Australians at War Film Archive

John Holland - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 29th May 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/222

Tape 1

00:21 **Good morning, Sir John.**

Good morning.

We appreciate the time that you're giving us today.

I hope it will be of some

00:30 use to somebody sometime.

I'm sure it will. And as we've discussed, what I'd like to do is to begin at the very beginning and look at some of your very earliest memories. Perhaps, we could start with your parents.

Well, my parents were married in 1892. I was number eight in a family of ten. They,

01:00 we were brought up in this locality, Flinders, where family had held property since 1885. They were my grandparents at that time. More?

As much as you've got, that's what we're interested in.

Well, this was a lovely place to be brought

01:30 up as children. We had wide open country, we had magnificent views. We had, school holidays we had tennis, swim, great afternoon tea parties, very happy tennis tournaments. We played in the local village cricket team, for annual matches, Flinders played visitors.

02:00 As a family, again, we all got on incredibly well. There was great discipline, which was absolutely essential in a large family. And there's a saying just out on the wall here, one of my mother's favourite sayings, "Don't put it down dear, put it away". So tidiness and discipline were very much a part of our growing days. We all had chores,

02:30 cleaning brass taps of which there were numerous numbers of them. Cutting buffalo lawns with a hand pushed mower, and that was a hell of a job. And even worse and more tedious was trimming the edges with hand held shears, used on other occasions for shearing sheep. We always had, were fortunate in having staff in those

03:00 days. The most conspicuous, most significant at home would have been a Welsh couple. She - a very large lady with very, again very strict Welshing discipline. The husband, a tiny little man, he used to follow her around, I think very much under the thumb, was Johns, but

03:30 he was a nice bloke. And he milked the cows and cut the wood and most of his time was spent in a somewhat largish garden. I suppose two or three acres and the property is known as The Rest. It's quite a well known property in Flinders. And the current owners, the current owner, Mrs. Robert Boynton,

04:00 and she just loves the place, she lives there on her own. She's maintained the garden in a very charming condition and it's always a pleasure to be there. Just a fortnight ago, she had a dinner party for about twenty to celebrate twenty years of occupation of The Rest. So to all of us as children, it was a very happy place in which to do our growing up years.

04:30 The place itself was small, well it was a farm, about one hundred and fifty acres. Commercially, it yielded a modest return, that's all I can say, modest. But it did provide us with a great never ending source of

05:00 agricultural products, carrots, potatoes, [bunning], [?] ochre and beans and peas. And the majority of those were not consumed at The Rest but distributed to various friends around the place. We always had plenty of fish. In those days you could go down to the local pier and buy it from

05:30 Mrs. Myall Chinchey, a very prominent, very round lady. Who, she always had a smile, always had a fish. And crayfish then were not only beautiful but quite totally inexpensive. We always had two pigs, they were of a great interest to my Dad, they were well looked after, but

06:00 we had the terrible job of cleaning the pigs' sty. Nobody has been able to convince me yet that a pig is a clean animal, in fact it's anything but. We hosed it down and brushed it out, when it came to the killing each year, that again was an interesting experience. My Dad didn't like killing at all, but the neighbours used to undertake the terrible task. Knock the pig on the head and do other

06:30 things to end it's life. Then it would be chopped up, then we had pork pies, beautiful pork pies. I've never had anything like them. And in the process of curing the bacon, my Dad spent a lot of time on that every day. It was a question of rubbing the bacon with sugar and coat it in vinegar and that would go on for several

07:00 weeks as would, similar treatment with the hams. Then there was a smoking process, you had a special little house called a smoke house. And the bacon and portions of pig would be hanging up in the roof, and that process again, would take three or four weeks. Then the produce after smoking would hang on hooks in the kitchen,

07:30 a very old fashioned kitchen. But it was a great sight to see them up there. Then the ham would be packed away in saw dust. One ham would be for Christmas day, another would be eaten on New Year's Day and the other two hams would be given away to friends close by. And the bacon was the most superb bacon I've ever had in my life. And I wish someone could learn how

08:00 to go back to those ancient processes of just rubbing and sugaring and vinegaring.

How much time were you able to spend with your father as a small child?

Not very much. He was very active on the farming property, he did a lot of the work himself, a lot of the labouring work. And was always involved in community activities,

08:30 president of the local shire and progress association and grand master of the local Masonic Lodge. And so there were always - both Mother and Dad were very community minded, and I think their habits have been absorbed by later generations.

Well, you had a lot of siblings of course, was it difficult to compete for their

09:00 **attention?**

Not really because the age spread was quite significant. If my eldest brother were alive today, he'd be a hundred and ten. And my youngest sister, who is alive today, is now eighty five. So we covered a pretty broad spread -

09:30 span of years.

So when you were a little boy, you brothers, I presume, would have been involved in the Great War?

Well, two eldest brothers were in World War I that is correct. One, Harry, the eldest one, he served on Gallipoli with the 8th Light Horse, where he lost an eye with a ricochet from a machine gunner, ricocheted from a barrel of

10:00 his gun and consequently lost an eye. And the other one served mainly in the artillery in France. And he was also wounded and for years after pieces of shell and shrapnel would emerge from various parts of his body. But he's the only one who died early, he died at sixty eight. The others all lived on.

As you got

10:30 **older, did you talk to your brothers about their war experiences?**

Very little, they were reluctant to talk about it. Most reluctant. I can remember, at the age of four, when my brother Tas, that was the second brother, when he returned home in, I think he was in uniform. I can remember him, a great celebration for that

11:00 triumphant return, it was very great to see him. But we all got on incredibly well together.

Tell me about your very early school days?

Early schools days were at Flinders State School, number 841, where we went at about the age of six. It was a small school. It was about, at that time, a population of I think, once, of about thirty.

11:30 They had a master and occasionally he'd have an assistance from a Mrs. Florence Daily. Again, they were happy days. We saluted the flag every Monday morning, we gave allegiance to the Queen. It was a good school and the school master in that area was a very highly regarded citizen. And the leaders we

12:00 had were in fact, leaders in the community. They played in the local football teams and took part in all community activities. And they taught us to hold a straight bat at cricket and how to kick a football. They were generally, they were happy days yet there was good discipline. I can recall one occasion

when, in a some what impish mood, I was singing “Land of Hope and

12:30 Glory” and there was a lady, a young lady at the desk immediately in front of me and I had a pin and I stuck it in the lady’s bottom and she let out an unholy yell, “He did it.” And so he was then sent to the shelter shed, a place of ultimate teacher retribution and took six of the best. But we had, that was the kind of, I had no hard feelings against that master at

13:00 that time, he was just really doing his job. He explained why he was doing it, gave me, and said, you know, “Did it hurt?” And of course, no it didn’t hurt. Of course it, jolly well did but you never let on. That was an expression of one’s manliness so.

Did you cry?

No, no. Oh, goodness me, no.

You were a tiny little boy of six getting a?

Oh no, by that

13:30 time I’d reached about, I must have been about ten when that happened.

Oh, very mature at ten, yeah.

And another aspect of the thing there, of the experience of that school, I learnt to appreciate music. Our master brought in an old fashioned gramophone with Dame Nellie Melba singing “God Save the Queen, God Save the King”. And I can remember, I can

14:00 hear those tones even now, that was my first introduction of classical music, and I’ve loved it ever since. Mind you, I’m not musically educated but I still love music. And my first introduction, I was so thankful. So we really had, it was a pretty jolly good school. And we learnt all the fundamentals and people went on to secondary education at Frankston High School.

You

14:30 **mentioned that you used to salute the flag every morning, you recall singing “Land of Hope and Glory” with sum punctuation provided by yourself, at that point did you have a sense of yourself as part of the British Empire?**

Very much so. Yes, those big wall maps with the pink areas, you know, we had a feeling that we were part of all that, part of that great Commonwealth. We felt there was

15:00 power, there was loyalty, there dignity. We didn’t know, probably not aware of the seamier side or the less attractive side of colonialism. We had, there was this immense pride.

And did that contribute in later years to your involvement in the military?

Very much so.

15:30 When World War II broke out the four brothers, the four younger brothers, we all joined up in the first few weeks of the war, World War II. It was because we felt we had an obligation to do so.

Tell me a little bit about Frankston High School in those days.

Well, again it was a fairly new school.

16:00 Most of my brothers and sisters had all been to private schools. But this was during the depression and the education budget was exhausted and so my youngest brother and I went to, we were sent to the school for, to Frankston High School, for financial reasons. And again, I think it was a good school. It was a fairly small

16:30 school compared with today’s vast numbers. I think there was only about four hundred or so, four hundred and twenty odd people I think. Which gave great opportunity for those of us who were interested in leadership roles. It gave us a great opportunity for us to participate in prefects, house captain, school captains or those

17:00 kind of roles. It also gave us great opportunity in the sporting field. We had, spent an enormous amount of time at sport. We had good leadership and we were encouraged. We had good teachers. I can remember the mathematics, again it was a fairly easy process in those days thanks to good presentation and good control. I had my first

17:30 inklings of interest in the classics. We had a wonderful English mistress and Shakespeare to me was always a joy, it has been ever since. But there were some of my peers, I must say, thought Shakespeare was the absolute end, and what I waste of time, didn’t understand it. I have nothing but admiration for the Bard, I think it’s still,

18:00 well I can’t read now, but I enjoyed reading him as did my father in-law, who was also a great Shakespearian. And we used to have discussions about Shakespeare, about his plays, and we occasionally used to do some readings. So that school to me, provided for me a good basic knowledge of

the fundamentals, certainly for me, maths, physics,

18:30 English, history, geography for the career I wanted to take in engineering. But again, it was a question of, I matriculated, not brilliantly, I wasn't a brilliant student by any means but I happened to win the Citizenship Award, I wasn't dux of the school, but I was up there somewhere. And

19:00 I felt that the staff there, they served us well as students, it was a happy school. And sporting opportunities were really great. I think I was invited out of sixteen to play in the Frankston Senior Cricket Eleven. I don't think I fulfilled the expectations the selectors had of me,

19:30 but I quite enjoyed it. And the same with football, I was invited to play with the Frankston seconds, playing with men about twice my size, but enjoyed it. So we had wonderful opportunities.

These were different opportunities to those that had been presented to your brothers, of course, them attending private schools.

Yes, well they all did quite

20:00 well. My sisters, again, they were at private school and they've gone out of existence now. My sisters went to, the eldest two went to a school called Cromarty, which you've probably never heard of. And it specialised, I think, in the social graces for ladies learning how to live and behave like

20:30 ladies. They had such people as Dame Mella (UNCLEAR) was one of the students there in my sister's time. And the youngest one ended up at Wrighton Girls School where her granddaughter just had her senior years there. So they had privileges, which we didn't have.

21:00 Better laboratories, better buildings, but people, I don't know, I was very happy in my school days.

Do you think it made a difference to you having exposure to probably a broader cross section of the community at Frankston High School?

Well, I've often wondered about that.

21:30 I didn't make many close friends but had some good friends there. One, a couple of distinction, one ran the standard newspaper company publication. Another one, Don

22:00 Charlwood became quite a significant author, he wrote one of the very best books I read about the air force called No Moon Tonight. He was a navigator in Lancaster bombers and served, passed through thirty operations. We met in London one time during the war, when, if crews successfully

22:30 returned from ten flights, that was about it at that time, the losses were horrific. And he wrote a book to give a view point of what he called, from the lower mountains. Plenty of books have been written from the Everest Peaks, but he wanted to give the views of a low ranking member

23:00 of the crew. Which he did, he just captured the atmosphere of briefing and the trauma of returning home and seeing the empty beds in the dormitory and knowing that you would never see those people again. With the cloths piled up in little heaps. But he carried on as a professional author, he's written several books. And some of the earliest settlers

23:30 out here, The Settlers Under Sail, was one of his and another one, a television series based on The Green Years. So apart from that, he and another very good friend I had, I suppose my best friend there, was one Granville Rug, who helped me along to university and studied architecture

24:00 and became one of the first commissioners of the National Development Commission in Canberra. And he was a great footballer, a great athlete and a great bloke. And we shared the study in Queens College for a while.

When did you decide you wanted to be an engineer?

At about the age of twelve. And I suppose there were three significant

24:30 factors influencing that decision. First one I suppose you could say was genetic, on my maternal side there were engineers. The second I would perhaps describe as theatrical because when my father was, one time, president of the local shire he was visited quite frequently by the

25:00 shire engineer, one George Brown. (UNCLEAR) and he came up to the family property, The Rest, in a 1923 model Dodge. He would put on a large broad brim, he was a little man, wear a large broad brim felt hat, he would grab a brief case, get out of the car and bang the door shut and walk manfully up to the front door and knock on the door. And I remember saying to my Dad, "Who is

25:30 he?" "Oh, he's a civil engineer." So I was pretty impressed with all this. And the third factor, I suppose, as a small boy I was absolutely intrigued seeing pictures of Sydney Harbour Bridge as it was being built and I just went over the picture and I'd want to see it. And as those great cantilever spans ultimately came together, that was to

26:00 me, there was nothing else I wanted to do but be a civil engineer.

And have a broad brimmed hat and a brief case?

I don't think I ever had the broad brimmed hat. I've certainly had plenty of brief cases.

I'd like to talk a little bit more about your father and his work.

26:30 Well, he spent his early life at sea serving on clippers. And as a matter of fact, there's a ship, a model ship in the room next door which he was influential in his courting days with my mother. And so the ship

27:00 was actually hand carved by one of his fellow seamen and presented to Dad who in turn presented it to Mother. And it's been admired so much and my youngest son, who is now fifty three, he used to stand in front of this jolly ship for hours and Mother was so impressed that

27:30 she left it for Peter until he should have a house of his own. But he's had a house of his own for a long time now, but he said the ship really belongs to Flinders, that's where it ought to be. So that's where it is, still in our house and we are still caring for it and it will ultimately end up in his house, I think. But he still might have an interest in living out here, who knows. And so

28:00 he was, when he married, he left the sea and then came down here in 1912 and one of my eldest sisters hadn't been well, she had some kind of lung problem and the medical advice, they thought the rural environment would be appropriate,

28:30 and it was. They bought a farm up in, a farm called Midford, up in Main Creek Road. Then actually moved down with my grandmother, down to The Rest, where he spent his time running the property there. Just a small property, which I mentioned earlier in the interview.

29:00 But he was very civic minded and was very active in a whole range of community activities. The church and the golf club and the sporting oval and the Masonic Lodge and the Progress Association

29:30 (UNCLEAR) Park Reserve. You know, a host of community involvements and a host of community activities. The family income that was derived most from, the farm contributed a little but not very much, from property. Involved in the first land sales in Melbourne in 1838 and they bought at that time, they owned the corner of

30:00 Little Collins and Queens Street, and other property too. That was the source of the family income for many, many years. Sadly it was sold early after the war, as was the property, The Rest,

30:30 because during those six years of war - Dad had died just before the war - the place was run down and Mother and my younger sister were living in the place at that time and they tried getting married couples to come in, but it never worked out. One would get on the grog or the other one would run off with someone else's spouse.

31:00 It was very difficult to get people and the maintenance was so, it was worrying her, although she was really a country lady. She decided to sell and go to the city. Single blokes of land on that property now are bringing in a couple of million dollars. So commercially a great mistake but it at least gave Mother the satisfaction, she didn't have to worry about any, she didn't have to worry about anything. Except she always missed

31:30 the country, but she was near the family living in the city. But still very much a country lady. But she was involved in everything that was going on down here at the same time.

Had your father had any military involvement?

No. No. He was too old for World War I and the Boer War. I never discussed it with him.

32:00 **When you went to university, you studied engineering straight away? You went straight into?**

Of course.

And how long were you a student?

Well it was a four year course. It was a four year course but should be a five year course, in my opinion.

32:30 It was a very intense course but I enjoyed it from the very first day. But at that time I was very lucky to be able to, we paid full fees, we were required, it was still the Depression in 1933 when I went up to the university. It was very much touch and go as to whether the family could afford it. But Sir John McFarlane was the chancellor at the time. He used to visit down here

33:00 and Dad used to know him moderately well. And anyway, he called and invited Sir John to discuss the situation and it was a day - I knew it was going to be an important discussion because the whisky decanter came out, and an oak barrel with bands around it with some special biscuits, it was all part of the scene. And so my

33:30 future was being discussed that day. And I can remember Dad, when he came out, Sir John left to go home, I said, "Well Dad, what's happened?" He said, "Well, Sir John summed it up this way", he said, "Look Holland, this Depression's got to end sometime and when it does the community will need

engineers, so if you

34:00 can possible find the funds I recommend you send the boy up to university." So Dad found the funds but it was a struggle, as it was with a majority of students at that time. To be at university at all was an extremely great privilege. And we still had to pay full fees, I've forgotten what they were. But anyway, university

34:30 were happy days. My first day, I'll never forget. The dean of engineering was one Professor Curnow, called Crunch Curnow. A long distinguished gentleman with a long white flowing beard and first lecture he came into the classroom with a slide rule, you probably have never seen one. It was about twelve feet long, and the things he did with that slide rule, it convinced of two things, a) that he had a wonderful sense

35:00 of humour and b) that he was a distinguished scholar. And so he had us eating out of his hand from the very first day. So university days, for me, were very happy days. And as it was, I think for most of us, there was only one cow in the entire engineering school. There were only twenty four students went up to study civil engineering, now there are hundreds

35:30 of various places all round the country side. And so we were indeed privileged.

Had you thought of any alternative plans if you couldn't go to university?

RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology] was a possibility. That was a working man's college. But I dearly wanted to go to university.

During your time at Frankston High, had you been involved with cadets

36:00 **at all?**

No. We didn't have cadets at that time.

So when was your first experience of the military?

Well in 1939, I returned to Melbourne, I was then employed by Commonwealth Oil Refineries and war appeared to be imminent

36:30 and special courses were, we were kind of cadet trainees at the engineer depot down at (UNCLEAR) Avenue. And so there were quite a few of us could perceive that we would be likely required for military service. So we did some preliminary training down there and that was in 1939. Apart from that, I'd had no training whatsoever.

37:00 **Did they have cadets at university in those days?**

Yes. Melbourne University Regiment, yes. Quite a few people joined that, but we were, engineering is a very intense course with very little free time, and I was also very interested in sport, and I so I did not join cadets, did not join the Melbourne University Regiment.

