the minister down there and he said to General Lloyd, "I'm terribly sorry we haven't anything better to show the minister but the troops are just back from a three days in the jungle", and Lloyd

09:30 in a very loud voice patted him on the back and said, "Don't worry old boy. Show him a couple of cooks. That's all he wants to see." Well you couldn't help it. I mean he was pathetic. Those sort of things left me with a strong political feeling that I had to do something. Yeah.

And tell me, when you went to the Atherton Tablelands, tell us a bit about the preparation for what was a big change for you

10:00 **in general warfare?**

It was a big change. It mainly affected what we called a G-people, the operations people, but I knew there was an enormous job for the staff captain in the way of ensuring in difficult conditions you had to get supplies to the troops and until you get there you don't know. For instance,

10:30 one time in New Guinea of all places, troops were advancing along the coast after the capture of Finschhafen and I got a signal from the forward battalion, "No water. Out of water." You don't plan for that. I got 'em water within a few hours but it was largely due to the co-operation of the engineers and the artillery, but we managed it,

11:00 and the troops didn't go without out but gee, what a position. You don't expect to go without water at New Guinea, where it's always raining. Yeah.

But what sort of things did you do at Atherton in preparation?

Look, the troops,

11:30 the brigade under the brigadier and with the BM, brigade major, was their task. They did a great deal of training, jungle training, and there was a lot of what we call jungle or rainforest up there. Most of it's been cut down since then. It surprised me. They had tobacco growing where there were jungles before but

12:00 they used to go out on two and three day exercises but my task was mainly looking after all the

paperwork, which just came in droves. There were masses of it and that's another thing that gave me a nasty feeling, political inference there. I'll guarantee not many

12:30 weeks went by that we didn't get a letter telling us that Private Bill Bloggs was a good soldier and should have been promoted to the rank of lieutenant. That he'd obviously served in somebody or other somewhere with distinction and the letter obviously came from a member of parliament. We had a standard reply, which the brigadier worked out. Mind you the brigadier was a brilliant leading lawyer,

13:00 afterwards became a high court judge, and he drafted a letter one day answering one of these which said words to the effect, "This soldier is at present absent without leave. It would be appreciated if the member could advise the proper authorities of the soldier's whereabouts in order that he be apprehended and brought to justice." I'll

13:30 guarantee we had half a dozen of those in a matter of a couple of months and that would be followed up with a detailed investigation. I remember the commanding officer of one battalion answered the letter. The first sentence of his letter was, "This soldier is a lance corporal and as such has reached the limit of his capabilities."

14:00 Oh anyway, it got to the stage where Brigadier Windeyer wrote a letter to division saying that “His time and the time of his staff had been taken up answering these political queries and could something be done to answer them on a higher level and avoid the problem of interfering with our training?” We didn't hear anything for several

14:30 weeks and then we got word unofficially that General Blamey was very interested and had given instructions accordingly and then we got a formal letter to say that “In future such queries would be intercepted I think at corps headquarters, who would only refer them on to the battalion or the brigade when it was felt appropriate”. We didn't get too many after that.

15:00 Yeah.

So take me on now to New Guinea, your disembarkation, and particularly interested in hearing about the planning for the landing at Finschhafen?

Well Lae of course preceded Finschhafen

Lae, I'm sorry.

Yeah and

15:30 we spent a couple of weeks at Trinity Beach training for combined operations, which was to be the first actual landing by Australian troops since Gallipoli. We knew that. As staff captain I had an enormous job, because there were no what we call staff tables, loading tables, detailing what forward troops had to carry and how boats and landing

16:00 craft were to be loaded and all that sort of business and I had to and as well as doing my part in the actual administrative side of the training, I had to be constructing staff tables which we could use for any landing. I put a lot of time into that and constructed loading tables, tried them out. Part of

16:30 our exercises were designed to test the loading tables that I'd devised and it was a big job. Most nights I used to work detailing preparing orders for the next day's training or the day-after's training. I'd work often 'til three and four in the morning to get it finished but we got through it and we had a final

17:00 big exercise where the American boat and shore regiment combined with us and the American Navy. We loaded everything and took off and then stayed at sea for about twelve hours or something and then came in and made the formal landing and checked on how things worked, and they seemed to work pretty well but

17:30 it, when we got to New Guinea we had a trial divisional exercise in which 20 Brigade landed as the original landing force and the others moved through. We did that on one of the islands in Milne Bay and it didn't go too badly, but to me there was something missing in the beach organisation. That worried

18:00 me and it rained like steam the day of this exercise and I remember everyone was getting around with the ground sheet used as a rain cape see and I'm all badges of rank were covered up of course, and I saw a figure coming along the beach that I knew quite well. It was Lieutenant General Herring himself and I saluted and said, "How do you do?" and he was very charming and

18:30 explained to me how the air force had done a wonderful job cleaning up Jap air bases in New Guinea and so on, quite an interesting talk. I reminded him some years later. He said, "Yeah I remember that." He said, "I didn't realise that you were a captain then." But we embarked then for Lae.

Before you say get

19:00 **on to that**

Yeah.

What was it that bothered you about you about the beach organisation?