37:30 **During your years at university, did you have any interest in politics?**

Yes, I used to go to, there was various societies. The one that intrigued me most of all was the Public Question Society. And we'd have eminent speakers on political issues. And they were

38:00 crowded, they were happy days, there was so much wit and fun about the thing. I think we would try not to miss those occasions. And I and another friend of mine, we joined a group called the Friends of Soviet Russia. I'm not at all communistic, if anything I'm right across the other side of the spectrum.

38:30 But we went along to join this particular group, I think principally, not for any political reason, but to drink vodka and eat black bread.

Sounds like a very good reason to join a political

Probably go onto the suspect list to this very day, I suppose.

I was going to say, this didn't prejudice your later involvement in intelligence?

It may have,

39:00 but I don't think it did.

It might have been a bonus in fact, in some intelligence services.

Well, it's possible.

Tape 2

00:21 **Sir John, what year did you graduate from university?**

Well I graduated in 1936, but did not have my degree

00:30 confirmed till 1946.

Why is that?

Well, the reason was that I happened to be employed interstate 1937, ’38 and ’39 and then of course, six years of war. But I could have still had it confirmed in absentia at the time, but I wanted the real thing

01:00 so had to wait until 1946.

Had you travelled at all during your undergraduate years?

Travelled with undergraduate years? Oh, only with university sporting teams.

You didn’t go to Europe during that time?

No, no, couldn’t possible afford it.

01:30 **Were you aware of the political situation in Europe that was developing?**

Yes, yes we were. In ’38, ’39 particularly.

And what were the sources of your information?

The daily press and common discussion with, in fact, any group of people you met, it was common to talk about the prospects of war. We just didn’t want

02:00 war. We felt that, I know as far as I was personally concerned, I was aware of victims of gas attacking in World War I and the horror of that, the prospect of that was just, it was enormous. I think it would be fair to say that there was a common feeling that that was the greatest

02:30 fear that we had, when we went to war, was gas. If a bullet went right through you, you didn’t want it to happen, but - or being incapacitated in some other way, there was a greater fear of that than death.

Was this because you knew people who had been exposed to mustard gas?

Yes, yes it was. And

03:00 wrecked lives so early, they were just existing, some of those people, and were never able to fulfil their potential, their dreams that they had.

Did your view of the use of chemical weapons, particularly gas, change at all when the Second World War had began?

No,

03:30 it was, the use, the thought of them was absolutely abhorrent to me. But we did have, strangely enough, we did have one mustard gas victim, the only one I’ve ever heard of, one of my OCs [Officer Commanding] in the Middle East. We had captured some Italian vehicles and he was riding in this Italian vehicle, sitting on the seat

04:00 where there had been a gas container and it had leaked, and he sat on this and became the only gas victim that I knew of in World War II. And he suffered greatly for a while but

After you graduated, where did you work?

04:30 Well again, jobs were still pretty jolly scarce, there was still a depression in ’36. So I went to the Commonwealth Oil Refineries. And I was fortunate enough to get a position there, I had, it was probably though cricket that I got the position. I had been,

05:00 in my final year of civil engineering, I’d got through all the subjects except the hydraulic engineering part two, which I had only received nine marks out of a hundred, and the reason for that was it was based on a project called “The Yarrawonga Weir”. And the occasion, there was an expedition to the weir and anyone, that

05:30 particular couple of days I happened to be play cricket. And I thought, they won’t ask a question about that anyway. The first part of that Hydraulic Engineering Part Two carried only ten marks, which I could answer quite well. And the rest, the other ninety were devoted to Yarrawonga Weir about which I knew nothing,

06:00 absolutely nothing. So I went along to see the dean and see if I could get a facility pass. And he said, “No way can I give you a facility pass for [ninety] percent for the second paper, first paper did all right, you’ll have to do a sub, you shouldn’t have any trouble with that.” And so he said, “Look, in the meantime Commonwealth Oil Refinery are looking for an engineer to do work

06:30 on the Glen Davis, student engineer, for Glen Davis oil development, to show oil deposits. So, if you like,

I'll ring the chief engineer straight away." Which he did, so I had an interview with the chief engineer, a very good bloke, and he said he'd call me in, this was before Christmas, he'd call me in

07:00 early January and nothing happened and I was getting a bit worried because there weren't too many other jobs around. Then I had a call and he said, "Look Holland, that job at Glen Davis, they're not going ahead with the project, it's been deferred." So my hope sank through the floor, that's the end of that. But he said, "Look, I wonder if you'd be interested in a permanent job with Commonwealth Oil Refineries?"

07:30 And I couldn't say yes quickly enough. Because I also had a friend who was working there and he was very happy there, and so I was offered a job, permanent job at the Commonwealth Oil Refineries, which I was very grateful.

What was the transition like from engineering in the class room to engineering in the real world?

They

08:00 were poles apart. In the real world one was dealing with real things that had commercial significance. And of course, they had functional significance. And so, but I had, I think I had a natural feeling for behaviour

08:30 of materials, shapes, sizes, textures and the machines. And so I think I adapted fairly comfortably. And was given an interesting project to do, to build a pipe line from Laverton to Spotswood, designed it and

09:00 built it. And like most graduates coming out at that time, the old dyed in the wool general foreman didn't think too much of us, but the foreman called Hanky. We really later, became quite good friends, but one felt you were always under test about practical issues. One such example, we reached the stage of the pipe line,

09:30 it was to cross the street near the Newport Railway gates. And it was, I went down to, they'd just done an excavation of a trench and I went down on a Saturday morning to see the progress of the work and I had gone to a lot of trouble preparing a detailed plan showing where the precise location of all the services,

10:00 you know, a dimension plan. And I'd issued that to the general foreman, Hanky. And I got down there on the Saturday morning and he said, "Mr. Holland" - there was no Jack or Bill in those days, you know, we were professional people, we were mister – "Mr. Holland", he said, "What are we going to with this?" He said, "There's something here that looks like a cable of some description." And

10:30 I said, "Look foreman Hanky, I've given you a drawing showing exactly where all the services are, you know, sewerage, water and telephone." And I said, "It must be dead, so cut it off and get on with the job." So he cut it off and we'd chopped off all the telephone subscribers in Williamstown. And he never let me forget that. But anyway, we later became quite good friends. But no,

11:00 we, it was very good experience for young people, a young person.

How much were you required to have, knowledge of very practical skills?

Well we had, doing a university course, we had exposure to some of the real practical issues, the tradesmen

11:30 were qualified and experienced. I worked for one, one of those periods during Christmas '37, sorry, Christmas '34 with Victorian Railways Newport workshops. And I learnt a lot there, just getting practical experience, learning how to use drilling machines and planing machines and shaping machines

12:00 and slotting machines and lathes and I found that was of very great value later on when we were deciding something, to know what you decide was capable of being built. So that was really great experience. Another year with what was then, County Roads (UNCLEAR) and they had me for the first two or three weeks using what was called a mini mitter. It's a device

12:30 for planning, balancing cut and fill, doing road construction. That was just simply repetitive stuff and I wasn't very happy about that. And anyway, a former Queens College engineer, a bridge engineer, I said, "Look Mr. O'Donnell, isn't there any chance of getting out on some bridges? I want to see something practical. I've managed that blasted mini mitter, I can do that in my dreams."

13:00 So he said, "All right, I think that's a fair question." So then I had a series of work on a series of bridges and developed a great love, I've always had it as a small boy, as you know, as I mentioned earlier. So I was actually working on bridges for, and that again was very valuable experience to see pile drivers in action, to see concrete casting in action,

13:30 to see the use of cranes in action. And so it was a great, wonderful feeling.

As the thirties progress and the situation in Europe became worse, did you consider which service you would enlist in if it became necessary?

Oh, it became very obvious and didn't require much consideration at all. Engineers was the

14:00 right role for me because during that period I had, in 1939 as a kind of cadet engineers in the services, been aware of the role and a lot of it, was of course, civil engineering. Bridges, ports, mine fields, war supply, those kind of operations which

14:30 were just part of the life of a civil engineer.

Do you remember the day that war was declared?

Very well. I was in Brighton, living in Brighton at a guesthouse and about eight o'clock at night we heard Chamberlain's speech. And so it was a

15:00 moment of great sadness to think that there would be a war and there would be casualties, there would be people who never had the opportunity to fulfil their true ambitions. So it was a great sadness that war was necessary.

15:30 **Did you discuss, at all, with your family your discission to enlist?**

Only my brothers. Mother, of course, was very disappointed, having two sons who served in World War [I], both wounded and serious casualties in the First World War. She was reluctant to give us her permission, but

16:00 she accepted it was an obligation that we had. And so, it just happened, we automatically felt a sense of responsibility to the nation and joined up.

That was almost immediately after war was declared?

Mine was October, October '39.

16:30 **How did you go about that process of enlisting?**

I went down to the drill hall at the corner of Punt Road and Commercial Road, which was the headquarters of the CMF [Citizens Military Force] 2/14th Battalion. And just went in and signed up.

Were you given any

17:00 **opportunity at that time to say where you wanted to serve or what sort of role you wanted to play?**

Not immediately, but soon after that the engineering chief, later to become Sir Major General Clive Steel, decided that there would be a shortage of engineering officers

17:30 and that he would establish the first School of Military Engineering. To which he invited twelve people, mainly graduate engineers from various parts of Australia. That school was established, first of all, in December, '39, so I was a member of it. There were twelve of us,

18:00 today there are three of us. One who has serious polymyalgia, the other, he was a POW [Prisoner of War] captured in Crete, and the other one (UNCLEAR) had a stroke, he was captured in

18:30 Singapore and served on the Burma Railway, so did the other one.

And where was the school established?

First of all at a place called George's Heights, in Sydney where there was a regular army establishment. And it was under the commandant by the name of Major McGillicuddy. A great tactician,

19:00 a Duntroon trained soldier who, I think never fulfilled his proper potential because of some extraneous aspects which kind of ended his life. But we all benefited greatly from that school. It then later moved

19:30 down to Liverpool, which is south of Sydney, where we graduated and were then commissioned as second lieutenants.

So was that your, your basic military training was received at that military engineering school?

At doing that, yes it was. Then we had training, after we graduated, we did training

20:00 then with troops at an army base at a place called Greta, up in the Hunter Valley.

What rank were you at that stage?

Well, when we went into the course we were called a special rank of staff sergeant, but we were commissioned, so at that stage, afterwards we were second lieutenants.

So as a second lieutenant, could you expect

20:30 **to be in charge of a very large group of men at that time?**

Well, we were still in Australia then, but we expected to be a section officer, which commanded 65 men.

And how did it compare, when you took that role up, with managing

21:00 **foremen and Hanky and those other people that you'd been working with at the Commonwealth Oil Refinery?**

Well, that of course was very helpful and still responsible for the managing I had because I was responsible for quite a major project at the age of 24. The Commonwealth Oil Refinery gave me very good experience in man management, and enduring construction.

21:30 So I'd had quite a bit of experience, even though, and that was rather fortuitous that the Commonwealth Oil Refineries decided to build a terminal in Hobart. And the project manager appointed was a Mr. Jock Webb who was about two or three years senior to me

22:00 at university. And then he decided to get married and went off to Japan and had an extended honeymoon. And so I was put in as acting project manager and nearly lost my job quite early in the piece. I had instructions to report to the Hadleys Hotel. It was a very nice old

22:30 hotel in Hobart. And these were my instructions from my chief engineer – (a) engage labour force to remove all rubbish from the site, and that was instruction (a). Instruction (b) investigate and advise on foundations required for all major structures. So

23:00 I did as I was bid. And the first people we employed were from, on the recommendation of one of his, Baldwin's engineers, friends from First World War. So got these people together and started removing the rubbish and found that the rubbish just went down and down and down, and we found that, we went along to the local

23:30 council and found that we were building on what had previously been a rubbish dump for the city of Hobart. Then I went to the mines department and found that there was a layer of basalt about 35 feet below the surface. And so I put my first report in to the engineering chief, with reference to instruction (a) if we remove all rubbish from the site,

24:00 we well end up with five acres of water, average depth, 35 feet. So instruction (b) essential that all major structures be supported on end bearing piles founded on the basalt 35 feet down. A couple of days later I was called to Melbourne. He said, "Holland, I have great difficulty holding your job." I said, "But why sir?" He said, "Well, it's that report you wrote." I said, "But

24:30 sir, those are the facts, that's true." He said, "Well, they might be the facts, but you weren't very tactful, weren't you aware that Mr. Robin Pugh, our general manager's been working for five years to acquire that site and to be told he'd bought a rubbish dump didn't please him at all. And I'll show you what he thinks of you." He opened up, I can see it now in bold red writing – "Impertinent young pup, what does he know

25:00 about this?" So Baldwin later said, "Look I accept what you've done is correct, we'll just go ahead and we'll plan accordingly." Which he did. And then Jock Webb, the project manager, he decided to take a further period of his honeymoon, so they gave me this responsibility at 24.

25:30 And it was a wonderful experience to be responsible for that entire terminal, including working with a tanker berth, for tankers to come in. All these bulk oil tanks and pipe lines and pumps and distribution buildings and so I had that quite early, that was before the war.

How long did it take to build that?

Only a year,

26:00 which was really wonderful going at that time. And I also learnt a lot about leadership with that experience. Because the project was going so well that it was due for completion at Christmas and by November, it was going so well that I thought I wouldn't work quite so hard and I eased

26:30 up a bit and spent some time playing some golf and cricket. And then I found that as soon as I eased up, the entire project eased up, so I had to revert to proper, down on site at half past seven in the morning and then there, all day till five o'clock at night. So it was jolly good experience from man management point of view. If you lead,

27:00 you've got to lead from the front, you've got to be seen.

Tell me something about your basic military training as distinct from the military engineering training.

Well, the basic military training would have been, of course, weapons, route marches,

27:30 rifle drill, lectures on tactics. And I can remember, that same Major McGillicutty, that first lecture of tactics, I remember how he summed it up on one occasion. He said, "If Gentlemen, you've made a military appreciation and have decided that the enemy has only

28:00 three possible avenues for attack, you may rest assured he will always find a fourth." How true that was, Singapore of course, being a prime example.

How did you take to the training drills and route marches and so on?

Well, I enjoyed it. It was clean physical fitness, we were fit, these were interesting things to do.

28:30 We did some assault river crossing, we also practice them, then we'd go on military manoeuvres. So I took that well and enjoyed it.

And what about the military applications of your engineering experience, what sorts of differences were there?

Well military application, of course, well the big difference I suppose would be

29:00 our role in preparing defensive systems for the use of demolitions for demolition of structures and ammunition dumps and railway lines. The laying of mine fields which - the delousing

29:30 of mines, the enemy mines, the delousing of booby traps, those are some of them.

Were there any accidents during the time that you were training?

There were minor accidents but nothing serious. Demolitions were always dangerous but the discipline

30:00 required for control was of a very high order. And we didn't have anything, anything of a serious nature. I think there might have been a broken leg on one occasion, but that was just damn bad luck. Someone just fell from a height, they were doing a bridge structure. But

30:30 nothing significant, no, it was well controlled.

Once you'd finished your training where was your first posting?

First posting then was to go to the Middle East. I was associated with what was called then, the Delta Defensive Scheme. The Italians had come right through from the northern part of Africa, Libya, and were heading for

31:00 Cairo and with the object of then going through the Balkans. Anyway, so my first appointment, strangely enough, was as a liaison officer between British troop headquarters, which were in Cairo, and 6th Division Headquarters in the Delta,

31:30 that is west of Alexandria. And I used to spend about three days in Cairo and four days in the 6th Div [Division] Engineer Headquarters. So I was building these defences. Then, well Val who was then GOC [General Officer Commanding]

32:00 in that part of the world decided that it was time to attack and with the seven armour division and started moving along the north part of Africa, through Egypt to Libya. And had to push the Italians back to [Sidi Barrani].

32:30 Then 6th Division, we were them moved up the desert to join the 7th Armoured Division for the attack on Bardia. And our role up there, well role, first of all, water was in a very short supply and we were down to one quart per man per day for everything.

33:00 And one of my first jobs up there was to having been in oil companies was to build a pipeline. It was the most Heath Robinson [crazily built] pipeline ever built by anyone anywhere in the world, I would claim. Because I had to build it from any kind of material I could scrounge from anywhere. And the idea was to barge water in from Alexandria to a place called Sollum then build

33:30 a pipeline up the escarpment up to the front line. And the pipeline consisted of fibre light, cast iron steel concrete. A most strange looking, strangest pipeline ever. And joints were quite of made, not having proper joining material, just blobs of concrete over the particular,

34:00 it might have been a change of diameter from twelve inch to six inch. Anyway, we built it and got water through it. And the Italians used to shell it every day and sometimes they'd hit it and we'd have to go out and repair it again. It was there that I had my first fatality. And that was, it was interesting.

34:30 A young man of about 24, the same age as me, oh no, I was a bit more then, I was 26. Anyway, he, I didn't have any hard feelings against those Italian gunners, they were just doing the job they were directed to do, but it firmed my resolve, in the future to do anything I could

35:00 do, do get this jolly war over, I would do to the best of my ability. Just firmed my resolve somehow. Anyway, we got the water through.

No cable to cut either?

Not there. And then our next job was to go on patrols and to

35:30 investigate enemy defences. And we called in at night in their anti-tank ditches and measured them up, took some soil samples back. We checked their mine fields and the extent of their barbed wire entanglements.

36:00 Then we went back to base and developed a replica of their defensive system, and then devised systems of destroying them. Put all that into action on the big day and it all worked

36:30 exceptionally well.

Can I just take you back a moment to that first fatality? Were you actually there when he died?

Yes.

Were you under fire at that time yourself?

Oh, just the occasional shells were dropping round about.

So was he picked of by a?

By a shell, just a random shell,

37:00 just bad luck.

You said you didn't experience any ill feeling towards the Italians.

No.

Did you have any other reactions at that time?