The whole organisation for receiving stores, organising the beach head administratively and I at that stage I hadn't worked out how to handle it and I was waiting to see what happened at Lae. I didn't know then that we were going to do another operation.

19:30 We got through Lae alright. The Japs had an airstrip at Lae and there were three planes on the strip and they took off almost as soon as we landed, dropped bombs on an LST [Landing Ship Tank], they're the big ones that carry tanks. Killed Colonel Wall and a few others and that gave the US a bit of a fright and they were most reluctant

20:00 to sort of leave their LSTs anywhere from then on but there was no opposition in that landing. We moved from the landing point towards the, well first of all the battalions found out, fanned out and secured the points that had been identified as necessary to protect the beach head and then the other

20:30 two brigades moved through, one inland and one along the coast towards Lae. We got to, pretty close to Lae and we heard I think the natives told us the Japs had left and then we heard 7th Div and 9th Div more or less entered simultaneously from two different directions. I think in fact 7th Div probably were first

21:00 and brigade headquarters had moved on. I was left in the previous headquarters area to maintain a sort of report centre and I slept in. I was in a slit trench and I was busy fixing up my lighter. I smoked a lot in those days and my lighter had stopped working

21:30 and my batman was making me breakfast and I looked up and there's a jeep with the brigade commander looking down at me. Gave me a shock. I hadn't even shaved. He said, "Come on Murray." I said, "What's going on, sir?" He said, "Hop in, we're going." So I just put on my web equipment, my pistol, my hat. Grabbed a little satchel with notebooks and things in it. Hopped on the

22:00 jeep and there was the brigade commander, the brigade major, the intelligence officer and the signals officer and I made the fifth of the party all piled into a jeep. Down to a beach. I still didn't know what was happening. We got onto a barge and were taken along the coast a bit and landed. Walked inland a little bit, only a hundred yards or so, and there was a clearing. Two large

22:30 trestle tables set up end on end. We were met and ushered in to one end of it. Sat there, the brig, the BM [Brigadier Major], me, IO, signal officer and a whole bevy of generals appeared and a lot of staff officers and I thought, "This is more than an ordinary conference." I couldn't work out for instance why Gaffer Lloyd, the agent, ah adjutant general was there,

23:00 and I couldn't work out why the master general of the ordinance, another major general, was there. I could see the general officer commanding 7th Div. I've never seen so many generals in one spot. All of a sudden a tent at the end of the clearing opened and out came the unmistakable figure of General Herring, who sat down at the head of the table and didn't mince matters. Said, "Gentlemen, we've been ordered to capture Finschhafen and Langemak

23:30 Bay. 9th Division made 20th Brigade available to carry out the operation. The details. Proceeded to ask questions and give details and the US navy was there, and they were going to do all sorts of things, which they never did, and he said, "Well we want the landing to be made on the 21 September."

24:00 This was the 18. We had to prepare, write orders. The brigade was spread over a large area and said, "We'll assemble at 1800 hours" I think he said, "To discuss the preliminary planning." So it might have been eight, might have been 2000. Anyway that was the brigade

24:30 commander and the brigade major and I wasn't involved in that, but they met and the BM told me a little while later “They'd agreed to make the landing on the 22 because, largely because the difficulty of concentrating the brigade in order to load them for the operation”. I sat on a hollow log and started to write the administrative order and I sent a message back, "Bring my batman up

25:00 quick. I need him" and he came up with my shaving gear and everything and we set about it. I'd, as I mentioned was unhappy with the beach organisation, so I put a plan to the brigade commander at that stage that the left-out-of-battle personnel should be used. You know

25:30 left-out-of-battle, do you?

Mm.

Second in commands and so on and he said, "What for?" I said, "I want to establish a proper command in the beach area. Someone responsible for the defence of the area and capable of doing that and someone responsible for the administration to see that it's run properly." And he said, "Well how do you propose to do it?" and I said, "Well,

26:00 if you'd agree I'd like to make Major Broadbent in command." He was the second in command of the 2/17th Battalion and one of these 'get things done' blokes, "And I'd like to use so many.” I'd worked out the number I'd want, "Officers and ORs [other ranks]," and he didn't take any time. He said, "That's a good idea. Yes." It worked like a charm and

26:30 it solved a couple of large problems that cropped up. Within a few hours of landing at Finschhafen I got

a message from one of the battalions to say, "There's no 9mm ammunition on the spot." That's the submachine gun ammunition, which is the principal weapon for close quarter fighting, which jungle warfare is,

27:00 and that gave me an awful shock. So I rang up John Broadbent and I said, "I hear there's no 9mm ammunition." He said, "I've searched everywhere. I've had people searching everywhere. None has been landed." So I drafted a most immediate signal. You know what that means? Well, it's a signal which only the command of an operational area can use. It's reserved for the commander

27:30 and I took the risk but I said to signals, "Encode it, and the moment you've got it encoded I'll be here. You let me know." 'Cause the brigadier wasn't there. He was out, they were fighting a battle at a village and I didn't know whether he was coming back in time or not. I was prepared to sign it and send it in my own name, which meant I took full authority and I could have been court

28:00 martialled for it and anyway signals came out of the tent and said, "It's all ready to send sir." Just then I heard a jeep in the distance and sure enough right at the critical moment the brigadier came in. I stuck it under his nose. He took one look at it and said, "My goodness. No 9mm ammunition." Signed it and away it went. Just

28:30 on dusk three aeroplanes appeared and we got a message to illuminate with torches or car headlights an area, dropping area, and they dropped the 9mm ammunition. Some of it within yards of my little douvre and some went in yards of the brigadier's. It was immediate action but if I hadn't set up that command situation on the beach head, we probably would never have

29:00 known. The other need for it was when the Japs counter attacked. The organisation was able to function very well. They had to withdraw the CCS hospital people closer in for awhile. The CO of the CCS was known as cookery because he carried a cookery all the time. You know the, who is it? The

29:30 Gurkhas used the cookeries, and it was a very sharp knife. He reckoned he wanted the opportunity to use it but I think he was engaged in some pretty tough fighting there. So that worked so well that army arranged for a battalion to be made available to run the beach head in future landings,

30:00 which they did in the landings on Tarakan and Borneo. I suppose I pioneered a military arrangement there, didn't I? It's one of the things that I look back and take great deal of personal pride in. The story of Finschhafen was written firstly in the official history by Dexter, he never once

30:30 approached me. Never once even wrote to me to find out my side of the story, although as I said I was a member of the original orders group and I conducted the whole of the original administration or logistics for the landing. Recently Lieutenant General Coates has written a book on the subject. He was chief of the general staff and he wrote a very good book

31:00 on the operational side. Never once mentioned the administrative side, even though I first heard he was writing the book from George Lush, who was by that time a Supreme Court Judge but he'd been an acting company commander in the 43rd Battalion at Finschhafen and General Coates saw him several times to talk about things and each time George told me, he said, "I

31:30 told him to go and see you", but he never did. Never approached me, and finally when George told me about it I rang Canberra and they wouldn't put me on to General Coates. They wanted to know who I was and what I wanted and I didn't realise then he was just retired as chief of the general staff, so I suppose he was a bit high up, wasn't he?

32:00 but he failed to contact me. I finally spoke to him and I said, "I've got a lot of information on the landing one way or the other. I've got copies of all the operation orders. I think I've got copies of reports on the operation. I've given a talk on the subject and I've got the notes of that." "Oh", he said, "Send them up to me but" he said, "The book's virtually in production. I'm just altering

32:30 a couple of chapters" and anyway the book came out. He had included me in the acknowledgements but he had nothing of what I had to tell him or of any of the documents I sent him, and I realised the book was virtually being printed. He couldn't fit anything in. There was, nobody's dealt with the administrative side at all and that

Well that's what we're here for.

33:00 Yeah.

So please tell us more about it.

Well there were a couple of large administrative problems. Apart from the original one of setting up a beach head that really worked, they advanced the troops advanced to the river, I can't think of the name of it, but it, they advanced south 'til they struck the river and we all realised the Japs would be in strength there. They had to be

33:30 and the brig's plan had been based on strength there and made arrangements immediately to swing out wide into the foothills of the ranges and sort of come 'round in a right hook, which he did, but it was very difficult country. The supply of everything they needed, food and ammunition etcetera, was not easy

34:00 but things functioned pretty well. I mean there's an ASC [Army Service Corps] officer at brigade who looks after that and there's a ordinance warrant officer who has a function in the supply of ammunition, etcetera. Nobody worries me as the staff captain until things start to go wrong, and they were functioning quite well but then the brigade commander, oh

34:30 when they advanced south of course they left their right flank open. The enemy was fairly strong in the Sattelberg area, which was up in the hills on our right. On the eastern side it would be when you're facing south, yeah. We were getting information

35:00 that the enemy was planning and trying to attack us across our lines of communication and they were strengthening up. We could feel that and they started probing. Most of our force was on the push forward. We had a minimum force on the Sattelberg track and this is where the brig's

35:30 marshalling command came out. He was arranging a final attempt to push through to capture Finschhafen. He, I remember him pacing up and down with the brigade major and he finally said to him "Well Bernie we've been ordered to capture Finschhafen and Langemak Bay. That's our objective. Tell Colonel Simpson to move two companies down to relieve the

36:00 rest of the 13th Battalion" I think it was, "At the river. Concentrate the 13th Battalion and use them with the 15th in the sort of right hook." They had very difficult country to deal with. They put in an attack, which succeeded, and they caught, they grabbed a good bit of ground and then they launched

36:30 an attack up a hill that was virtually a precipice. The troops were hanging on to shrubs and growth to pull themselves up and the Jap marines up the top were rolling grenades down at them, but they were, they kept rolling down to the bottom where they exploded and didn't do any damage. When they got to the top the troops went in with the bayonet and the Jap marines took off flat out. That left

37:00 us in a position to put in a final attack and the brig arranged with the air liaison officer for a, an air attack, bombing attack, at a certain hour and I think from memory he asked for the air force to bomb at 11am and if I remember rightly they came in at about 10 or