No, I don't think the Australians are good haters. We didn't hate, we had to respect those people just doing their job they were meant to be doing. As a matter of fact, there's a sequel to all that, the

37:30 one time, oh, a few years ago now, but one competitor organisation in the construction industry, at firm called Transfield, I had occasion to see the managing director, an Italian, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, a delightful man. And we had

38:00 some business to do, he's a great philanthropist and very fond of art, and he had a great gallery for both photographic arts and sculptors. Anyhow, he has in the middle of it a little office suite where he conducts business with people whom he likes. Anyway, we finished our business and he said, "John, you must have some wine." Well, I didn't really want wine in the middle of the

38:30 afternoon but out of courtesy I did. He had an interest in a vineyard, he had an interest all over the place. I said, "Franco" - we were having our wine - I said, "How was it you came to Australia?" He said, "Well, John", he said, "It was like this", he said, "I had studied civil engineering at the University of Rome and then I decided I'd like a military career and I went through the military academy and I became

39:00 an engineer officer in the Italian army." I said, "Well, you might have served under (UNCLEAR)." He said, "I did." I said, "You might have even been in Libya." He said, "I was in Libya." I said, "You might have even been in Bardia." He said, "I was in Bardia." I said, "Franco, what was your job in Bardia and where was it?" He said, "Oh, I was laying the mine fields and building

39:30 the anti-tank ditches and the barbed wire and the pill boxes." and, he said, "Up near Fort Capuzzo." I said, "Oh, Franco that's very interesting as it was my job to blow them up." He said, "Good God." And we shook hands. "You will come to dinner, we will fight the war all over again." he said, "I have my old maps." And we did. Fascinating experience, but I thought, you know, the utter futility of war. Here's a thoroughly decent bloke

40:00 and at one time we were trying to kill each other.

Tape 3

00:21 **I was intrigued when you were talking about the reasons why you became an engineer. I was just wondering whether or not Sir John Monash had been**

00:30 **any sort of role model?**

No, he hadn't really been, not a role model, but I was of course aware of his distinguished career, because I don't think he died until 1934 [actually October 1931], I don't think. But I wouldn't regard him as a role model but then again I was very proud to know an engineer had achieved such distinction,

01:00 very proud indeed. And I've been critical of the engineer curriculum, there's not enough emphasis given, in my book, never has been given to some of the great achievers of the past. It brings more life to

the profession. But they say to do all the things you want for the course

01:30 would add another year to it. I say, so be it, we'll have better engineers, better rounded people. But Monash, of course, was the great. And you've probably heard of the Monash Awards, have you? They're just coming into being which are meant to be the Australian version of the Rhodes scholarship.

Thank you.

02:00 **I also wanted to take you back just a little bit before Egypt to talk about the voyage over the Indian Ocean. Can you lead us through from the moment that you hear that you're going to be sent over seas?**

Yes. Indeed, we had a wonderful farewell on the Aquitania from Sydney.

02:30 She was still in first class passenger carrying capabilities. And I was shown a cabin, I had the privilege of meeting with one, who later became Sir John Overall, the first Chairman of the Australian National Development Commission and who also became the first CO [Commanding Officer] of the Australian parachute regiment.

03:00 And so we had great comfort on the Aquitania, and life was rather good. We arrived at Bombay, this was my first time outside Australia, I might add, and the plan there was to change into a small ship, the Orcades. They didn't want to risk the Aquitania as we approach more war like waters.

03:30 So we changed ship at Bombay.

Did you get to see much at Bombay?

Well, see, a little bit. And look, it was quite an experience. We were being hosted by a young British officer and his wife, taken out to dinner at the famous Taj Mahal Hotel. And I thought, this is not a bad war. But

04:00 on the way I was absolutely appalled with the poverty and the stench and the dirt in Bombay, this was a great shock coming from pristine Melbourne or Sydney to this environment. And there was a woman carrying a dead baby in her arms seeking support, financial support.

04:30 And it was nauseating almost to me. And our host turned around in his car and said, "You know, I know exactly how you're feeling right now", we felt the same way, but it's just part of the scene, everyone has to rationalise the situation and if one can't accept living under these conditions, the best thing you can do is go home. He'd been a regular, you see, serving in Bombay,

05:00 regular army. And the rationalisation is really simple that life is a jolly sight better for the average person in this part of the world because of our presence than if we weren't here. So we are making a positive, Britain is making a great positive contribution to the colonisation of India. So that was a shock. But then we sailed up

05:30 the, we had a trouble free run across from Bombay, a trouble free run up to the Red Sea where we disembarked at Port Suez. There was only just one air-raid warning, the system was innocuous as far as we were concerned, nothing really happened, didn't see anything fall out of the sky. So we arrived there without any

06:00 trouble at all.

How did you entertain yourselves? Was there a lot of drill or was there more amusement?

Well there was, yes, PT, regular PT [physical training]. We did a lot of theoretical training. There was a series of lectures on tactics and a lot of the work we had gone through during training days, we were then training with the troops.

06:30 But it was a great experience. And I'll never forget, practically after every lunchtime the officers had their, and I suppose there were a couple of hundred officers on board, and we occupied the main saloon. There were two sittings for lunch

07:00 and every day after lunch there was a young man, I've forgotten his name now, and he'd move in to the, this bridge saloon. There would be absolute silence would descend, but prior to his arrival there'd be a great hubbub and noise and talk and chatter. He'd move over to the piano

07:30 and sat down and would play music that was mood music. It was music appropriate for a young man going off to the war, about which they knew nothing. And somehow, such sensitivity and selected such music that it was a wonderful experience. I was very envious of a young man who could do that,

08:00 day after day and a change of all this clubber and noise and chatter to absolute silence as soon as he walked into the room.

Was there much talk about what you might expect? Especially, I'm thinking of, did people think about stories they knew from the Great War, is that what you were thinking you might have to

08:30 **expect?**

Yes we were, we thought about that. Didn't talk about it that much because we were all close enough to World War I to know the horrible experiences they had in places like Pozieres, Armentieres, Villers Bretonneux and Gallipoli. You just hoped that

09:00 it would be different. We didn't know, there was a great blankness in front of us. It was like travelling into, taking a trip into the unknown.

When you landed at Suez, you were sent north to Gaza, is that right?

Yes, we were. I'm trying

09:30 to, as a matter of fact we met at [El Kantara] by some representatives from 6th Division. And that was interesting too. We were first out of the train and had our first experience with a gulli-gulli man, the Egyptian slight of hand people. And they were absolutely brilliant, I had great admiration for them, still have, they were very, very skilled

10:00 with the old thimble and the pea trick and those kind of things. And then the post cards sellers, I can remember, this officer who met us had been there for some, he went over with the advance party and knew the ways of the Egyptians by then. And they all sold little trinkets and merchandise and filthy pictures. And on one occasion

10:30 as we arrived one of these gentlemen with a whole basket full of pornographic pictures, he came up, and they always promoted you one rank up so, "Monsieur, captain, you like to buy the filthy picture?" And here we were, we were just young fresh faced and didn't know what a filthy picture was even. And I remember this rather mature officer, a captain, who was

11:00 rather impressed when I turned around to the gentleman selling the postcards and says "Take them away George, they're not filthy enough." So he thought there's maturity from these kids, and we were kids really. And then up to Gaza, yes.

Did you get a chance to

11:30 **look at the Suez Canal?**

Yes, we did. We sailed up and saw a lot of it later too. In the later stages of the war I was posted to, we came back from Greece and re-equipped and I was posted to a School of Military Engineering right on the Suez Canal.

It must have been fascinating for you professionally?

Oh it was, absolutely, a wonderful achievement at that time. And we

12:00 used to fish in the Suez Canal with explosives, which is probably not quite the thing to do, but it was done. And there was a wreck, a ship, I've forgotten the name of the ship, it had been bombed and sunk. And that same officer I was talking about a while ago used to command this operation and he'd be on the bridge with binoculars and

12:30 we would drop these explosive charges and up would come these fish. And he would say, you know, "Fifty yards over to the north" or, and so we had fresh fish there day after day.

From Gaza, well, how long did you spend in camp at Gaza?

Oh, I suppose

13:00 we were there about a couple of months and then went down to Delta Defensive Scheme.

Did you know much about what was happening in the war?

There used to be an army news paper. Yes, generally we did, we knew, we were pretty well informed as to what was going on. And particularly after the events in Europe when the,

13:30 after the Dunkirk period and the withdrawal there. The whole thing took on a different, I suppose, a depth of seriousness, we felt that now the phoney war is over, the real war is now with us.

14:00 **Tell us about the Delta Defensive Scheme?**

Well, as I mentioned earlier, the Italians had ambitions of taking and conquering both Egypt and taking over Cairo and then moving north again through

14:30 the Balkans. Sorry what was your question?

The Delta Defensive Scheme.

Oh, the scheme itself. Yes, well we were just laying mine fields, preparing bridges for demolition and we had a plan for, we had plans also for

15:00 blowing up the water distribution system and the various ammunition dumps.

Describe to me how you lay a mine field and how you keep your records?

Well, the mine fields

15:30 we were laying at that time, it was a geometrical pattern, we had military maps and you would just mark on that map a strip and so the mine fields could develop into, you could be at depth of, I suppose I'm guessing now, a hundred feet of mines. And steps right along the

16:00 perimeter of the defensive scheme, barb wire entanglements, of course and anti-tank ditches, ditches that are meant to stop the, to impede the progress of tanks.

How important is it when you're laying mines to be able to dismantle them yourself should you need to?

16:30 **Or is that just, you didn't have time to worry about that?**

Didn't have time to worry about that. Any mines we laid ourselves, we never had time to do anything about that. But enemy mines, on the other hand, we had quite a lot of experience in disarming them, a nasty job.

How much time did you have to establish the defensive fortifications?

Well,

17:00 suppose it wasn't really until the Italians made that major push through from, you know, came through from Libya to Sidi Barrani, Sollum, Mersa Matruh, and they were not that far away at times so it was a fairly, it was a rushed operation.

And were you working with the British Army at this stage?

Yes. Well

17:30 I had, my job, person job, was liaison officer between 6th Division engineer and British troops' engineers at their headquarters in the St. Barnabas Hotel in Cairo.

It's fashionable these days to play up the differences between Australian soldiers and British soldiers, often for humorous effect, but

18:00 **supposedly the Australians have a different attitude to authority and discipline. Did you find any differences apparent at the time?**

In my opinion, that's over played. Our good divisions were well disciplined people and they behaved well. They were, I suppose we might have had more initiative than perhaps our British counterparts. But

18:30 when 6th Division went into action, they were a very well disciplined group. We didn't have any disciplinary problems at all. Oh, the odd soldier would get drunk or be caught, found in brothels or, you know they'd be behaving like human beings. But generally speaking, those with whom I was associated, I thought their standard of discipline was

19:00 of a very high order.

And how did the British treat you?

Well, in the desert, very well. When we first went up the desert we had quite a lot associated with the 7th Armoured Division quite a lot. And we found that when we first saw them, chaps were wearing suede desert boots.

19:30 Well suede desert boots, you wouldn't be seen dead in, in Melbourne or Sydney before the war. It had connotations which are not very attractive for a man. But we found that these troops were wearing them for a very good reason. So they were very good on patrol, they were silent and you could move at night. And what's more they became very comfortable.

20:00 And we thought then, 7th Armoured Division, their record in the field was just so great that we had great respect for them. And so we started wearing suede shoes, I've been wearing them ever since.

With no thought of what impression you might be giving?

No. When we came back from the Middle East there were suede shoes all around the place.

20:30 But the relationship with, in those days was absolutely first class. It was a matter of pride, you know, to be serving with them. And some of the artillery regiments and some of their engineering squadrons we saw quite a lot of, they were really first class people.

21:00 **The allies soon decided to move up against the Italians and that's when you're moving up to Bardia. Can you tell me about your role in the siege of Bardia? What were the specific?**

Well my first duty was building a pipeline to provide water. That was actually

21:30 fundamental because as I say they were down to one quart per man per day, and so water was absolutely critical. Then our role then was to breach enemy defences, so that our tanks and infantry could get through into the heart of Bardia. So it involved us in

22:00 going out on patrols at night, going into the enemy defences. Measuring up the anti-tank ditches and analysing the type of mine that we happened to come across and devising how to delouse those mines. Then the location of enemy,

22:30 identifying the location of enemy pill boxes for, you know machine gun attack, and then breaching the barb wire. So on the day just preceding the launch of the attack our role really can be summarised as saying, creating gaps in the enemy defences, so that the infantry and armament could get through.

23:00 So we went out and picked up the mines, deloused the mines, put markers down either side of tracks for the infantry and tanks to take, got into the tank ditches and blew up the tank ditches with methods that we had, that I described, perhaps earlier in this interview. Then

23:30 we did that, and we did a trial with the 7th Armoured Division prior to the attack. We tried out our system of drilling in holes into the side and using explosives.

So you built replicas?

Replicas of the enemy's entire defensive scheme, yes.

How long did that take?

Oh, just a few days. You

24:00 only needed short sections of it. And then the traditional, blowing the wire gaps, the traditional, what's called the Bangalore torpedo, which is a tube of explosives which you press through, push through under the wire, explode it and it creates gaps in the wire. In the actual event everything worked

24:30 very well but we were so naïve that at that time, I'd never seen tracer bullets, I'd never seen a tracer bullet fired before. And anyway, we were working on this, blowing up the tank ditch, preparation for it and there were streams of white things just whizzing buy and then I realised that

25:00 it was, it was tracer ammunition. I'd heard about it but never seen it. They were rotten shots anyway. So I got my troops (UNCLEAR), in the trench "Chaps get down, keep undercover you can complete your task here without any worry at all". And they did.

The first time you were fired upon, can you recall what that sensation was like?

25:30 Well, the first time would be the shelling with the battalion we were building the pipeline, that was the first time. Well, they were dropping all round the place but most of them were missing by a mile. We only had that one fatality, they weren't very accurate. So you felt,

26:00 you know, if there's an attack on you get down and find some shelter, which you could in a depression or, it wasn't really all that disturbing as long as one didn't land right on you. And I suppose, what was interesting, I suppose when first of all, when the attack first started our artillery didn't have the right range

26:30 and they were dropping, some of them would drop short, as they call them. Going the same way as we were and dropping, that wasn't such a worry, I think it was the early ones coming from the other side, coming the other way.

As a lieutenant it was your responsibility to lead the section in these night patrols, I imagine?

Yes.

27:00 But we didn't have, well the patrols that I went on were, as a matter of fact, it was not very wise. We had, the first one was just three officers and two sergeants, and that was not a good thing to do. We were too vulnerable. And we could have achieved the same result with

27:30 two, we could have achieved the same result. Or perhaps three. You're just exposing, unnecessarily exposing, but I think our OC felt at the time, you know, that he wanted to be sure of this and we might have to fight our way in, which we didn't. We got in quite comfortably.

28:00 **Were you confident that your anti-defence works were going to be successful?**

Absolutely. No doubt about that at all. We rehearsed it and rehearsed it and knew it would work.

You've talked a lot about delousing mines and what a difficult job that is, can you

28:30 **lead us through how that's done?**

Well, the Italian mines were the ones we first came across, were really quite relatively simple. You could, you felt your way and they were not even properly covered at times. They were laid in a hurry. And you could detect the by

29:00 changes in the contour on the ground. And so in the delousing operation you just place a wire through a slot and that would deactivate the mine. It was said though, I think it was somewhat apocryphal, that on one occasion the Italians were,

29:30 we were picking up mines shortly after the Italians had laid them, they were just a little bit in front of us. I can't vouch for the accuracy of that but that was the apocryphal story.

Were there any accidents?

Yes. Sadly there were. Well not, we lost two officers

30:00 doing that attack. They actually trod on, going through some wire entanglements and they actually trod on a couple of mines. The OC of the 2nd Field Company and the 2IC [Second in Command] were both killed. And that was a very sad loss.

30:30 But there were others but overall I think the discipline was good and the training was good and, you know we managed to get away with it.

What was your impression of the Italian army at this stage?

Well, the Italian army, a lot of them didn't want to fight

31:00 and we were - after the first attack, the first day, potentially we had to build. Our role was virtually over when we got the infantry attacks through the city. But we had prepared POW [Prisoner of War] pens in barb wire. And

31:30 the first morning after we had some thousand Italians in one of these pens. And we were camped right along, just on the other side of the fence and our cook was preparing breakfast when all of a sudden there was a stirring in amongst the prisoners and an Italian came

32:00 rushing over to the fence and he said to our cook, "Mr. Simpson, Mr. Simpson get me out of this place please, I do not like this war, you remember me, Antonio Ferassio, I was a preacher in Townsville." I'm not quite sure

32:30 of that name now, but the incident certainly took place.

He recognised the cook?

He recognised, yes, he said, "You remember me?" And so, anyway, he said, "I was on holiday in Italy and they conscripted me into the army, but get me out please, quick." Poor old bloke.

33:00 So I think a lot of them didn't want to fight and yet I believe their alpine regiments were absolutely first class soldiers.

After the success of Bardia, you moved further west along the Mediterranean coast?

We went along then from similar operations at

33:30 Tobruk the first time, Tobruk, Derna and then up to Benghazi, we stopped short of Benghazi at a place called Barce. But they were some of the kind of operations and if anything, easier than Bardia.

Did you get a chance to spend time in any of those towns?

Very little.

34:00 But we were on the fringe of some quite good, you know, around Derna some Italian, some of Mussolini's developments. And they were really quite impressive. But at that time, I suppose, we played a lot of sport, any kind of game at all. There was

34:30 cricket and football and even soccer, we tried at the time. Played a, we thought we were becoming reasonably competent until we played a Wellington bomber squadron, and they killed us, and so we weren't nearly as competent as we thought we might have been.

What were your impressions of war at this stage?

Well, the impressions were, that if you have to have a war

35:00 the desert is a good place in which to have it. You see, we were doing very little damage to private property. There was very little, oh, there was some damage in places like Tobruk and the port was bombed and damaged to some extent, but you felt, we're not damaging - civilians really didn't come into it.

35:30 The only time they did, well we would meet in the strangest places in the desert and turned up with

eggs, which were always very welcome. So it was, you'd say, "Ekkas, ekkas." And eggs would be produced. They would just appear out of the sand dunes sometimes when we were miles out from anywhere. But so, our impression was that

36:00 our losses at that time were reasonable, not unexpected. So, I can remember having a discussion about that with the chaps. Although we were dusty and dirty and there's not much water to drink, if we have to have a war, this is the kind of place to have it.

36:30 And I still think that way.

You're talking about it being dusty and dirty, what was the typical encampment like, and how long did you spend in any one place?

Well, we were moved, those few months in the desert, we were moving, I think at Barce

37:00 was the longest stay we had anywhere, we might have been there for three or four weeks, at which, as I say, we played a lot of sport. Interrupted by one long reconnaissance journey into a place called Mechili to determine whether there was a short route for the 7th

37:30 Armoured Division to take through to Benghazi, and there was. So that was interesting, going straight out a couple of hundred miles into the, just straight into the desert. But it was, there was a

38:00 period of waiting, what's going to happen next? There was this great apprehension. Rommel had just arrived, but we were never engaged with Rommel. The 9th Division took over from us, but we didn't get any further than Benghazi. Then we were called back to, we met the

38:30 9th Division at (UNCLEAR), as they were going up we were going back in preparation for going to Greece. And we had a great party, they had some beer to drink, the 9th Division, and we were very glad to see them.

Very glad to see their beer?

Yes, indeed. And we struck, there was an occasion where one of those very great

39:00 dust storms, of which there were several of course, and you couldn't see more than five or six feet in front. And anyhow, one of my friends who was also in that first School of Military Engineering, he was with the 6th Division but we had a great (UNCLEAR) party with this beer, and he was quite a mathematician. And we both, there was nothing to write on,

39:30 so we were both solving differential equations in the dust on the floor of the tent. Anyway, by three o'clock in the morning the beer had run out and we'd solved our differential equations then it came time to go back to our respective lines. We got outside, you just couldn't see at all and it was dark and this dust storm, he wanted to go in one direction,

40:00 I wanted to go in another. So in the end we stood back to back and he marched off, ultimately he must have got home, and I marched off, I got home to where I wanted to go. We didn't see each other again until after the war. He was captured in Crete.

Tape 4

00:28 **One aspect of this campaign which I'm wondering if you could comment on, is the fact that the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] got to Benghazi in great haste, I mean, the success, your success had been remarkable, and as I understand it, a lot of people felt that they could easily go on to Tripoli,**

01:00 **but that didn't happen. Can you tell us about those decisions and how you felt about them at the time and perhaps later when maybe in hindsight you knew more things?**

Well, we could have gone onto Tripoli, I believe, if Rommel hadn't been there. By that time Rommel had arrived, and see, 9th Division took over from us

01:30 and they would have gone further if they could. See, Rommel could have absolutely outnumbered them and out gunned them, came with his armour, and of course, 9th Division were in almost immediate retreat to Tobruk. Where they did a magnificent job as the famous Rats. So it was a question of, we just didn't have the fire power to,

02:00 they did not have the fire to go on, nor did they have the fire power to stop him at that time, until he got to Tobruk.

I thought there was a chance that the 6th Division could have kept on going from Benghazi and got to Tripoli before Rommel landed there?

Look, it was possible I think, it would be a very quick move because did more pretty jolly quickly at that time.

02:30 But remember that our line of communications was getting longer, of course, the further west we went. And becoming much more different then, the whole campaign being much more vulnerable.

Did you get any respite after the

03:00 **North Africa campaign and before you were sent to Greece?**

We had about, I think, one glorious weekend at the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria. And I think we were moving again, well I certainly was, I suppose within about a

03:30 week, I think to Greece under the advance party, going over to Greece. By which time, of course, the Germans had still not declared war on Greece, at that time. But the Greeks were being threatened on the Albanian frontier from, by the Italians who were have a pretty bad time.

04:00 When the decision was made that, there had been much discussion of this decision, whether that was the right policy or whether it wasn't, I don't know. But we, at some time were regarded as being sacrificial lambs, but the rationale for the decision what that Russia was about to come into the war

04:30 and not quite ready. And a campaign in Greece was diverted and German armour, German fire power for a few weeks. They allegedly gave them, the Russians, another six weeks of preparation. So that was the rationale as it was explained to us.

05:00 Whether it was right or wrong, who knows? It was probably right. So we were, I was in the advance party into Greece and we were a party of six merchant ships and about, I don't know how many, perhaps half a dozen

05:30 destroyers in the escort. And we planned that we'd leave Alexandria about four o'clock in the afternoon which would give us, as we expected then, a free run till darkness came and then we'd have at least a night to travel without any intervention by the German

06:00 Stukas and Messerschmitts. But how wrong we were. Of course, the place, Alexandria, was full of 5th Columnists and of course, they probably seen a ship at anchor, the message would get to the German air force. And we were only about an hour out, I suppose, when the first raid occurred. And so we were bombed heavily that night.

06:30 But I must say that the OC ship was the CO of the 2/11th Battalion, a great tactician and a great soldier, and his name I can't remember. I never saw him again after that trip. But he organised us, the troops on

07:00 board, I suppose there might have been two hundred on board, and we all had, we had quite a few Bren guns and we had Bren guns all around the top deck. There was an Oerlikon gun on the stern and an Oerlikon gun on the bow and navy all round in the waters around about. And our CO

07:30 or OC, it was called the OC ship, he gave one demonstration of controlled fire power and we had every third bullet as a tracer, and so we had time and again your control fire until the Stuka comes

08:00 with his siren screaming, coming out of the sky and dive bombing. Till we saw this stream of fire just going out, it was really most impressive, and time and time again they would just veer off and wouldn't come through it. But enough did get through, we were, the nearest things to us was -

08:30 it lifted the stern, a bomb that did get through lifted the stern out of the water, the engines and propellers were buzzing, but the greatest concern of that was it spilt the evening meal. It was a kind of a soup or a stew being prepared on the deck and it went skinning down the deck and we had very little to eat that night. Anyway, we,

09:00 I think all the ships were hit or damaged. That night nothing went down. And then the next day they started again early in the morning, just wave after wave of bombers and strafing and there were - two ships were on fire and went down

09:30 and in spite of the navy putting up a really good, you know, a really great display, a great fight. And then the next morning we were just about to arrive at Piraeus, a port in Greece, and we were up on deck and all of a sudden, looking down, there were two lines of bubbles, went past out bow. And there was a young

10:00 naval officer there who said, "Don't worry chappies, they both missed." These were torpedoes having a go at us.

From a submarine?

Yeah. But I was talking to a naval commander about that not long ago, he said, "Well you know, if that was today they wouldn't have missed, they would have turned around and come back and would have got you." But then we

Can I just ask

10:30 **again about the defences on the ship, you were saying that it was the density of the fire that lifted the ship up? And the tracer bullets, are they there as much for the gunners to see where their bullets are as to let the plane see them as well?**

Yes, that is another purpose. But this thing was just a hail, you see, as soon as something

11:00 was in the air. It was a spectacular sight. And it worked. Well, we got through all right. Well, we had a few holes in us the next day, but we made it. And then, of course, a couple of torpedoes to just finish the story, to get us there. And I was there for about three weeks, I suppose, before the

11:30 main body of troops

In Athens?

Yes. Had a wonderful look around Athens, and happen to be up on the Acropolis on the night the Germans actually declared war on Greece. And they didn't drop anything anywhere near the city of Athens, but they blasted hell out of Piraeus, the port. So then we, after about three weeks waiting for

12:00 the main body of troops, I think one of the most emotional experiences of my life was as we moved out of Athens to go to the front, the road was strewn with people and they were just throwing flowers, heaps of flowers onto the trucks of the troops as we moved out up to the front.

12:30 And so we went straight up to, what was then, we went up through Larissa, Collum Park, Trikala up to, almost up to the Italian border, where we immediately met up with the German armour. They had about, I think they had about twenty divisions.

13:00 I've heard these figures are somewhat flexible, but they had, including three panzer divisions. We had one Australian division, one New Zealand division and a few British regiments. They had the air full of Messerschmitts and Stukas, we had six Hurricanes to defend us. Of course, they didn't last very long, sadly. But nothing,

13:30 we were just absolutely overwhelmed.

What about the Greek army, how many divisions were there?

Look, I don't know. That I don't know. I think they were good people but didn't have anything like the equipment or the fire power to meet what the Germans had to throw at us, and so we were really in, had to

14:00 withdraw, start withdrawal as soon as we got up there. And there was a standard [Brallos] Pass, famous scene battles of history centuries ago. And that was a good defensive position. So our role again, as engineers, was to do demolition,

14:30 blowing up bridges and ammunition dumps and railway lines. We didn't get time to lay many mine fields. Some of the other sections, companies might have. My company certainly didn't. But we were very active on demolitions. And one railway bridge

15:00 south of [Brallos], we'd been advised that the last train had come through, and so we headed, it was quite a big bridge, and we headed, my troops - the ammunition truck actually on the railway track. And we had people up

15:30 in the steel truss ready, up in the girders, they were placing charges and setting the wires and fortunately we hadn't got the detonators in. When all of a sudden someone said, "Hey, there's a train coming around the corner." And here was a great train coming, so I said, "Right chaps, get back the ammunition truck off if you can, if you've got time, and chaps, down on the ground."

16:00 And anyway, the chaps got down from their elevated position. And the train came through, didn't quite get the ammunition truck off, full of explosives, and she was just hit but she didn't blow up. But she was badly damaged, we later had to abandon it. But if it had been five minutes later

16:30 the bridge would have gone, the train would have gone full of refugees and they would have gone. So it was a pretty interesting one.

How do you know, I mean, is it from your engineering training that you know the points at which to place the explosives?

Yes. Yes, we did, that's right we knew that. And then

17:00 there's another one, a reinforced concrete bridge, fairly new one, and it was fairly narrow. And the troops, there were still forward troops and we had to get troops through this bridge and yet we had to have it prepared for demolition that night.

17:30 And it was reinforced concrete, heavily reinforced, and there were two, three possible methods of attack. One was to drill holes in the arched ribs but there was so much steel in it, we tried that but couldn't make any penetration at that time.

What are your drills powered by?

Air compressors.

18:00 And next charge would be what they call a pressure charge right across the middle of the bridge, but that would obstruct traffic, so we couldn't do that. But there happened to be a Greek ammunition dump, ammunition explosive dump, just around the corner, which we were going to blow up anyway, and the 2/11th Battalion, the same battalion that I talked about on

18:30 the troop ship. So the infantry were getting a bit jittery, wanted something to do, so I decided, all right the way we'll blow this bridge now, we'll pack under the haunches, it was an arch bridge, under each of the haunches, we will stack that with so much explosives that the whole thing will certainly go. And we got the infantry as a carrying party, and how much explosive

19:00 we had there, I don't know but it was an enormous amount. And anyway, we were using ammunition for tamping these charges round about. And it was a custom to hand over for the firing of bridge so that they'd be co-ordinated properly, in groups of about six. And this one came under the 56th Company Royal Engineers.

19:30 We'd prepared it and they were going to hand over to them to blow. And the Lieutenant Hood, great bloke, who won an MC [Military Cross] posthumously, and he had this one, this bridge to blow and he was killed that night. The next day I saw one of his sergeants and I said, "Sergeant, how did

20:00 that reinforced concrete bridge, how did that blow?" He said, "Well sir", you know we had these dynamo exploders, he said, "Well sir, I took hold of the bloody handle, sir and pressed it down sir and there was a hell of a bloody row, and when I looked around the bloody bridge wasn't there and neither was bloody hill."

20:30 So it worked. That was our main role, destroying those, anything that could be of use to the enemy. And then we went. The withdrawal, it was decided to withdraw completely on, I think that might have been about Anzac Day, precise dates I don't remember.

21:00 And then we headed south to cross the Corinth Canal, down to the Peloponnesian Peninsular to a place called Kalamata. And we had instructions to be, we were bivouacked all day under olive trees, they were great protection,

21:30 planes didn't spot us, didn't worry us much at all there. And then we were to be out at the end of a rickety little jetty at midnight, and so we were out on the jetty at midnight and sure enough a Royal Navy destroyer, the [HMS] Hero came along beside. And a very young commander threw a line off the bow and a line off the stern,

22:00 which I though might have pulled over the little jetty, it was such a rickety affair. And this young, he was a two and a half ringer but he looked very young, we only looked in his mid twenties, and a loud hailer from the bridge, "Righto chappies, come on board now will you?" With all the aplomb in the world as if he was taking us for a ride up the Thames in a ferry. So we then,

22:30 he put his foot on the accelerator and took us out to a regular troop ship, it was still nicely fitted out, and thing called the Dilwara. And we got my troops to bed and then I got, I'm ashamed to say but I was just so exhausted, I hadn't had much sleep at all, I was filthy dirty and shown

23:00 to this beautifully clean cabin with white sheets, but I was so exhausted, I took off my boots and my jacket and didn't even have a shower or a wash and just got into these beautiful sheets in the filthy dirty condition. Anyway, I was so exhausted, when I woke up in the morning we'd already been through three air-raids and I hadn't heard a thing, not one.

23:30 So we then had arrived off Crete at Suda Bay and we arrived, we were very late getting off Greece and

Can I just go back to Greece for a moment before you get into Crete? When you'd arrived at Piraeus and you'd gone up to Athens,

24:00 **seeing the Acropolis, seeing a lot of Greek history, the glories of Greek architecture, these sort of things, and then you spend most of your time in Greece blowing things up, did those ironies play upon your mind at all?**

Oh, yes. Yes, they did. Yes, there was one particularly beautiful bridge,

24:30 quite a new one, I didn't personally blow it but somebody else did. But to see it, I've seen it in its pristine state and then to see it as a heap of wreckage, you know, it left a horrible sinking feeling. What a terrible waste, what a disaster that something as beautiful as that should

25:00 be destroyed. But that's war. And it was the logical thing to do, it was on a critical route, so it had to go. But the Germans didn't attack Athens, there was some sense of sensitivity and control there obviously being exercised. Because when I was actually on the Acropolis

25:30 that night, it's such a wonderful building. The Parthenon we had studied in architectural history in the engineering course, and I remember being so impressed by what I heard, learned then, then I just

hoped that it would survive and it did.

26:00 **The 6th Division had acquitted itself fantastically well in North Africa and they'd done nothing but advance at a rate of knots. What was the morale like when the opposite happened in Greece?**

Well, again, it was incredibly good, due to the fact that it was a disciplined organisation.

26:30 And then when we were pulled out of Crete and Greece, we re-equipped back to Gaza or Hill 69, I think it was, re-equipped and I thought the troops took that incredibly well, that we lived to fight another day. And I can remember the army newspaper at the time,

27:00 published, I think it was Headlies Invictus. "Out of the night that covers me, black as a pit from pole to pole, I think of what the Gods maybe, for my incomparable soul, in the foul clutches of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud, under the bludgeonings of chance, my head is bloody but unbound, it matters not how straight the gait, how childhood punishment the scroll,

27:30 for I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." That went over very, very well in the army newspaper.

It obviously made an impression on you.

It did. I've quoted it many times since.

Were you in any danger in Greece of being over run?

Yes.

28:00 I suppose at practically anytime, I suppose after the, you know if they'd moved their armour through more quickly than they did. We had very little, see, we had no air defence at all apart from those six Hurricanes. They were great fighter pilots, they had no hesitation about

28:30 having them fall prey to various activities, but they were just outnumbered. But no, it was always possible. But I think on the other hand, the tactics of withdrawal were very well handled.

Your role as an engineer is mostly involved in engineering works rather

29:00 **than actual combat, but did you?**

Oh, wait a minute, we may say, we were the first in to any action and we were the last out.

Were you involved then in firing your weapon?

Only on, the only firing I did was on the troop ship, fired a Bren gun on the troop and again,

29:30 just for the hell of it, with my pistol I used to have a pot shot at Stuka or Messerschmitt up in the air, just for the satisfaction of doing it. No, apart from that I didn't do any shooting. But we had, our sidearm officers would carry a pistol. Oh no, I didn't have to shoot, no.

30:00 **You talked about 5th Columnists in Alexandria, I think, was there much of that activity in Greece?**

Well yes, oh yes. Again, they penetrated our lines, which was quite a safe thing to do. I'm sure that I had

30:30 an interview with one up in the north part of Greece. But I didn't know, when I say I'm sure, I think I was interviewing a 5th Columnist, which I thought about it later, I didn't know I was at the time. This particular bloke was dressed in British Army uniform

31:00 and asked some question which I thought later were, I wanted to be helpful, but I was suspicious and I thought that the questions he asked me later on, what units were so-and-so or where they were. But he just seemed quite a decent kind of bloke. But I just became a bit hesitant

31:30 after the questions went on and on, so I didn't, I don't think he got much out of me.

What was your main fear in Greece?

My main fear in Greece was that the Germans would break through and, you know we could end up

32:00 captured or killed.

Did you witness any Australian troops being captured?

No. No, I didn't witness anybody being captured but some were captured in that area down at Kalamata where we disembarked from the Hero.

32:30 I remember troops were spread about quite a bit, you know some lost their, got remote from their battalions. (UNCLEAR) two members of 2/21st Battalion, they became

33:00 astray, went astray and were holed up on the edge of a little Greek village and they knew that the Germans had occupied the village. Anyhow, they only had enough food for a couple of days and then they were running short and knowing that a lot of the Greeks, most of the Greeks were very friendly and wanted to help.

33:30 And these two, they just felt, they were desperate, they just had to have food and happened to approach a little farmhouse. And so they approached this farm house and they tossed a coin to see who should go and knock on the door and the other one would cover the situation with his rifle, and a dirty old Greek came to the door and the

34:00 soldier said, he didn't know much Greek, but there were a few fundamentals that we all picked up, you know, "How are you?" "Good morning". And anyhow, he looked into the room when the door was opened and there were some rather dirty looking people sitting at

34:30 a table eating eggs and bacon. He couldn't hold himself any longer, he didn't know enough Greek to ask for food, so he said what they used to do in the desert "Ekas, ekas, ekas" and one of the old dirty Greeks sitting at the table – "Ekas be buggered, who the hell are you?" "We're from the 2/22nd Battalion." So he got some eggs and bacon.

35:00 **Very good. When you're lying in the olive grove at Kalamata, were you completely confident that you were going to be evacuated?**

No, not completely confident but we felt it was, there were reasonable expectations that we would be.