37:30 10:30, they were early anyway, and didn't quite co-ordinate but the attack went through well and the enemy evacuated, which meant we were clear. One of the reasons the enemy evacuated was because a militia battalion, the part of the brig's plan, he requested that a militia battalion which had been on the flanks at Lae should advance

38:00 around the coast supplied by coast coastal barges and they were coming up behind the Japs and putting pressure on 'em. They did a good job. 22nd Battalion it was and between that and the pressure from 15th and 13th Battalion the Japs got out but they got out through a track that they were defending pretty

38:30 solidly and concentrated in Sattelberg and they then launched this attack across our LST. We captured an operation order that they, their colonel had issued directing this attack and the signal was to be a beacon lit at Sattelberg

39:00 and three barges were to land troops on our Scarlet Beach. Well it rained like hell that night and the fires if they were lit didn't show unfortunately and the next night a few spots of fire appeared and three barges appeared, but they were engaged at some distance and sunk.

39:30 We were attacked, infiltrated through in a couple of tracks. They got right down to a creek, a small party, which was virtually on the right of the beachhead, is looking the way we looked at it but they were eventually cleaned up and cleaned out.

40:00 I've got right ahead I should tell you about the landing.

Tape 8

00:30 **You wanted to tell us about the landing at Finschhafen.**

Yep. I just want to see. Oh, yes. Looking for the actual landing time, which was the subject of some debate in the planning. The American navy wanted us to land in the middle of the night. Fancy putting troops in a strange area,

01:00 in a jungle, in the middle of the night, and expecting them to fight. Eventually, it was agreed that it had to be at first light. And then the Yanks immediately wanted a limit on the number of hours, or minutes, their LSTs could remain on the beach. Remembering the ones that were bombed at Lae.

01:30 The landing was timed for 0445. A quarter to five in the morning. The first wave set off in the little LCIs, Landing Craft Infantry, each holding about a platoon I think. As they made for the beach, there were two spots that had been identified as possible enemy posts. One on the right,

02:00 a bit of a knoll, and fire came from there, quite strong fire. Now, the landing from then on became a shambles. The landing craft veered off to the left. On the left was a cove, which was a little cove with a creek running into it, and then the land mass ran back to the left,

02:30 a rocky coral beach that was unsuitable for landing. But unfortunately most of them landed there, because they'd veered off, I'm sure by the fire. They said it was the currents, but to me it was the fire coming from there. I was timed to land in the third wave, in what they call an LSI, Landing Ship Infantry, carrying about a hundred and eighty,

03:00 and I was OC troops, which is important. Because as the second wave was going in, I noticed two LSIs had collided, and the ramps that they carry each side of the bow drop down for embarkation and disembarkation, was hanging loose on one of them. And I noticed others had let there ramps down, obviously, in deep water.

03:30 Probably about eight or ten feet deep at least, and I rushed up to the captain. I went to the head of the gangways first, and there was a sergeant in charge of each one. I said, "Nobody's to go off till I give the order." So he held the troops. I went up and saw the skipper. I must say I was holding my pistol, and I was prepared to shoot him if necessary. I said, "Captain, you're still in deep water. Can't you go in closer?"

04:00 He said, "Yes." And he picked up his phone. He was quite cool. "Full speed ahead, both engines." I stepped off on dry land. So did all the troops. But these other blokes were going off in eight, ten feet of water. The other thing was, in the forward section of each LSI, there's an Oerlikon gun. Fairly high calibre gun, and they were shooting up on the beach, and I said,

04:30 "Your Oerlikon gun's firing out on the beach. Our troops are there now." And he said, "Ah." And picked up the phone again. "Cease fire, the Aussies are on the beach." So, he was quite calm.

And this is an American?

Yes. Quite good. But I think there was a fair bit of panic in other places. Actually, what happened, our troops were most experienced, of course by this time, and they realised two things. They got ashore, it was still dark,

05:00 one particular company commander managed to get his company together on armed point, to wait for daylight. Another company commander, who knew he should have been on the other hand side, he was landed on the left side. He wanted to be on the right, where had had to assault that knoll where we thought the enemy fire was coming from. So he collected his company and was marching around the beach by the time I landed, and I got up in dry,

05:30 didn't get my feet wet. But I saw all these troops milling around on the beach. I started roaring at them "Get up off the beach before the planes come, etc, etc." And somebody said, "The Japs are up there." So I climbed up this bit of a sand dune cliff, and sure enough, up the top was Colonel Simpson with the 2/17th, having his head bandaged because I think one of the Oerlikons had just grazed him.

06:00 His troops were firing at the tops of trees, where and still a few snipers, and still a few shots coming from up there. Anyway, I saw Bert Sheldon the company commander, who was supposed to land on the right and clean up that right spot, taking his crocodile, a whole company behind him, towards the right. He cleaned them up there. There was a famous story.