35:30 **Did you have any doubts about the campaign and the organisation?**

Well, we did wonder why, at that time, we were sent to Greece. Knowing that the Germans were going to be,

36:00 that they would have overwhelming power and numbers, so that was, we were certainly apprehensive about that and what would happen and was it worthwhile and were we in fact, sacrificial lambs. But I suppose, I think most of us accepted the situation and thought, well if this is going to be overall of any real significance to winning the

36:30 war, then so be it. This is our part that we were destined to play.

That voyage from Greece across to Crete, you said you spent most of it asleep. Did you talk to your companions

37:00 **much about what you'd been through then?**

Well, yes. When I woke up in the morning there was a chap on the top bunk, he was a friend I'd met from Hobart in 1937, Doug Chessman, and I knew him quite well. Oh yes, we talked a lot about that.

37:30 And it was a question of what was going to happen next, was really more important. Were we going to land in Crete or weren't we, because we were late in the piece. And it just so happened that I also had two brothers and we were all within a few yards of each other and didn't know it at the time. But my brother Trev, who was a captain with

38:00 2/7th Battalion and his ship, the Costa Rica, it was sunk at its moorings at Suda Bay and a lot of them went into the water including Trev, but they all got out, they all survived. And I had another brother, Brick, who's now 93,

38:30 and he was with the 2/2nd Field Regiment, artillery. And they had taken up, they'd landed a couple of days before and they'd taken up position as infantry because they didn't have any guns with them, they were all spiked back in Greece. And Trev who was with the 2/7th Battalion, after he got out of the water he was wet and soggy and very cold and happened to be

39:00 going up to the front line when he passed brother Brick in the 2nd Regiment. And Brick saw Trev looking pretty miserable, so he gave him a spare jumper that he had, he just gave him that as he went by up to the front. Anyway, they both got out and went on to fight another day. And I was

39:30 comfortably on my, well it wasn't comfortable. A decision had to be made as to, it was the last day of Crete and we arrived late, whether there was going to be a withdrawal or not. And we were just a, sitting target there most of that day for, you know, German Stuka practice.

Tape 5

00:32 **Can you tell us a bit more about Crete, particularly what you were told while you were waiting in the harbour and what decisions were being made?**

Well, we sat there most of that day and we just didn't know what was going to happen. There was not much information at all. We knew that the German parachute regiment

01:00 had landed and we knew that they had had very heavy losses. And so that gave us some hope that it might be possible to hold Crete. And in retrospect I still feel we could have and should have. But we didn't get very much information at all at that time. I suppose those in command

01:30 didn't have it either, I suppose.

Did you have friends that were taken prisoner on Crete?

Yes. There was one of the, Murray Day, Lieutenant Day, the one that I said disappeared in the dust storm at Mersa Matruh, he was captured on Crete. He

02:00 was the only real friend I had that was captured there.

Did you speak to him after the war about those decisions?

Oh yes. And he felt like me that with a little more resolution and a little bit more protection from the air

02:30 that Crete could have been held. But again, here we are, we're only lieutenants at that time, and we were not privy to the really important information in which decisions were in fact made.

See these decisions, firstly the decision to

03:00 **occupy Greece in the face of overwhelming enemy numbers and the decision to, half-hearted decision to go to Crete and then leave, did this cause you to question army hierarchy at the time?**

03:30 Well we wondered, yes we did, you'd have those questions then we thought, well look, we don't really have the information. We're not really in a position to make a fair judgement. But we did wonder.

When you say you wondered, I'm just interested in, did you as junior officers talk

04:00 **about these things or was it a bit infradig to be seen to be criticising your superiors?**

I can't remember any occasion when we were really critical of those in command. I think we had, or I did, I had

04:30 respect for our leaders. I thought they, I had great respect for people like Blamey and Sir Edmund Herring and Major General Sir Clive Steel and [Lieutenant] General Sir Leslie Morshead,

05:00 these were really great people, I was very impressed with what I knew about their records in World War I and the way they were going about World War II. I could not have asked for better leadership.

Were you disappointed at Crete, not to be allowed to fight or were you relieved

05:30 **to just be getting out of the situation?**

Well we didn't know, have enough information to know how desperate it was when we came in there at that last day. But we knew that things must have been pretty jolly serious if they're even, by the fact that we had not landed and didn't join the battle. So we were just a sitting duck for German bombing practice that entire day.

06:00 Didn't like that much at all.

After Crete you went back to Egypt, was it Egypt or Palestine?

Palestine.

Palestine, and was it there that you became involved with the SOE [Special Operations Executive]?

No. No, I didn't become,

06:30 after we were re-equipped in Palestine and I must say, the troops were remarkably good, the way they responded and the way they accepted the situation, that we'd been bashed, they accepted that. They trained well, they were well disciplined. And we went through route marches in those jolly sand hills for

07:00 ruddy miles and miles and miles and we were very fit again. And then I was posted to the School of Military Engineering, British School of Military Engineering on the banks of the Suez Canal at a place called Ismailiya [?], which is really a French settlement.

How long did you spend there?

Well, I spent,

07:30 we were just waiting for further action, when the 6th Div would be engaged in serious action again. I must have had about six months there I would think. That was an interesting experience. It was a very well run school

08:00 and both Australians, New Zealanders and Brits. So that was a fairly easy, the easiest part of the war for me I suppose.

I was going to say, how much more, also, you could learn at that stage?

Well I was teaching then. I was learning how to teach,

08:30 so that again in itself was very good experience and it gave me an opportunity also to get to know more people, to asses their capabilities. I found out, it was quite a revelation, there were some senior officers who, in my opinion, shouldn't have been senior officers. And there were others, you know, juniors who were showing enormous potential.

09:00 So that again, was great experience in man management skills. So I enjoyed that. Played a lot of squash there at the French club and swam a lot in the lake. The water was so dense you felt you could just swim on forever without

09:30 any trouble at all. I'm not the greatest swimmer, but in that lake with that salty water, I went so far out one night that one of the local fellows, a sergeant was really worried, he thought, the boss has gone. But the boss came back.

Boss. What's your rank at this stage?

At that time lieutenant, I wasn't promoted till we came back to Australia.

10:00 **Did you feel at all, was this the best use of your skills at this time or did you itch to be in a campaign somewhere?**

I would have preferred to be in a campaign but on the other hand, I still felt I was carrying out a fairly useful role in

10:30 training, qualifying others, assisting in qualifying others to also carry out a useful role in a campaign.

Did you know a lot about what had been happening in the Pacific?

Not a lot, no. We had very limited knowledge of what was happening here. But it was quite disturbing, yet on the other hand, a great

11:00 relief on December 7th 1941, when Pearl Harbour, after Pearl Harbour, we knew then exactly where the Americans were and would be, we had an ally that we really wanted. And that came as a great relief to many of us, and I've been forever grateful for the American contribution they made to not only

11:30 Europe but the Pacific. And when people denigrate the American performance I vehemently critical of their role. Their marine division, the first time I came across them in Guadalcanal, the Solomon's, they

12:00 did a magnificent job. And the Coral Sea battles, well who knows how many Japs would have come down to Australia had there not been the Coral Sea battle.

After your time at the British School of Engineering, you were then sent back

12:30 **to Australia. Can you describe that voyage?**

Yes. Yes, we embarked at Suez and were heading straight for Australia in a (UNCLEAR) ship called the Melbourne Star. The trip was

13:00 unlike many others, my sister in-law went right down to the South Pole pretty well. But we had an uneventful trip with one exception, it was about late afternoon, a ship appeared on the horizon, which should not have been there and which was not

13:30 identified. And so our skipper turned around completely. And he did head due south for the, somewhere way down at the Antarctic. And we sailed and we got very cold and we came up again and landed at Perth. But apart from that, no trouble at all.

14:00 **Do you know how far south you went?**

No I don't, look, I really don't, I've got no idea of that. But it's a strange thing, when we got within two hundred miles of shore, I felt we'd get there, I felt we'd make it. When I read stories about people hanging onto spas and things, boats

14:30 and it's ridiculous because when you're within two hundred miles of a port, that's where the submarines are lurking, of course, just waiting for somebody to turn up. But I don't know what it was, but I had that feeling every time. I did some other trips later that, you know well now we're pretty right.

You reckon you could swim the last two hundred miles?

15:00 Well I reckoned I could get there somehow, how I don't know. But anyway, that's the feeling I had. And we landed at Perth without any trouble. Then we went around to Adelaide, disembarked in Adelaide. And my fiancé, how she ever got across to Adelaide

15:30 at that time, I don't know, but she did. And you know, things were pretty grim, that was May '42. The Japs knocking at the door and we didn't know whether we were going straight to Darwin, and at one stage we didn't know whether we were going to Java, we didn't know what was going to happen. It was a period of great uncertainty, that era.

Where were you when you heard about the fall of Singapore?

16:00 Oh, that was later, where was I then? At the School of Military Engineering in Casula at that time. Anyway, we arrived in Adelaide and a friend who was friendly with the

16:30 Bishop of St. Peters Cathedral, and he said to my then fiancé, he said, "Well look", the plans were roughly put into place to be married at my old university college chapel. And he said, "Look, you might only get two or three days leave, why don't you get married tomorrow?"

17:00 When my fiancé, she'd waited a couple of years and so why not. And he said, "I can arrange that for you through the lady chaplain at St. Peters Cathedral." So the wedding guests, they were all army officers and their fiancés or friends or wives and we had about sixteen,

17:30 sixteen wedding guests. And the old Louis, a famous South Australian hotel, they say, hand out Louis, he used to be a great one for the tips. And he would organise the wedding reception, which he did, so we married the next day.

Did you have a chance to ring your mother?

Yes, rang Mother. And Mother was very disappointed, she

18:00 already had a frock. But end of story there. We only had about, I had to go back to camp the next day and then joined a train across a troop train back to Melbourne.

Your fiancé, this was someone you'd known in Sydney?

Yes. At that School of Military Engineering.

18:30 Her family lived about five hundred yards from this school and we knew this family and had an introduction to go there and we knew that we'd be invited to dinner, so three of us were invited to dinner. And I'd met her sister, one of her sisters before, she was very pretty.

19:00 And later introduced but Jane was the prettiest of all, so she was and we got married. Well, when I came back from the Middle East.

And one night together?

And we were married for fifty seven years.

But it was a pretty short honeymoon?

Two or three days, that was all.

19:30 Oh, we might have got a, it was a bit longer because we had a couple of days, partly army and partly a couple of days at the Windsor Hotel, part army and part honeymoon. And then fortunately I got posted to the School of Military Engineering and used to get some weekends free even when the war was pretty

20:00 tough.

Back in Melbourne, what was the first thing you did when you got back to Melbourne?

Oh, well, the first thing I did when I got back to Melbourne? Rang the family at Flinders, there was only my mother, my

20:30 Dad had died before the war. Rang the family. Got, dispatched our troops on leave and then waited for instructions, which came

21:00 pretty soon. And then I was posted to the School of Military Engineering, again just to do some rush training of people, enough engineers.

This is the school that you'd attended before the war?

Yes. And then I ended up as a, well in the early stages of the war. And then I was pulled out.

21:30 It's a coincidence, I'm sure, but, you know, the war situation was pretty grim and I'd introduced an exercise in a salt river crossing and introduced realism into it, to give troops a feeling of what it was going to be like under fire.

22:00 And we had Bren guns firing into banks, we had explosive, gun cotton slabs being exploded to simulate artillery, and we had all kinds of obstacles these troops had to go through. And it made a lot of noise, and then they had to swim this river, make out of their ground sheet a little canoe and put your rifle and

things in

22:30 and push it, swim across the river with it. And anyhow, it was alleged that my activities activated some of the air-raid warning systems on the east coast of New South Wales. And so anyway, I'm sure it's a coincidence, not because of that but

23:00 two or three days later, on parade, I was called to, I'd been promoted to the rank of captain then, but I was recalled to Melbourne to report to the engineering chief. And I went in with some trepidation, thinking about my newly acquired, recently acquired rank was, mightn't be staying with me for very long. Anyway, admit the, his [CI Chief Instructor]

23:30 and he said, "John, the chief wants to see you." So I thought I was going to be sacked or something. And anyhow, I saluted very smartly and General Sir Clive Steel said, "Morning John, now a tour, you're going to be seconded to SOE for six months, you're going to leave on Monday for England

24:00 and what's more, you're going to be promoted to major too." So I could have fallen through the floor. I didn't know what SOE was. And I said, "What is SOE?" And he said, "Well I don't know much about it either." But he said, "They're going to establish this for subversive operations activities in Australia for - follow the pattern of SOE, Subversive Operation Executive

24:30 in UK." And so I had to go and report then to a Colonel Mott up in the main road. And that was an interesting experience. Oh, that's right, and there were two sentries at the gate with bayonets fixed and I thought, what's this all

25:00 about. And anyhow, I had a pass and I marched in and a Sergeant Samson sitting in the hall said, "The colonel wants to see you sir." So I went up to see the colonel and saluted smartly and he said, "Holland, you'll be leaving on Monday for United Kingdom and

25:30 you'll be seconded to SOE for six months to learn every aspect of subversive operations." He said, "Before you go, you'll take a special oath to not repeat a word about SOE or SOA [Special Operations Australia] to anyone including your own wife and family.

26:00 So you'll sign that now or you'll be dismissed from this service, you won't be required in this service." So I signed that oath, I took a new oath and read it and signed it. And he said, "Sergeant Samson, have your tickets ready, you can pick them up as you go out,

26:30 and you can report back to me in six months times in this office." There was not a stick of furniture in it except his desk and two chairs, it was eerie. So I was wondering what I was getting myself in, well I didn't get myself into it. Most of the people that turned out in special force were volunteers and so I

27:00 was directed to be, they wanted someone who had actually mines and demolition experience. And I suppose, someone regarded as expendable.

Why do you say that, that last comment?

Well, you know, when I was appointed they didn't know exactly what I'd be doing, whether I'd be dropping

27:30 into outlandish places and being cut up by Japanese or, so, I said that in a frivolous way, that I might be one of those regarded as perhaps, if someone had to be expendable, I was the right kind of bloke to get rid of.

Were you ever curious after the war to try and find out why you'd been

28:00 **selected or who had been**

Well I know now, well I think I knew then. The reason was that SOE's activities are primarily for sabotage, demolition methods, operation behind enemy lines. And they, because I'd had

28:30 some experience in demolitions and mines, I could cope with that side of it, and the development of special devices for specific sabotage purposes. So I suppose I had the right qualifications.

Were there any other Australian sent?

No.

29:00 No, I was the only one at that time, there were others sent later. So I was sent to train with twelve Czechs, twelve French, twelve Norwegians and twelve Brits, and I was one of the Brits, one of the twelve. And the role was to

29:30 study all aspects of those subversive operations, which are sabotage, development of resistance forces amongst indigenous populations and on occasions to gather intelligence for orthodox operations. So the trip over to do that, that was interesting.

30:00 I'd only flown about once before in my life, and that was on a DC2 [Douglas] going to Perth. Started off on a Liberator bomber from Amberley in Queensland, heavily laden, we had to take off. I was sitting in

the bomb bay, on the catwalk in the bomb bay

30:30 and hoped they didn't pull the wrong lever, then up to Lae and then from Lae to Guadalcanal, from Guadalcanal to the New Hebrides, a new airfield called Bland de Keyack [?], and we were just, we'd landed and refuelled and we were just about on the taxi way taking off,

31:00 ready to take off, and the front nose wheel gave way and down she came in a cloud of smoke, but we all got out, it didn't go on fire. And I spent a week then waiting to get a flight through, but included in the lot on that plane was Admiral Nimitz, the Commander of the US 7th Fleet in the Pacific, at that time. And I wasn't

31:30 really a poker player, but we played quite a lot of poker to fill in the time. He got out after a couple of days, he was all right with his rank. But the planes were just full of marines going back home on leave. Anyway, I hitchhiked with a US bomber, a B26, through Ellis Island to

32:00 Honolulu. And in Honolulu I was to report to Hickham Field, that was a great place to call, I'd never been there before, but I had my papers, my papers were fairly urgent papers, and I could get out, couldn't get a plane out to San Francisco. And so I complained and they said, "Well, you'd better see colonel",

32:30 I've forgotten his name now, colonel so-and-so who is in charge of transport up at Diamond Head, the headquarters. So I called in to see the colonel and I said, "Look colonel, these are my papers, they have a degree of urgency for me to first of all to

33:00 call at the Pentagon and then proceed to England." And he said, "Major, how dare you criticise my decisions, I'll decide when you go, when you leave this place, you won't go before a minute before or a minute after, if you've got any complaints I suggest you see the British Consul." Todd, that was the name. I said, "Well that's

33:30 exactly what I'll do." So I went to the British Consul, and they said, "Oh we've had trouble with that fellow Todd before, he's a damn nuisance." He said, "Do you think your government would be prepared to pay for you to go first class fare on the (UNCLEAR) [Boeing] clipper to San Francisco?" I said, "Consul, I'm sure they would." That night I was on a Boeing clipper, and it took seventeen hours at that time, but it had bunk

34:00 kind of bed to sleep in and all first class accommodation. It was so unreal. I was fairly happy in Honolulu but I still felt I had a duty to get on the trip.

Tape 6

00:30 **Sir John, before we move on, I'd just like to ask you about how you managed the situation where you were sworn to secrecy about where you were going and what you were going to do, now I assume you didn't really know what you might be involved in in the UK, but you weren't able to discuss any of this with your wife.**

No, I was able

01:00 to let her know that I was going to England for six months, but why or where or what she didn't know anything. And so it was throughout my service with Z Special. I'd get up in the morning a three o'clock to catch a plane to go somewhere, she wouldn't know where I was going to when I'd return or what I'd be doing. And it was

01:30 quite innocent, you know, just simple straight forward staff on voluntary services. But she would have more worry than I would.

When you first went away, how long had you been married at that point?

About four months, five months.

And

02:00 **she accepted this?**

She accepted all that, yes. She had, of course, she had two brothers who also served and a sister who served too. One of whom became quite a distinguished airman, a wing commander, DSO [Distinguished Service Order], DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] and Bar. And the other had just got his commission, I only met him once, he was

02:30 in the air training scheme in Canada, I met him in London in 1942 in December, the first and only time I met him. And we had lunch at the Dorchester, then he was killed a year later on a raid over Mattersburg [?]. And the other one, the wing commander, he was killed in a Mosquito

03:00 bombing raid over Norway at a place called Abscoll [?]. So she was very service oriented and wanted to try to be a part of it herself. But she ended up, instead of driving aeroplanes she ended up driving a truck for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, and was also at that time, a specialist as

03:30 an orthoptist and used to carry out tests, working with eye specialists, for aspiring young pilots. Some needed a correction of various aspects of eye sight.

Did she ever achieve her ambition to fly in later years?

No, she didn't fly. But

04:00 no, she got busy having a family and doing other things.

So you went off to the UK for six months?

Yes. Well before getting there too, it was quite interesting crossing the, I also had duties in USA other than

04:30 my special operations one. I had some engineer duties. Had to do a liaison visit to a place called Fort Belvoir in Virginia, which was a US Engineer Training School. And there I learnt to speak in front of a big crowd. I was asked, I was talking to the Americans about

05:00 experiences in Greece and the desert, about mines and demolitions. And I was asked one day if I would mind saying a few words to a few of the boys. So I said, "I'll be very happy to do that." Thinking, a few of the boys might be 30 or 40. And a great hall adjacent to the mess, I was led in

05:30 and there in front of me were a thousand faces. And it was quite a shock. But anyway, I told them a few stories and got them laughing, well a couple I've told you today. And had them on side, and they were very interested and a very impressive lot of people. So then when we finished that duty, on the way to England, had the crossing of the Atlantic in the [HMS] Queen Elizabeth,

06:00 and that was without incident, although ships were going down in the Atlantic very rapidly, very frequently, at that time. But the three big ships, the Aquitania, the [HMS] Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, altogether, they shifted a million people across the Atlantic during the war, and didn't lose one

06:30 person. I think the Queen Mary was torpedoed once in the bow, but repaired and went back on her duty. We were, the ships, we were escorted out of New York for about two hundred miles, then they relied on their own speed, a zig zag pattern, which made it difficult for submarines to get the proper alignment.

So you didn't go in convoy across?

No.

07:00 No, that was quite surprising. And that was not the practice at the time, they convoys were only going into port at the other end at Greenock. And we landed at Greenock and we didn't have one incident on that trip, but certainly did on another one. And I knew things were pretty difficult food wise in the UK, and we disembarked at Greenock

07:30 then went into Glasgow Station for a troop train to London. And anyway, we were held up and decided we would have lunch before we start out. Lunch was bread and cheese sandwiches. Then the day went on, the evening went by, another announcement, a further delay, "We will be having

08:00 the evening meal before we take off." Bread and cheese sandwiches. Then did take off in due course and called at Carlisle on the way down and had supper. Bread and cheese sandwiches. And then the next morning I arrived in London, I was met by an officer from the Australian military mission, who said, "Now look Major, we've got a busy program for you today, I

08:30 suggest we just go and have breakfast in the station here at Paddington, and then go about our business." And breakfast, believe it or not, was bread and cheese sandwiches. All of this was fairly tough, but in fact it wasn't as bad as that at all. Later on I was (UNCLEAR) for about a week in London at SOE headquarters.

09:00 Not domicile there, but working with SOE headquarters, being briefed on the various things I was going to do. And we stayed at a place called London House, which was an establishment for tertiary students studying in London from the Commonwealth, but it had been taken over then as an officers' club. And that was all very comfortable. And then

09:30 Christmas Day I had in London and joined the air force, they have a favourite watering pub called The Codgers off Flinders Lane, near Australia House. That's where I met a lot of the air force, this chap Charwood, I mentioned earlier, he can remember meeting me, I honestly,

10:00 we just, met very briefly anyway. But they were a great bunch of people, and looking around you knew that only very few of them would ever survive. That was rather worrying in a way, to know that such fine looking people would never have a proper life. But anyway, then we went up to Scotland

10:30 at a place called Arisaig, where we had a mixture of, I mentioned earlier, Norwegians, Czechs, French and Brits. And that's one time in my life, when I came out of there, I can say I was reasonably fit. We did some climbing, kayaking, weapon training, pistol shooting, unarmed combat,

11:00 breaking and entry. There were really a wonderful lot of people, all volunteers.

Can I just take you back for a moment to that first week in London, when you received your first briefing about the role that you were to perform, was this the first time that you really understood what you were going to be involved in?

Yes, yes, it was.

11:30 **And what sort of detail did they give you at that time?**

Not very much, not very much detail, except what the course, what the content would be. That, I suppose,

12:00 it would cover really most aspects of SOE operations, so I was to be exposed to every kind of operation they had, and the technicalities that went with it. And particularly, the technicalities, that was, I guess my principle concern. So, but it included, you know, weaponry and

12:30 development of special devices for attacking tanks or aeroplanes or limpeting, kayaking, we did all those kind of things in the field at this place called Arisaig. But we never knew each other's surnames. We only knew Christian names for security reasons. So how many of those people

13:00 came through the war, I don't know, but I know a lot didn't. But they were all volunteers and really splendid people.

Was it clear at that stage that you were going to return to Australia to assist in setting up SOA?

Yes, oh yes, that was clear.

13:30 **So did you expect to be actually involved in operations while you were in the UK?**

I couldn't be for, again for security reasons. So that if I was, having been trained in the broader aspects of SOE, if someone had put a bayonet in my tummy, I couldn't disclose information, which would prejudice the lives of others. And so it was throughout

14:00 my whole situation. The director of SOE, we were not permitted to go on an op [Operation], I had hoped to go on one in particular, but we were not permitted to do so.

The senior staff that briefed you at SOE, did those chaps have an intelligence background prior to the war?

I frankly, I don't

14:30 know where they came from. I don't know. They certainly wouldn't talk about it if they had.

When you were in Scotland being trained, you were presumably taught a lot of techniques that you could expect to use behind enemy lines?

Yes.

Tell us about some of that training?

Well,

15:00 it was kind of, some of it was based on some realistic exercises, you know crossing streams and climbing mountains and living in the cold and living in, unfortunately we would have liked to have lived in the heat but there wasn't any. We paddled boats for miles and miles, we went

15:30 on route marches, we climbed mountains, we did pistol shooting every morning for about half an hour in the basement, and surprisingly became quite good at hitting a moving target, you can do that with surprising accuracy after a few weeks of doing the same thing day in day out. We did unarmed combat,

16:00 you found yourself wrestling with French or Czechs or somebody. So weapon training was quite a big part of that and physical fitness was a big part of it and living outdoors was a big part of it. And we got so fit you could virtually run up the side of a house.

16:30 Well, they had a particular house you could run up, there were things you just grabbed as you went up. Then after that the twelve of us were invited to go down to the 6th Airborne Division for parachute training. We qualified down there as paratroops.

17:00 Then we went to an intelligence school and learnt the arts of deception, intelligence gathering, communications and creation of false identities

17:30 and the printing of false passports and the printing of phoney currency.

So this was a sort of spy craft?

Yes, that was the craft they had. And a lot of the crooks of the world since the war have probably trained there. The skills have probably transmigrated I

18:00 would say. Then down to, well they had a small boat section, one that was carrying those raids across the channel that you were talking about earlier.

Motor gun boats?

Yes, well these weren't so much motor it was called the small boats, you know. The motor gun boats, they were bigger, these were more kayaks

18:30 for, oh, and small launches that used to go across the channel. And at that time I was there, they were preparing for raids, US raids on the northwest Africa. The first American landing, the first American division landed there under General Clark, I think it was. They were preparing for that. But I didn't go on any raid across the channel.

19:00 Anyway, then came home. And that was interesting, crossing the Atlantic again in the Queen Elizabeth again, a journey expected to take five days. On the fifth morning I got up to go on deck expecting to see the sky line of New York and suddenly felt terribly cold, freezing

19:30 cold. And I look around, I couldn't see the sky line of New York at all, couldn't see a building at all. But there were icebergs everywhere. Found we were up north of Iceland and the German U-boats at that time were hunting in what they call wolf packs, of about eight submarines. And they were really after us. And it was strange

20:00 again, all this beauty, all these icebergs everywhere, lovely sea, the sea was a lovely colour, yet lurking beneath the surface was a few tinned fish trying to send up to the bottom. Anyway, in the end we came down the coast of Greenland and

20:30 we were running short of fuel, so the skipper had to make a dash for it and dashed for Newfoundland. And we got into St. John, Newfoundland, but instead of five days it was ten. And there were very few people on board going that way but going the other way, the first trip over, those ships were taking a complete American division at one time, 16,000 people on board.

21:00 And the troops were sleeping, what they call hot bunks, two people per bunk, one would have it for eight hours and another eight hours and so on. But we did all right as officers. There were still four majors in a single berth cabin, which took a bit of fitting in, but we got there. So anyway, back

21:30 here, back to Australia with a flight across the Pacific in a Liberator. In those days the flying was, very few navigational aids, they did have radar, but if you struck a storm you just had to fly through it, and so there were some fairly bouncy trips at parts of that. But anyway, we got here and

22:00 I reported back to Domain Road, see the Colonel Mott. And Colonel Mott had gone, and so a mystery, where, why, I didn't know then and don't know now. But he was replaced by one Colonel Chapman Walker who evidently did a very good job as a leader at Dunkirk, he'd been in Europe.

22:30 Then was chosen to head up this SOA operation, which later became known as SRD, Services Reconnaissance Department and Z Special, which was known, it's not with the operating arm it was an administrative unit just tying together the various elements, which served in Z Special. And so

23:00 for administrative purposes, although the common perception is that it was the operating arm, but it wasn't.

Was he a British officer?

Colonel Chapman, yes very much so.

So the people who were establishing SOA at that time, were they almost all British officers?

No, no. Oh no, far from it. Most of us were Australians.

23:30 The organisation structure, it varied a lot depending on the conditions at the time, the state of the war and the relationship with the various services.

And the relationship with our allies, I assume, must have?

The Americans. Oh, very important, they still, General MacArthur, we were all still responsible to him as the Supreme Commander, southwest Pacific.

So the establishment of SOA really

24:00 **depended on MacArthur's support?**

Yes, it did - MacArthur's support. First of all, Blamey's support. Blamey's support was very readily forthcoming quite early in the piece. He saw the value of this kind of subversive operation. Well, the objectives were identical with those in SOE in UK which were,

24:30 again, to organise resistance forces behind enemy lines, to carry out sabotage at critical locations and to occasionally gather intelligence. Those objectives were common, but the big differences in operation were, here we first of all had very long distances from base and transport was always a problem except for the last few months of the war.

25:00 And our operatives were normally Caucasian and large, operating in countries where the indigenous populations were dark and small. So that was again, always a security risk.

Was there any opposition amongst the senior ranks of the military to establishing?

A great deal of

25:30 opposition in some quarters, which carried right through, some of them. And the same thing from the navy, the navy were very much against it early in the piece. Mainly, not on principle so much as they didn't, the resources they had they needed and were reluctant to make them available to us. Their assessment with a cost benefit analysis, would mitigate against

26:00 us, but the whole thing - the navy changed their attitude very significantly after a mock raid carried out by our people on naval ships in Townsville Harbour. An operation called Moskeel, and led by my number two, a chap called Professor

26:30 Carey from Hobart. And he organised this attack on the navy and they penetrated the defensive barriers into the harbour and attached limpets to about six of Her Majesty's Royal Australian Naval vessels. And so after that the navy realised,

27:00 you know, there was no escape. Also, coupled with the fact, the navy were very conscious of the raid by Italian frogmen, successfully, on the battle ship, the Queen Elizabeth in Alexandria Harbour, on one occasion. So those things added together changed navel support from being opposed to being supportive.

Can we talk a little bit

27:30 **more about that operation which was designed, presumably, as a sort of propaganda effort really, on the part of SOA, to demonstrate the value and their capacity. Who amongst senior ranks knew about that operation and supported it?**

Well, there's a general principle, the only people who

28:00 knew anything about any operation were people who had some specific relationship with it, some responsibility. So it was not widely talked about. But the directorate were, of course, they were informed. And the directorate, the organisation structure, really, it was somewhat fluid, but for most of its time there was a directorate with the

28:30 commandant, that was Chapman Walker. There was a director of operations and planning, a Major Jock Campbell from the King's [Own] Scottish [Borderers]. There was a director of intelligence, he was a naval officer. There was a director of training, he was an infantry

29:00 officer. There was a director of communications who was again, an army officer. And there was me, as director of technological services. So we formed a directorate, we would be all informed about, well most things that went on. But there was some things that even I didn't know about, there were

29:30 some but very rare.

But no one in the navy knew anything about it?

Oh, we had a naval officer appointed too, also. But he didn't carry the rank, he was not a director, he was just in charge of naval kind of activities.

Now, was that operation carried out before or after the bombing raids on Townsville?

30:00 Well, I can't remember what date

I think those bombing raids, was in September '42 actually, so it would have been after that.

This was September '43.

So Townsville Harbour was pretty well defended, as I understand it.

Oh, it was meant to be, yes.

And how many men did Carey take in with him on that operation?

Oh, gosh,

30:30 from memory I'd say about half a dozen. I think it was three boats with two threefold boats or kayaks with two in each. But I can't guarantee that, it was so long ago.

So they paddled into Townsville Harbour in their kayaks, which were, and Townsville Harbour was mined?

31:00 Townsville Harbour had defences, I think they had a net for small submarines and they were able to get around or through that, and then attached their limpets to these ships. And limpetry was part of the technology with which we trained out people. Well, the people that

31:30 were destined to carry out that kind of operation. It was a simple technique, but with the limpets being an explosive charge on the end of a rod, but the important aspect of the technique was to, it was a magnetic attachment that lowered down on the rod gently, so that it didn't make a clanking sound

32:00 on the side of the ship. That was the art really in limpetry. Then of course, you'd have a time delay for detonation.

But these were sterile mines?

Oh yes. Oh yes.

But if they'd been seen in the harbour

Well the navy could have shot them up, that's possible.

Given that there's been bombing raids previously in Townsville and there was quite a lot of shipping in that harbour, wasn't

32:30 **there, at that time? Then there was every chance they would have been shot up?**

Oh, yes, it was a busy port.

I heard a story that actually they were seen and were challenged by a seaman on deck who looked over and saw the kayak below and asked the chap in the kayak what he was doing, have you heard this story?

I think I know what's coming.

I think you have. Is it a true story?

Look, I don't know, I

33:00 don't know. It's a good story but I can't vouch for its accuracy.

Would you care to tell the version that you know?

Oh, he said, "I'm fishing." Is that the one you heard?

Yes indeed.

Yeah, it might have happened. I never asked Carey that.

What happened to Carey after this raid, because I should imagine it caused some consternation?

33:30 Oh it did. Oh, he went on doing good things. But it certainly untied the shackles with the navy. We had very good support from the navy after that particular event. But he was quite, again, a naval parachutist and he was

34:00 also a, what's the word, he was a geologist, my profession of speleology, cave dwelling and he developed techniques for living in caves in, particularly, limestone country and devised methods for

34:30 light weight ladders that could be flung down a cave and with parachute silk cords for ladder and duralumin rungs. And he'd roll up a pretty long ladder in a very short space, so it could be dropped with parachuting equipment.

When it came time to

35:00 **conduct the actual operation, for which that was something of a dress rehearsal, in Singapore Harbour. Was Carey involved with that?**

Not to any great extent, although with my department we had the skills of kayaking and

35:30 the limpetry skills, yes, he would have been advising on that.

I'm interested in the relationship between military strategic objectives and the conduct of operations by the Special Operations based on different sorts

36:00 **of intelligence, and I wondered how you communicated, what were the protocols for communication between yourselves and people who were setting military objectives.**

That was always difficult because MacArthur's Headquarters, through Allied Intelligence Bureau, they had the final say in all these kind of operations.

36:30 But we had to have our operations approved again, by the director of military intelligence and Blamey himself took a great interest in all those operations which were undertaken. In total, I think about eighty one operations were in fact carried out. But we had, as the directorate,

37:00 we had to make a risk benefit analysis for each operation that came up. Some were quite hair brained, others were quite brilliant, a lot of them very brave, a lot of them very political. For instance, the operations in Borneo were very, the objectives there were twofold, one was to carry out operations, which would

37:30 benefit the establishment of a British presence there immediately after the war. Borneo had been very much part of the Commonwealth at that time, and the second role there was to develop a resistance organisation in areas where the natives were not only friendly, but very - really welcomed us. They'd had a very bad time with the Japanese. And so they cooperated

38:00 very well, particularly the Dyaks in particular. So that was kind of a political motive and then the third objective was gathering intelligence from behind enemy lines.

So is it a two way street, do you suggest operations to them and they say yes, this meets our objectives. Or do they tell you?

It could go both ways. We would initiate some

38:30 and we could see opportunities, and then have them approved, or they could ask for certain operations to be carried out. But the initiative, I would say, more often than not, came from us.

And were those initiatives based on a full understanding, if you like, of what was happening?

39:00 **Was your intelligence very good that you were provided with by the military?**

Well I think it was, I'd say it was reasonably good. But we had a better appreciation of what we were capable of doing and I suppose we were enthusiastic, young and strong and enthusiastic and really wanted to hurt the enemy. A lot of them were unusual

39:30 people that we had, all exceptionally brave people. But people who were prepared to take a risk which they thought was worthwhile. But then it was not always plain sailing as to what was on and what should be on and what was on and what wasn't on. The greatest disaster, of course, was the Supremo Operation, you may have heard about.

Tape 7

00:25 **Sir John, I'd just like to ask you about recruitment into**

00:30 **a unit like Z Special unit. How would you go about recruiting men for those sorts of operations?**

Well, the main sources was first of all the Australian parachute battalion, and my friend, John Overall, who I went to sea with, me on the Aquitania on the way over to the Middle East, he became the CO of the parachute regiment.