06:30 Bert, I think, was educated at Oxford, and he had a bit of an Oxford accent, and somebody said that he, in early morning darkness the voice came out, "Mr Smith", or whatever his name is, "Mr Smith, throw a grenade." The grenade was thrown and the position was taken, but we proceeded in to where our company headquarters, ah,

07:00 brigade headquarters was to be located, on the way in the IO who was leading his little group, struck a couple of Japs, who threw a grenade at him. He turned his back and got peppered with little bits of grenade. The Jap grenades weren't terribly effective. And anyway, Barton Mourne it was. Barton went off to the CCS to get his wounds dressed,

07:30 having got his IO section settled in headquarters area. That evening when he was in the CCS, the Jap bombers came over and bombed the area, so he reckoned he'd be safer in headquarters, and he got dressed and came back, and then stayed with us. But that was my story of the landing.

08:00 Somewhere in the archives at Canberra, there's a painting showing two LCIs, one with the two ramps dangling. I'm sure I've seen it. We got through that. We had our moments, because one of the things General Herring said at the Orders Conference was that.

08:30 "Intelligence tell me there could be two thousand troops there, enemy troops. I don't believe that. I don't think there are more than two hundred."

At Finschhafen?

Yeah. Well, it turned out there was the best part of a division. Certainly, there were four thousand there. And what had happened. The air force had bombed a convoy that was coming across to reinforce New Guinea from New Britain, and some of them got ashore,

09:00 and some of them made their way, quite a few of them overland, to Finschhafen. And were organised into groups at Finschhafen. Then there are the ones who escaped from Lae, and came over the mountains. Some of them filtered into Finschhafen. So altogether the Japs had quite a considerable force. They outnumbered us, and they had the advantage, they were able to concentrate their attacks,

09:30 whereas we had to spread out to be prepared to meet them.

So how did the first wave of troops who landed on the beach, what were their casualties?

I don't know. There were a couple. One fellow jumped off in the deep water, where the mortar base plate strapped to his back, and never came up. They never saw him again. There were a couple drowned.

10:00 And what the casualties were, I don't know. There were a few. I've never read that. I should. Be in Dexter's part history. The counter-attack they launched caused a bit of trouble, partly because the dispositions. By this time the division had taken command, they'd moved too.

10:30 Incidentally, one of the problems was, the Yanks wouldn't resupply us. All our wounded were left in the CCS on the beachhead. Didn't matter how serious they were. You know, if that had been an American force, there'd have been hell to pay in America. They couldn't evacuate them to a proper hospital, but no,

11:00 they were just left in the CCS, where they got wonderful treatment, but it wasn't equipped to handle patients long term. And it was at least eight days before they did supply us. We were asking for more troops because the brigade commander was finding he needed more troops to cope with the assault on Finschhafen,

11:30 as well as protecting his flank. And we wanted another battalion at least. I've since discovered there was a great argument going on between the American Navy and the Australian Army people, and Admiral Barby has written that Finschhafen is one of his great mistakes, and he regretted it greatly that he didn't provide the support we needed.

12:00 So that was not a fault of our making, but it was an administrative problem of considerable magnitude. I did, at one stage, discover that we had practically run out of the Owen sub-machine gun, which, of course, is a vital weapon. I wasn't game to tell the brig. I thought he had enough worries on his mind. I hoped to stick it out, and we'd get by. Well, we did, fortunately.

12:30 But the supplies were right down almost to zero by the time we got resupplied.

Are you talking about ammunition or actual guns?

I'm talking about the guns there.

The Owen guns?

The Owen gun, yeah. Because there's a fair wastage of those sort of weapons in a battle. Every time somebody's wounded, for instance, it could be that the weapon is lost. And you know, that side of it didn't go very well.

13:00 Well, after we captured Finschhafen and Langemak Bay, which they wanted for a PT [patrol torpedo] boat base, and a very effective one, because when you look at the strategic value of Finschhafen, it was enormous, because it opened the Vidia Straits and enabled the progress then to the west. To start the assault, the strategic assault on the Japanese-held islands.

13:30 Until that Vidia Strait was open it couldn't be done. In the follow up, I had the first problem I mentioned earlier. That one battalion got in touch with me to say that "There was no water" and I had to arrange water supply in a hurry. But then one day, we were advancing only two or three miles a day,

14:00 and even half-fit troops should be able to do six miles a day, at least. It was on flat country, coastal plain, narrow as it was. There was precious little hold up from the enemy. Most days, none at all, and I couldn't understand it, and each day we were getting more sickness. They were getting up to about thirty per battalion per day, sick,

14:30 unable to take an active part. And a young doctor came in one day, to what I had as an office, and he said, "I think the brigade is suffering from a ninety percent Vitamin B deficiency." And I said, "What does that mean?" I didn't know much about vitamins. I didn't know anything really. And he said, "Oh, it's very important to the well-being of the troops."

15:00 I said, "In what way?" And he said, "Well, it means that they're not fit, not really fit, a general feeling of lassitude, they get sickness for no apparent reason." And it started clicking in my brain, when I heard that. And he said, "Generally they're all well below par." And I said, "Well, what do you do?" He said, "Well, you can get Vitamin B tablets."

15:30 And I said, 'That'll do me." So I got straight on the phone to Bill Lemprier, who was the assistant director, Medical Services, the Colonel at divisional headquarters. And I said to him, "A young doctor

has just come in to tell me there's a ninety percent Vitamin B deficiency in the brigade." He said, "Well that could be so, Murray?" And I said, "Well, he says you can get Vitamin B tablets."