01:00 And on one occasion I went over there and called for volunteers. Told them what our objectives were and what kind of operations and spoke to these people for about half an hour and called for volunteers. And names were shooting up all over the place because, the point was there was no role for the

01:30 parachute regiment in the foreseeable future at that time. So quite a lot came from there. Then again, a similar situation with the Australian armoured regiment in Western Australia. Again they were well trained, well disciplined and itching to participate somewhere. And we had a lot of volunteers

02:00 came from there too. So they were two of our principle sources. And then the message got around about the raid on Singapore Harbour, the (UNCLEAR) raid. That did get a bit of publicity and a lot of people just turned up and wanted to join. So that's how most of them came. But they were all volunteers with the exception

02:30 of me, and I was just pitch forked into it.

This might seem like an odd question, but it always intrigues me how these operations are named. Who named Operation Jaywick, because I happen to know it's a rather small place outside Clacton in the south of England and I wondered how it?

Well the leader, Ivan Lyons,

03:00 he chose that name. But again, I think probably that village correlation, I guess, was probably why. I don't know, but all I heard was that it was Jaywick when I heard anything about it. And of course, a huge success, one of the most successful raids,

03:30 I think, during the whole war.

The culture of the unit must have been very different from the culture you were used to amongst engineers.

Well yes, it was entirely. This was quite unorthodox warfare, compared with orthodox warfare. But both had their,

04:00 a place for both. So half my war was with Australian engineers and the other half with Z Special. Totally different cultures.

What special challenges, in terms of man management were presented by Z Special Unit?

Well quite often you found some individuals who were

04:30 prepared to take on these unorthodox tasks, where themselves, were rather unorthodox people. And some you would say were temperamental, all of them were brave, all of them were prepared to take a risk, but some of them could have what I would regard

05:00 as personality tantrums, that was always possible and it did happen. Then again, I suppose, we were talking about personal relationships, and again, they were very complex relationships between, say, Australians and MacArthur's

05:30 staff. Between Chapman Walker, who was very, very English in his ways, and came from a fairly aristocratic, comfortable kind of life style, perhaps didn't go over too well with the rougher ordinary Australians like, some of the Australians, I'm going to say like one,

06:00 but I won't. And it probably wasn't easy for him early in the piece having his, because there were other Australians who felt, look I could do that job better. There was always that, I suppose, there were people that could even say they could do your job better than you do it.

It's hard to imagine, really, isn't it?

Absolutely.

06:30 So they were difficult, some of them. And occasionally, although my formal role was director of technological services, I was called upon because of the general knowledge that I had of the people that I knew, being born here, brought up

07:00 here, I was called on at times to go and talk to certain people to persuade somebody to, if it was an aircraft or a Catalina or a Liberator, get it from the navy, similar kinds, if we wanted particular help. So I suppose an Australian talking to an Australian

07:30 in a senior place has a, really, a better chance of success than perhaps an American or a Brit. That's with some people, but others are a very easy relationship. I was very happy with some of the allied intelligent bureau people, I got on really quite well, the Americans, didn't have any trouble at all, had great regard for them.

08:00 **Did you ever have any discipline problems with those chaps?**

I didn't have any discipline problems whatsoever during my association with, oh, that's not quite true, I think

08:30 one time there was a problem in Darwin, there was an operation in Darwin, in Timor, not going well and I was sent up under the command of a British officer, and I was sent up to

09:00 sort out some of the problems. Some of the operatives were, well they were gay, happy, strong young men and playful and they needed a little discipline, and they got it, and we ended up quite happily. So there were those kind of occasions that, you know, troops just

09:30 behave in a rambunctious manner.

I presume this was after the bombing in Darwin?

Oh, yes, well after.

So the situation in Darwin was pretty anarchic anyway, wasn't it, for quite some time?

It was.

What were they actually tasked with in that area?

Well supporting the Sparrow Force in Timor. Sir Bernard Culnane's

10:00 group. But some of those operations were not very well organised, the code was, on one occasion, broken. The Japs were trading on that indiscretion. And the operator in the field had forgotten to, or neglected to

10:30 include in some of his messages an authenticator, a word used in such a way that we could identify him as the legitimate sender of that particular message. So some of those operations were aborted and there were losses there that need not have taken place.

11:00 **Would an operator who made that sort of mistake, would there be any repercussions?**

Well, well yes, if it can be proved, at the time there would have been. But I think, what happened to that particular gentleman, I don't know.

Because it must be quite difficult when you're engaged in subversive operations,

11:30 **if there are issues of neglected duty or discipline and acting outside a mandate, to deal with those in normal military processes.**

Well yes, there would be. But if there's no,

12:00 neither an enquiry nor any conviction, as far, certainly as far as I was aware.

If there were, if such enquiries were needed to be conducted and I presume after operations there would be

12:30 **debriefing (UNCLEAR) and so on. Would they be conducted by external bodies?**

No. No. I suppose AIB [Allied Intelligence Bureau] would occasionally, they would want a full explanation as to what went on, our Intelligent Bureau, and that was common practice there, an analysis of the operation

13:00 from every point of view. Planning and equipment and behaviour and success and an analysis of whether it was successful or otherwise.

What sort of criteria do you use to assess the success of an operation?

13:30 Well, the sabotage is quite physical evidence. In Singapore Harbour six ships were actually sunk and there would be photographs to support that success. The intelligence, well the raid, for instance,

14:00 landing on Lombok Strait, the task was to determine the strengths of the enemy position, what defensive equipment they had. Well the information brought out, brought to life, was very useful information, so a success. The landings in [Sarawek] and the development of the resistance organisation

14:30 there, where I think, we developed a force which included training and supply and about, just under 2,000 people, Dyaks, and they knocked off about 1,500 Japanese and harassed the

15:00 enemy on various occasions, a success.

I think it might have been Roosevelt who said that SOE in the United Kingdom and in particular F Section, their activities probably shortened the war substantially. You know, I think he actually put a time limit and said

15:30 **"They shortened the war by up to six months". Do you think it's possible to put that kind of assessment on the work that was done in Australia?**

No, I don't think it did shorten the war by six months in Australia. But it's a very difficult judgement to make and how he could put six months on it, I don't know. But good luck, I hope it's right.

16:00 I'm sure he wouldn't say it unless he had a lot of evidence to support that kind of statement. But no, our operations were, I would say that operations such as the Jaywick raid in Singapore Harbour, the psychological impact which that made on the Japanese, I don't know how you could measure it, it would have been great loss of face to think

16:30 that this major port could be penetrated by a small group of people. The loss of shipping was 40,000 tons, that was worthwhile, but I think the psychological impact would have been greater. So that would have played a very important role. And I think, again, the contributions in Borneo, again, were, it's a valuable contribution

17:00 to the war, there's no question about that. But to think that, I don't think the war would have ended any sooner because of the success we had in Borneo. It would have contributed but I think it was brought about by the dropping of those two big bombs, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

17:30 And we were all delighted when it happened. But I do know that, you know, at the end of the war we had a splendid well trained brave group of young people who were prepared to take very significant risks in the belief that their contributions would be

18:00 of extreme value to winning the war. And I still hold that opinion that they were, they were really a

great bunch of people.

During the conduct of operations, if we talk about Operation Jaywick in particular, can you describe to me what your role would be and where you'd be located and so on?

Where I would be?

18:30 **Yes.**

Well, my role was just minor really, in providing facilities for training, seeing that people had the skills for limpetry, canoeing and living in isolated places. And I knew that technologically they had the right kind of equipment to carry out that role.

19:00 And I also found that, I was sent overseas in 1944, again, do you remember the Australian Army had the practice of sending observers over to Europe to study various aspects of warfare in Europe. And I was sent over as the observer for special operations

19:30 and met a lot of people and spent some time in Europe. Met some of the operatives, in particular the French and had talks with, again, the Supreme Headquarters in Brussels and I came to the conclusion from a technological point of view, we were really -

20:00 our technical devices and equipment were really state of the art, we were really right up top and did quite a lot of things which were quite new, which were more relevant to our area. For instance, converting a rotor aircraft to, for parachute

20:30 jumping. That was again one of our tasks that came under my wing. I found the, they had different problems in Europe - they were not so much technical. Again, all the technical devices and equipment seemed to work well, but their problems were getting access to targets and

21:00 reprisals by the enemy on innocent villages. So they had a different set of problems from we had out here. But technically, we were as well advanced as anywhere.

Did we get a lot of assistance from the Americans in that regard?

Not really. It was more Britain, more SOE.

21:30 We didn't really have a, on the special office, it was really only, they controlled us but we didn't get any in the way of technical advances from America. No, I can't remember any.

22:00 But no doubt they had, they were extremely competent people and no doubt they would have had the right equipment for various specific tasks.

When chaps went out on these special operations, did they wear uniforms or elements of uniforms?

It depends where they were and what the occasion was. For instance,

22:30 on Jaywick raid, they wore sarongs to look like Japanese or native fishermen.

So they would then, therefore, have been placed outside the Geneva Convention if they were captured in that case.

They would have been, yes.

23:00 **Was that an issue that was discussed at great length before the decision was made?**

Yes, it was discussed. It was agreed that this was a risk that was appropriate in subversive warfare.

Would it have been the case that they largely

23:30 **didn't wear uniform, rather than did?**

Well, when you're operating in a foreign country you try to dress that is appropriate for that country.

I have difficulty imagining a bunch of Aussie blokes in sarongs in kayaks, it just doesn't work for me, it must have been a pretty

24:00 **extraordinary sight.**

Well it did.

Hopefully, it was at night, I suppose. If it's the case, as some people have suggested, that in any war, ten percent of the men do ninety percent of the killing. From your experience, would that be true?

Oh, yes. Oh

24:30 gosh, I've never done that sum, but there were so many in Z Special Unit that never went outside of

Australia.

But would they have been men generally recruited because they belonged to that ten percent? They had the capacity

No. Would you frame that question again?

25:00 **When men were selected to work in this area, would it have influenced the process of selection, that they had that capacity, if necessary?**

Oh, yes. It would have been, of course. And every operation, which was considered by the board, first question we would ask was, do we have the leadership

25:30 available, do we have the right person to lead this particular operation. And then what number of operatives would be necessary, do we have enough operatives with the appropriate skills and determination to pursue an objective. But they were almost standard questions. There was no point in sending a

26:00 middle aged clerk who'd never been outside his office to go and handle a raid like the raid on Singapore Harbour. They were all trained people who have very special skills and a high sense of courage and duty.

Do you think that these men

26:30 **would have had any difficulty in readjusting to civilian life?**

Look, some of them, I believe, some of them have had difficulty. But, I don't know, we didn't seem to, all my friends that were

27:00 involved in hazardous activities or subversive campaigns, they were all just seemed to be trained to take those, accept those circumstances of which they were confronted. And none of them needed counselling or having any psychological

27:30 problems. And I believe, in Vietnam, I believe it's different, so I don't know enough about it, I can't comment. But a lot of us old soldiers of my generation, I think we seemed to have a different attitude. We didn't like war but we had to put up with the challengers, which we were confronted and expected to

28:00 meet those challengers in a strong and manly way.

Was there any price to pay for maintaining that inner strength?

I think we gained inner strength. Those of us who survived and who were shot at

28:30 and shared experiences with others, you developed a friendships, I'd say unshakable friendships. I think any friendships are born out of shared experiences, but shared experiences in adversity produce really firm friendships, I'd say unshakable.

29:00 I think we're probably a dying breed - I think. Or do you think your generation would have those same views and values?

Well, my generation is the generation that went to Vietnam and they suffered enormously psychologically.

Yes, so I believe. And I think they had more difficult circumstances than we had.

29:30 Agent Orange seems to be, I don't know enough about it but I had a nephew who served, I think three tours there, I'm sure it affected him.

We've spoken to a range of veterans who have told us that they do still sometimes dream about the war, do you ever dream about the war?

30:00 Well, wife told me I used to for a couple of years after the war and sometimes I'd wake up and call out, "There are Japs." There weren't any Japs, but that didn't very long.

Do you think that it was because of the high level of

30:30 **stress and anxiety that was involved in those operations?**

Well I never tried to let the, I tried not to let any situation be stressful. And I just took the, that resolution,

31:00 when I lost my first bloke, I think I told you earlier, that it just firmed my resolution to do what I had to do and do it as well as I could. And I can't say that I was, I'd like to think I wasn't stressed, you know, you've

31:30 concern for the safety of the people for whom I was responsible, but I don't know whether I let that be

stressful. Or am I splitting words there, stressful and concern.

32:00 But we did send people back from the Middle East who, it was called anxiety neurosis, and there were some of those people who just could not take more. I didn't criticise them, but they were not psychologically able to adjust to

32:30 difficult situations.

Were there times when you had to make choices, decisions about sending men on operations that were extremely high risk?

Yes, we did. And at Rimau Expedition, where we lost 23.

33:00 I was a director and spoke vehemently against it because of what I'd read from various books and so on, it's crazy thing to go back to the same destination where you've achieved a success, achieved a previous success, because they'll be on the look out for you, waiting for you,

33:30 for sure. And of course, that's what happened this time with Rimau. But the higher commander said the operation was to go on. So my voice, it wasn't the only one I might add, it was opposed to it. But we had to make those decisions, yes. Well, every operation was considered on a risk benefit

34:00 basis, a risk benefit analysis.

Why was your risk benefit analysis so different then from the risk benefit analysis of those senior officers who insisted that operation go ahead?

Because of the obsession of mainly Ivan Lyons who

34:30 lead the successful Jaywick Operation and he was very persuasive and he desperately wanted to carry out another operation in the same place with more modern equipment. And he had the more modern equipment and he had the volunteers to do it and they were very good people. But he was able to persuade them that it should go ahead and it did and it failed.

35:00 **And you knew it would fail, you were?**

Well, I was only one. I don't have any exceptional powers of analysis, but to me it just didn't make good sense at all. I thought the risk was too great. And they'd achieved, the earlier raid, they'd achieved the psychological impact on the Japanese, they had so much loss of face to have their

35:30 defences penetrated in such an effective way. But I didn't think it could happen again.

Do you recall the discussions and meetings where you expressed that opinion?

No. There were several discussions, I know, but I can't and

36:00 there were certainly voices against, there's no question about it. And I suppose, but Lyon was a very persuasive gentleman and a great bloke, he was a very brave one, but he certainly had an obsession bordering on a real hatred of the Japanese.

36:30 **And in a unit of that size, of course, one man's motivations can, presumably, have an enormous strategic impact?**

Well yes. It did, he had enough persuasive power to convince those who had the final say that this operation ought to take place. And it was so

37:00 you know, the access was by submarine and then a small junk and then kayaks, oh, sleeping beauty, a special small one man submarine for each operative.

In any intelligence operation

37:30 **or subversive operation, what sorts of checks and balances can be introduced to moderate the influence of one particular point of view?**

Have a very strong commander, who will say, "My boy, this will not go ahead."

And the implication is then, that your

38:00 **commander wasn't sufficiently forthright?**

Well, on this occasion I would say no, he wasn't. It should have been knocked on the head early in the piece.

Tape 8

00:23 **You've just been talking with Annie [Interviewer] about the problems of**

00:30 **operation, I'm wondering if you can tell us about some of the successful operations? You mentioned there were perhaps 81 operations, we know Jaywick and Rimau are the best known for good and bad reasons, but I'm wondering if you could lead us through one particular operation?**

Well, you see a lot

01:00 of those were concentrated in Borneo, that was the, I regard that that was one of the most successful phases of Z operations.

That was in July '45?

Before then, I think late '44.

01:30 And the role was there were three main objectives of that operation, of the operation in Borneo, a group called the Semut Operations, as a group. And they, the objectives were first of all to ensure and establish a British presence in

02:00 Borneo when the war was over. It was obviously, it had very commercial significance with Shell and I suppose timber in particular. And the British Colonial Service was well established there, and the next objective was to develop a

02:30 resistance organisation behind, to operate behind enemy lines. And the third objective was to gather intelligence for more orthodox landings at Balikpapan and Tarakan

03:00 where 9th Division landed and in Balikpapan where the 7th Division landed. So those are the objectives. And we had leaders for that operation, principally there was a chap called Harrison who had

03:30 been in that area before the war, so he had local knowledge and could speak the language. It was he who assembled the Dyaks, organised to bring in other operatives from Australia to train them in warfare, particularly the art of ambush

04:00 and he was then supported by, well we built that force up mainly with the Dyaks who were head hunters. And there was many stories told about them, but they'd received brutal treatment from the Japanese during the

04:30 period, early periods of the Japanese occupation. And the story has it that on one occasion, to seek retribution, they persuaded, I think it was supposed to be 23 attractive young ladies to take off their cloths and swim in an

05:00 adjacent lake, which they allegedly did. And the Japanese not being aware thought, ah hah, we're going to have some fun and games here. And rushed down to the water's edge, and on the way, they were not aware that an ambush had been laid for them. The Japs were all shot, or executed. And that night

05:30 they took, I think it was 23 heads, to the celebration dinner. And our people had to, in spite of intense feelings of nausea, had to attend this ceremony where the heads were actually on display. But anyway, they put up with it. And the Dyaks were

06:00 great people, and of course they had this famous blow pipe which they could pick off a target, well I think it had to be fairly close, you know, thirty or forty yards, but with great accuracy could knock off the Japanese. So that series of operations and support by another series called the, based on a series of small ships called

06:30 The Black Snake and the Rattle Snake and some other snake. And they had the ability to penetrate the rivers and from the east side of Borneo. And they were the Semut series of ops. And they again had that role of arming, ambushing and

07:00 supplying and training these troops. So there was quite a good book on that subject, on the Semut Operations

The Silent Feet?

Silent Feet that was [Colonel] Courtney's book on operations in general, and that's quite a good book, quite well written. There are omissions as there are in any book, but he

07:30 came out as a planning officer originally from UK, he'd been with SOE over there. And he came out and did a very good job as I think strengthened the planning side of it very significantly. And then of course, the other one was Campbell, he was

08:00 director of operations, and he had a very significant role, from the King's Own Scottish Borderers. The challengers they met apart from the Japanese, were first of all mountainous terrain, some of the mountains, I've forgotten the name now, was about fourteen thousand feet.

08:30 Flying around that in a Liberator trying to find, often shrouded in mist, and trying to find dropping zones, which were safe, that was really quite a challenge. And we lost, I think two Liberators on those particular operations.

Flying into the mountain or?

Well, I don't know what happened in the end but they just disappeared from sight

09:00 and never seen again.