16:00 He said, "Yeah, you can." And I said, "Well, can we get some, in a hurry?" And he said, "I suppose so." I said, "Can you get them flown in tonight?" and he said, "Yes." And I said, "What else can you do?" And he said, "Well, I'm not sure but I think there's an American ration that's very strong in Vitamin B." So I called in the AOC [Air Officer Commanding] officer, and I said,

16:30 "What's this American ration that's very strong in Vitamin B?" He said, "I think it's the Field Op [Operations] Ration Number 2." I said, "Well, can we get them?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, what about issuing those instead of our normal ration?" And somebody, I don't know who it was, said to me, "That ration is rather sweet and I don't think it will go down every day with the Australian troops."

17:00 And we talked and decided then to arrange for a Field Op Ration Number 2, to be issued twice a week to Australian troops. Those B1 tablets I got to the brigade that very evening, two per man for every man in the brigade. Within two days they were advancing six miles a day, and the sickness casualties had dropped below ten per day in each battalion.

17:30 It was quite spectacular. That again, I regard as one of my major achievements in that operation.

You said that you moved up the hinterland, towards Sattelberg.

The troops did.

Were you involved in that march?

Oh, no. No.

Or the planning of it?

No. That was an operational march.

18:00 The only thing I had to do with it. Normally the brigade major looks after operations movement, but the brigadier said to me, "Will you concentrate vehicles to move a battalion, as soon as we capture Finschhafen, up to the Sattelberg road", so I begged, borrowed and stole jeeps and trucks and all sorts of things

18:30 from artillery and engineers, as well as our own infantry and concentrated them all at what was jeep head, for getting supplies into them, and I moved a whole battalion, that same afternoon, up on the Sattelberg Track. It so happened that a battalion of the 2/43rd Battalion, which had come in to help us out,

19:00 I'm not sure if it was a battalion or the whole company, but they were surrounded by the Japs there, and we had a, one evening, planes were flying around and we all thought they were enemy, and then somebody said, "No, they're not. They're Kittyhawks." And we listened closely and we thought Kittyhawks. And night was closing in.

19:30 We got a message from the air liaison officer to, if we could possibly light the airstrip, which was there, but not being used, of course, because it was still more or less operational. But before then the planes just stopped, and we guessed they'd crashed or crash-landed or something had happened. And there were four of them. Anyway, we gradually got the news.

20:00 One had landed in the middle of the 2/43rd Battalion Company, that was surrounded, and he had a whale of a time. He got a rifle and joined in. And another one landed in, I think he landed with the CCS. They parachuted. And another one landed behind the Jap lines, but he made his way around and got back, and another one landed somewhere in the 2/17th,

20:30 which was at Jivevaneng, which was on the Sattelberg road. But they all came out. Oh no, one landed in the sea, that's right, but they picked him up and he got ashore. We didn't lose any. We lost four Kittyhawks, though. But 17th Battalion was surrounded up on the Sattelberg track.

21:00 **The 2/27th were surrounded?**

When they finally evicted the Japs, they found in one area the FDLs [Forward Defence Locality], the slit trenches they'd dug, were within three metres of the Jap FDLs. You had to keep your head down there, didn't you?

Three metres? That's from here to the door.

Yeah. Yeah. Incredible.

21:30 I didn't know that. I read it in the 2/17th history. I presume it's accurate. But that, I think, is the story of Finschhafen, as far as I recollect. I haven't had a chance to go right through my diary on Finschhafen.

22:00 **After that, you went to Tarakan and Morotai?**

After we were relieved in Finschhafen, and incidentally, we'd chased the Japs along the road towards Seyo [?]. I'd had a couple of bouts of malaria, and the first time I went back to the CCS,

22:30 and the best I could do was lie in a stretcher in the mud. And they were still sort of erecting tents and things, and after a couple of days, I managed to get into a tent onto a bed. But I got treatment, and it was only what they call BT, Benign Tertian. And that cleared up. But then I got another bout

23:00 and this time the place was astonishing. It was like a city. And the hospital had all mod cons, more or less, but the Yanks had come in a huge way, developing into a massive base. Langemak Bay was full of shipping. The engineers were building huge air strips,

23:30 and it became the major jumping off point for the western expansion, advance. I was nominated to go to the staff school. Going back to Australia anyway, still as staff captain, I'm not quite sure how it came about. I didn't travel with the brigade.

24:00 I got a movement order to go by plane and I got onto a plane. They started to take off and the pilot said to me, "Would you like to come up and watch us take off?" And I stood behind the pilot and co-pilot hanging on to their seats, and watching, and all of a sudden I realised things weren't going too well.

24:30 And the pilot was looking very worried and struggling with his controls. And finally, I could see the trees at the end of the runway getting awfully close, and finally we just lifted over them and there was a big sigh of relief from the pilot. When he got up I said, "What's wrong?" "Oh," he turned to his co-pilot, he said, "Go and have a look." And I said, "What's wrong?" Anyway the co-pilot came back and said, "Yeah."

25:00 And he turned to me and he said, "We've got a double load aboard." I said, "How often does that happen?" He said, "Oh every now and again they load the spleen and then they put another load on." Oh, goodness. If I'd known that I wouldn't have been so happy. However, as we started flying south, the pilot said to me. "Have you ever had a proper look at the whats a name, the Coral Reef, the Great Barrier Reef?"

25:30 I said, "No." So he turned west a bit, picked up virtually the start of the Great Barrier Reef, and followed it all the way down to Townsville. Flying, you know, low enough for me to have a good look at it. It was a wonderful experience. Anyway, I had a fortnight's leave or something, and then back to the brigade.

26:00 They told me that my nomination for the staff school had gone through, and I left the brigade and went to the staff school, the last one at Canberra. Came out of that, didn't know where they were going to post me, and I got a call from my friend at Mill Six [?] one day, saying, "Are you ready to go?" "Yeah. Where am I going?" 21 Brigade as staff captain.

26:30 He said, "I can't tell you much, but," he said, "It's a bit delicate." So I went up to 21 Brigade, which were up on the Tablelands, and I walked into the mess, and there were just two or three officers there, I said, "I believe I'm to be your staff captain." One of them said, "Do you know anything about being a staff captain?"

27:00 and I said, "I've been staff captain of 20 Brigade for a couple of years." There was a sigh and somebody said, "Oh, you'll be all right then." I didn't know the previous staff captain had been sacked by an angry brigadier over a mess he'd made. The brigadier come back and I talked to him, and he said to me after a while, he said, "I'm easy to get on with, Murray", he said, "But you might hear some stories, but I'm easy to get on with. Don't worry."

27:30 Turned out a top class bloke, one of the best brigadiers in the AIF. Ivan Docherty. Then I went, oh, they told me. Have you got much to go?

Oh, yeah. We've got a little bit to go.

They told me "That my promotion to major was coming through

28:00 and I'd have to leave the brigade". The CO of the battalion came across and went in to see the brigadier and then they sent for me and the brigadier said, "Your promotion to major has come through, and Colonel Anderson wants to know, do you want to go back to the battalion or stay on staff?" And I said, "I've been on staff now for about three years. It's time I got some regimental experience." And he said, "That's what I wanted to hear you say."

28:30 He said, "I can't promise you you'll be second in command, but you'll be very close to it." So I said to him, "Well, I've had no regimental experience, and I'd like to do a tactical school first." He said, "Yeah, I think that's a good idea." So I went to the LHQ [Land Headquarters] Infantry Tactics, under Brigadier, oh, he was a bloke I knew very well. Bernie Evans.

29:00 And I did a very nice, pleasant school there for a few weeks. In the meantime they landed at Tarakan. I was glad I missed all that. It was pretty hairy. And I had to get to Tarakan then. I got to Morotai and they said "There's no onward movement at Tarakan because the landing had taken place on Borneo and everything was going there".

29:30 And I spent about a week, and finally I wrote to the CO and the letter got there, and there was a frantic call then. "Get him over here quickly. We need him." They had two majors. One was a new major who

had come from one of the broken up units in the CMF, and had no field experience at all. And the other one, the South Australian government

30:00 were demanding his release because he was a senior railways man and they wanted to organise the rail. And apparently there was a lot of pressure on to get this fellow, George Rosevere [?], back. So anyway, the CO put pressure on the movement people, and they said, "Well, there's a courier plane going. You can travel in that." So I duly met the courier plane at 4 am one morning,

30:30 which is an ungodly hour. I hate getting up early like that. And we got on the plane. I made myself comfortable. I was the only passenger. Lay down on a lot of boxes and things, and went to sleep. And I suddenly woke up. There was one of these awful tropical storms. Unless you've been in one, you couldn't image what they're like, lightening and thunder and the whole lot.

31:00 And I thought the best thing I can do is go to sleep again, which I started to do.

Sounds like you could sleep through an earthquake?

Oh, I can. I was just about asleep and the co-pilot came back and he said, "We're turning back." I said, "Why?" He said, "One engines out." I said, "Good. Let's go." And again I thought, "Well, if it's going to happen, it's going to happen. I better go to sleep again."

31:30 By the time I practically got to sleep we were almost back again. We landed safely on one engine. And the pilot said, "It might take an hour to fix and we'll take off again." So I waited around and we took off again, and the same thing happened. Except we didn't have the tropical storm the second time, but the engine petered out when we were almost half way. Back we came.

32:00 And he said, "Well, we won't go till tomorrow morning." So we took off six o'clock the next morning. Got there. Very dicey airstrip, but it landed all right. That was on Tarakan, and the CO said to me, "Well, you've got to act as 2IC. The other major's senior to you,

32:30 but he's had no experience", and he gave me a separate command on the major landing beach, where our troops had landed, where I had a company of infantry, a platoon of machine guns, and a couple of anti-tank guns, and we were there in case there was an enemy landing. We were sending out patrols and picking up odd Jap stragglers all the time,

33:00 but they'd practically cleared the island of Japs. And then, of course.

This is Tarakan.

This is Tarakan. And the peace was signed then. That was a bit hairy. One of my blokes apparently got himself drunk. I don't know where he got the alcohol from, but he did, and I suddenly heard this Thompson sub-machine gun going flat out, and so I, you know the usual call. "Sar-major", and "Yes, sir." "Find out what's going on, will you?" "Yes, sir."

33:30 A very nice bloke, the Company Sergeant Major, a bloke named Trixie Willis. And he came back after a while. He said, "Oh, I think it's all right now. So and so got himself a bit shickered. I think it's quietened down." Half an hour later, it's on again. So this time I went down, and that was a bit hairy.

34:00 I was walking. I said, 'Put your gun down, son." "Come here and I'll shoot you." Full as a bull, anyway, I just kept walking slowly, and nothing happened. Took the gun. Handed it to the CSM [Company Sergeant Major] who by that time had suddenly appeared beside me, and he took the ammunition thing out, the clip,

34:30 and it was empty fortunately. I don't know what would have happened if there'd been something in it. That happened in 6th Div.

Now I've got two questions to ask you for your New Guinea period. Blamey's speech. He's known to have said something derogatory about the 39th Battalion, which served in the Kokoda Track, and some of the 2/14th and some of other AIF units.

35:00 **At Koitaki or some place.**

The only thing I know about that is what I've read, and a couple of references that were made to me, when I was in 21 Brigade. Apparently, he reviewed the brigade, 21 Brigade, I don't know about 39th Battalion.

35:30 But in the comment he made, that, "It's only the ones that run away that get shot." Now that was taken as a derogatory comment. I don't think Blamey would ever make a derogatory comment about Australian troops. But he was under enormous pressure at the time. Blamey shouldn't have been in New Guinea. The politicians forced him to go up there because

36:00 Kokoda didn't look nice, and the politicians panicked. And they demanded that Blamey go up. I don't know what they thought he should do. Take a rifle and bayonet and join in with them or something, but Blamey's job was by the War Cabinet, advising them, and he'd told them he had every confidence in the local commander, and they were doing all right. The politicians still demanded that he went up there.

36:30 Now, at their instigation, he was abandoning his post, which was advising War Cabinet. What if there'd

been a landing in Western Australia, at that time, which there could have been. Blamey was nowhere near to control it. Nobody quite realises the danger of what the politicians forced him to do, through their ignorance. But he did, I understand, make that comment, and I feel

37:00 he was having a none-too-happy association with Rowell, the local commander, who was a very able bloke, but he didn't like Blamey. He was a staff corps, man and the staff corps felt Blamey was an interloper who should never have been given the command. Or some of the staff corps did.

Because of his police experience?

No, mainly because they regarded him as an amateur soldier, and not as a professional.

37:30 There were undercurrents from the police business and so on, as well.

Now, Blamey seems to be universally, by and large, he seems to be quite unpopular with a lot of the soldiers.

They've got the wrong idea. Blamey was a brilliant soldier. Outstanding soldier. He was a Field Marshall. No other Australian has ever attained that rank. He was side-tracked by the British in the Middle East.

38:00 But when they got into trouble, they used him. For instance, in the withdrawal in Greece, when Jumbo Wilson pulled out, Blamey took over and made sense out of a terrible rout, really.

Did he have anything to do with Crete?

No. Not really. That was Freyberg, the New Zealand Commander, who messed things up a bit there.

38:30 **And of course, the islands, there's also quite a lot of debate amongst a lot of soldiers, that after taking Madang and Finschhafen, Aitape, Wewak were useless operations. Tarakan, Balikpapan. All those places. What do you have to say on that?**

I agree. I agree. I don't think that had anything to do with Blamey. I think that was political. I don't think the story of that's been properly written. I must read what Butler says about that.

39:00 I haven't done that in his official history. But I think they felt Australian troop should be used. The Yanks wouldn't use them. They were offered 1 Corps, which was a body of the most experienced troops, probably in the world at that stage, and certainly they were the best troops in the world.

Whose troops were these? This corps.

1 Corps. Australian. 6, 7 and 9 Divs.

39:30 6 Div was engaged and had to be disengaged, of course, up around Wewak. 7 and 9 were both out in North Queensland. The politicians, I'm sure, felt that Australians had to be involved to, you know, to appear to be doing something, but the Yanks didn't want them because they wanted to run the peace.

40:00 And the Yanks would never give an Australian command. For instance, when the air force command that was established under MacArthur, the first commander integrated Australians in his command, with a commander, an American. A 2IC, an Australian, and so on.

40:30 And MacArthur didn't like it, and sacked him. And brought in Kenny, was it.

Don't you think that these island operations would have had something to do with oil, as well? Borneo was a huge place where oil fields

Yes, I know. I don't think it was. I don't know. Yes. Tarakan.

41:00 **Do you think there was any other strategic value in Tarakan, apart from oil?**

It had a strategic value in that it commanded the China Sea, and had operations moved down that way at all, command of the China Sea would have been important. I don't think it was necessary.

Time's running out I'm afraid, so I'd like to thank you very much.

Oh, that's all right.

I hope you got a chance to tell, you've got a huge history, so it's difficult for us to try and

Yeah. Yeah.

INTERVIEW ENDS