Did your staff manage to parachute out or did you lose them?

We dropped a lot of people in by parachute. They got in quite, out of that plane, no. No, we lost the crews too. Then later we were able to get Catalinas because there was enough

09:30 open water for a Cat to come in and land. And so the supply situation, the supply chain was greatly strengthened when that was available. So they were tough operators. And scrub typhus was another constant challenge. And so the medical side was,

10:00 again, always a problem. But I think in total, the figure I mentioned earlier about, I think it was the best part of 2,000 Japanese, were killed, 1,800 to 2,000. We had a force of about 1,500 including about 30 operatives from Australia. There were about thirty natives

10:30 killed and about, and we didn't lose any white Australians in that series of operations.

I think I interrupted you before, you were going to talk about another book. Was there another book that you were going to mention?

The Semut Operations, that's one book, and the other one, Silent Feet, that was Courtney.

Once people were

11:00 **parachuted in to somewhere like Borneo, did they come back or did they stay there until the end of the war?**

A lot of those stayed there until the end of the war, some came, we got some out. A chap called Gault was in and out, but getting out again was difficult. But at the end of the war we got quite a few out with Catalinas

11:30 or were able to get these small river boats, the Snake-series of boats, they brought out quite a few. A lot found their way out of Balikpapan, some came out by normal air services from, well from Balikpapan. But how many were in there at the end, I don't know.

12:00 My last appointment was, actually, as OC of - all the technical side had well and truly finished. I was commander of group D Operations, which was going to be operations in Sumatra and the Celebes and Morotai, not Morotai,

12:30 what's the islands further south? And at that time transport was readily available, I could call on submarines, Catalinas, motor torpedo boats for what we wanted. In some ways, it was a bit of a disappointment the war was over, because we had at last had access for transport, which had been a bugbear throughout the entire history

13:00 of Z Special.

You mentioned to Annie that you were somewhat disappointed that your role was administrative rather than operative and that there was one operation in particular that you wanted to go on, what was that one?

Well, this was one that was really my concept called Operation

13:30 Falcon. And the plan was to attack on the one night, instead of going on the Rimau Operation, to attack on the one night thirteen ports around the south west Pacific, and to attack them all simultaneously on the one night. We got as far as having

14:00 preliminary approval for it, we had the equipment, we had the trained people and we were ready to go when it was cancelled by higher command on the grounds that there was going to be a final push north and all available transport was going to be concentrated in

14:30 other activities. That was a great disappointment to us but it possibly could have been the right decision, no one will ever know. And at that stage it may not have been necessary anyway, the war would have ended without Falcon. But it was very disappointing to

15:00 people that had trained so assiduously and prepared to risk their lives, and it would have been a very exciting kind of operation to be part of.

The frustration you would have felt then, did you feel it more keenly because you couldn't talk about it with anyone?

Couldn’t talk, no.

15:30 The only one I would talk about it with would be the other directors - that’s all. Certainly couldn’t talk outside. And my own staff, I could talk to them, used to chat with Carey in particular.

The Secrets Act that you signed

16:00 **stipulated that you couldn’t discuss your work, not even with your wife, did that have a time limit on it?**

No, it didn’t.

Are you breaking that act now?

No, the 30 year act, those

16:30 issues are allowed to be discussed now.

Were you tempted before that thirty years was up to discuss your work?

No, I wasn’t. And it annoyed me when people wrote books, which they had no right to write, for commercial reasons. So I wouldn’t have a bar of it. You shouldn’t talk about it at all.

17:00 I followed my obligation.

Did you feel that at times you might have to set the record straight?

I would’ve liked to have done, yes. But, yes I did have an urge to do that.

In relation to what particularly?

17:30 Oh now you’re trying to draw me out too. I would like to have had the, done sufficient research to retrace the Rimau Operation from its very beginning and find out what really happened in the end.

18:00 There’s a lot of conjecture, but not a great deal of facts to support the articles which have been written.

Do any of those articles, to your knowledge, make use of Japanese records?

Some of them do, yes.

Do you think it’s

18:30 **possible to say that in light of what happened with Rimau, that Jaywick was too successful, that it painted the wrong picture of what might be achieved?**

Well that, I think that is possible. I think Ivan Lyon was certainly on a high and a very brave man and I think he thought he was indestructible,

19:00 some people have that attitude. But he’s a great man, I have nothing but the greatest admiration for him. But I think it’s a pity that he risked his life again on this ill fated Rimau.

You mentioned, I think it was in Timor, another operation where the operative was

19:30 **a bit casual with security.**

Well he was casual in that, I understand he failed to include in some of his messages an authenticator in the message which he sent, which resulted in supplies being dropped for the benefit

20:00 of the Japanese and certain, and there was also an expedition, I’ve forgotten its name now, which was also a disaster. The Japs were just waiting for these people when they landed. And of course, they were all executed. Well not executed, killed.

Is it possible that the Japanese had been sending those messages?

Yes. Oh, it was.

20:30 Quite possible.

There were other operations too, that were compromised in that they led to people on the ground, be they natives or operatives, not achieving

21:00 **what they’d been sent to achieve, possibly because of lack of intelligence or because the characters of various people had been misread, that’s what I understand, was that the case?**

Well I’m not aware of those.

Maybe I’m mistaken.

21:30 **I’ve read some assessments which - one in particular by Geoffrey Grey, where he criticises**

some operations of SOA for not understanding the local environment well enough.

Does he name a specific operation?

22:00 **I don't think he does, no. I mean, it's probably easy for him to do so without naming specific operations.**

We were always aware of the challenges which races imposed and we wanted in many of our parties people who could speak the language,

22:30 which of course was a vital part of it.

Knowing what you know now, in hindsight, what might you have done differently, I'm not saying there is anything you would have done differently, I'll rephrase that. Are there things you would have done differently if you'd had

23:00 **more resources, more information?**

Well it's what I would have done if I'd been commandant, I think I would have argued very strongly

23:30 for access to submarines, Catalinas and to surface craft which I knew I could rely on, which would be available specifically for operations, which I was responsible. Instead of this having to, when each

24:00 new operation cropped up, having to go and beg for the transport which was fundamental to our success. But that was one of the biggest problems. The second one, I would have in my staff appointments, I would have appointed

24:30 people who had the personal qualities to develop very close relationships with the Americans and senior members of the orthodox forces.

It seems

25:00 **your training, from what you've told us today, it seems extraordinarily detailed and the skills that you were taught and put into practice many times seem to make, to have been a very good regime of training. But you're suggesting**

25:30 **that the organisation was a bit hamstrung because the resources and?**

Resources and people skills, say inter-service and international personal skills that would have helped. They were good people, I'm not being unduly critical, but I felt it could have been better.

26:00 **Because of those restraints, do you think that someone with your skills might have been put to better use in another theatre of operation?**

I think there were many, many people who had much greater skills than I

26:30 have.

Do you think it was a good use of resources?

What, using me

All the training that was given to you and all the other people and then the use of ships and planes, for what was achieved.

Well, that's a very difficult question, very difficult to assess. But

27:00 as in orthodox warfare, there are, you know, there are triumphs, there are disasters. There are brilliant successes and there are gross mistakes which we made and lives have been lost. And so it was

27:30 in Special Operations, there were mistakes and there were loses in human life. Again, there were also successes. But how you can really balance the two, I don't know. If you're having a continuous stream of losses, then of course, you chop that kind of operation out all together. And on the other hand, if you're having a string of success, you

28:00 support the success. But I do know that at the end of the war in Z Special Unit, they were a great group of courageous young men who were prepared to offer their, risk their lives for these incredible challengers.

28:30 **Did that, does the excitement of those challenges provide its own adrenalin? Does that help people achieve the sorts of things they did achieve?**

Yes, without doubt. They're filled up with the adrenalin running through the system, even from the planning

29:00 stages of a major operation, it does help, without any doubt. And the people who don't have that, they're not the right kind of people for that kind of operation.

29:30 **After the war when various people talked about what they did, what did you tell people that you'd done if you couldn't talk to them about the last few years?**

I told them that I had spent half my war in Royal Australian Engineers, half my war in Z Special

30:00 Unit about which I just can't tell you anything, and I don't want to talk too much about the other half either. That used to be my stock reply. Because we'd had six years of war and the interest then was to get on with establishing oneself back into civil life.

30:30 **Were people curious, I mean, did you find people uncomfortably curious about that special unit?**

Some were, yes. "Yes, what a pity, it sounds all very exciting, why can't you tell us more?" Because I'd signed an oath in 1942 which precludes me from doing that.

31:00 But wait for a few years and a lot of it will come out and a lot of it will be written, some of will be right, some of it will be totally misleading, some of it will be meant deliberately to create excitement that wasn't there. But quite often the common objective is selling books.

31:30 **I seemed to remember that Ian Fleming, was he involved in SOE?**

Oh, yes. I don't think so.

A similar sort of

Yes, he might have.

I know he was involved in something like that.

Yes, I think he was.

Did you have, and you're a very sober person, but I mean, did you have characters like that whose

32:00 **imaginations were a bit too large?**

Oh yes, oh yes. Some of the hair brained ideas that would come up too, for the director to consider were just, you know, unbelievable. But on the other hand there were brave people who were prepared to risk their lives.

Can you tell us about some of the more imaginative?

Oh,

32:30 I'd rather not, I think I've dismissed those from my memory now, you know, they just come in with a piece of paper, and out the door with that, put it in the waste paper basket. A lot of those I never took seriously, never bothered to remember them.

33:00 **Can we talk about the end of the war now, whereabouts were you on 15th August?**

I was in Balikpapan. Then my role as a director of technological services, then of course, really was then

33:30 redundant because we had the equipment, we had all the techniques, we were well established, which was confirmed after my visit to Europe in 1944. So I was then posted to the command operations based in Balikpapan which would cover the Sumatra and the Celebes and

34:00 Southern Borneo.

Were you elated by the end of the war or

Absolutely. It had been six years out of my life and I'm more a creative person, I was much more interested in creation than destruction.

34:30 The night we heard the announcement of the bomb, we had a celebration that night, a great celebration that night. And there was something to drink, which was not always the case. And we knew we'd be going home at last, and staying home.

35:00 **And how soon were you able to come home?**

Well I was, having joined up early, in October, I was able to come home in October and had my discharge, I was going through the process of being discharged, sitting in the dentist's chair for a final check up when I

35:30 received an announcement that my son had arrived. And he's now fifty-eight, I think.

That was welcome news.

Oh, it was, great. And then demobilisation leave, to have three, I think we had

36:00 three months demob leave, and that was really a wonderful leave.

How did you spend that time?

Spent most of it at Avalon in New South Wales, that was where my wife was born in Sydney. And we had a house down at Avalon Beach and it was just so wonderful

36:30 to get up in the morning and not have to go to an office or not have to go on parade or jump in an aeroplane or wonder what was going to happen next.

Were you physically fit at the end of the war?

I was fortunate enough to be fit for most of the war. I just

37:00 had one bout of dysentery through drinking bore water in Greece which was not quite the right kind of water to drink, but it was the only water available at the time. But apart from that I was fairly fit.

How long had you spent in the tropics?

Altogether, I just don't know.

37:30 Up and down, you know, never any long stays. But I never contracted malaria or any of the other nasties in the tropics, although I can't say, I don't enjoy the tropics. But,

38:00 I just don't know. But never had any really long stretches, thank goodness.

I'm just thinking, it sounds, you talked about having to, you know, get up at three in the morning and get on a plane and go somewhere, it sounds like exhausting and stressful work.

38:30 I'd say demanding, yes, but I always tried to keep fit. You had to be fit. And you might be off to, say, a school where you established at Cairns and another school at Fraser Island, and you'd be paddling kayaks around for

39:00 what seemed like miles, it probably wasn't, but we certainly went for some quite long paddles. And I think you had to be fit to, I think, to command respect from the people you were working with. Not had to be, wanted to be.

Tape 9

00:25 **You mentioned establishing schools, training schools at**

00:30 **Fraser Island and Cairns, I'm interested if you can reflect on the arc of your experience of the war beginning with yourself as a student at the engineering school, then moving to becoming a teacher at the British School of Engineering in the Middle East and then being responsible for establishing the schools?**

01:00 **What was important to you in terms of training and pedagogical practice, if I can put it in those terms?**

Well, in view of the kind of operations, which we were associated, physical fitness was very, a fundamental requirement, we just had to have fit

01:30 people. Again we needed disciplined people, we needed people who could withstand a rigorous challenge, and so we challenged them with these schools, with these long journeys in kayaks and mountaineering and

02:00 overcoming obstacles, again, training in weaponry was important and training in demolitions, training in mines, perhaps laying mines and mine fields. And communications, again,

02:30 was a vital part of the training process.

Apart from those, like the information, the war information, what about the way you would teach in terms of discipline. How do you go about, you know, the fact that each individual is probably going to have a different response?

Well, I suppose it was,

03:00 my approach was quite authoritarian, I suppose. I'd say, "Now look chaps, this is what we're going to do, whether you like it or not. Now if anyone's got any objections, let me hear them now, but I'm doing it for this and this and this reason, this is the way we'll approach this particular problem. If anyone's got a better way,

03:30 let him speak up." That was my style, and it seemed to go over quite well. And I always believed in

always introducing some humour somewhere along the line, keeping people laughing, if people laugh, they're happy, if they're happy, they'll absorb.

04:00 **Did you have any occasion when you didn't think that people were keeping up or were perhaps rebelling in some way?**

Very, very rarely. I can remember on occasion when the gentleman had been interrupting a bit and wasn't concentrating

04:30 too well and I remember calling out, "Lieutenant, I'm giving this lecture if you think you can do better, come up here now." He kept quiet and he apologised later. Never had any trouble with him again.

05:00 **When you were having your leave at the end of the war, did you have an idea about what you might be doing after the war by then?**

I had an idea about what I was doing after the war, during the war. I had developed a plan in the Western Desert, I think it wasClausewitz, the famous French general, once

05:30 said that "War can be defined as periods of intense boredom punctuated by periods of intense fright". You've probably heard that one. Well I can't say I was actually bored at any time.

You had calculus to keep you?

Well, yes. But one did have, there were quite periods and during some of those quite periods the first thing you would think about home and family

06:00 and then you would think about what you're going to do after the war. And I conceived the idea of forming an engineering construction group, had that idea in the Western Desert, and thought I could staff it, the plan envisaged staffing it with proven young engineer officers as executives and NCOs,

06:30 Non Commissioned Officers, as foremen, general foremen. That was the plan and it was ultimately implemented. And not only did we have members of the Royal Australian Engineers but service people such as the company secretary was a radio officer on HMAS Australia. And one of our early project managers was a former fighter pilot.

07:00 But they were trained proven people and that gave us a wonderful start in commercial life.

Did you ever, at the start of that company, reject an employee because they didn't have an army background?

Well,

07:30 at that time we were really inviting people and it was once said, which wasn't quite true, but it was said around the town, you're wasting your time applying for a job with John Holland unless you have a first class honours degree, a commission of services and you played cricket. Well, I really wasn't

08:00 quite like that. But we did find enough, we had enough contacts in those early days for (UNCLEAR) servicemen, they practically all were, but no, if I found someone who was a competent engineer and had the other qualities, we had quite a lot of course. And some of them didn't even play cricket.

And the company, of course, was

08:30 **very successful. A lot of the people we have been speaking to over the last month or so, many of them finished the war with qualifications that you couldn't dream about and walked away from them. I'm thinking of pilots and people in the navy. These**

09:00 **seemed to be vocational careers which remained open to them and yet they couldn't get away from it quickly enough. You were able to use your war career positively, did you, was there ever a time when you did want**

09:30 **to do something different?**

No, never.

You didn't form the company straight away, did you?

No, because Commonwealth Oil Refineries had been very good to me during the war. I knew they had a major development program to be implemented

10:00 and the two officers senior to me were both killed during the war. And so I knew they'd be short of staff, senior staff and the third reason was I felt I didn't have, six years and I had no commercial skills or experience whatsoever. So I wanted to get those experiences from COR [Commonwealth Oil Refineries] and I [wanted] to give

10:30 too. Return some of the support that I had had. So that delayed that till 1949 when we first started, that was the year I chose to establish John Holland. And I went along before hand to sound out, to get some

advice from people I respected

including Major General Sir Clive Steel, told him what I thought of doing and Sir Clive, his reply was, “What the bloody hell are you waiting for my boy, get out there and get cracking.” I only wanted his advice but also had wonderful support. And the opportunities just flowed in, we had a wonderful run. And throughout industry and throughout public service again,

so many of the people in senior places had served in Royal Australian Engineers, so we had very good contacts. Sir Clive also gave an appreciation dinner early after the war to say thank you to officers who had served with him. And said, “There are some people that say one should never do business with friends”. With that

statement, I heartily disagree. There are friends who are best sources of contact. By all means do business with friend but for God’s sake, never let them down.” Which is very good advice of course. And he knew, and projects, I didn’t ask for any help, but came our way. And you obviously just bend over backwards to ensure that they were successful.

Did you ever find, I mean, apart from the jokes about people not bothering to apply, to join your company if they didn’t have an army service career, you’ve told me about all the pluses and benefits

of working with army colleagues

Service colleagues, put it that way.

Service colleagues, sorry, yes. Were there any times when that back fired?

Oh, there might have been one occasion

when a somewhat rambunctious general foreman, on a rigging project, had an altercation with a rigger and they were both in the wrong and the rambunctious foreman knocked the rigger off a stay

on a major cable structure, and he fell to the ground. But they were both former service people, I suppose. One was a former navy rigger and the general foreman, he was an army type, but a very forthright bloke who -

I think his action caused a certain amount of displeasure with our client. But apart from that, no, they worked together incredibly well.

Did you join and participate in service associations after the war?

Yes. I was,

well first of all I served with the CMF [Citizens Military Force] for a few years. I was second in command of the engineer regiment at Peckham Avenue. I was president of the 2/2nd Field Company Association where Jock belonged, for about three different times, I think. And patron of the Z

Special Unit. And of course, with the RSL [Returned and Services League], I’m currently, been chairman of Anzac Awards for 24 years, and still am. And of course I served for a while, a few years, in Legacy.

How important was it for you to be part of those

organisations. I mean, obviously it was important, but can you give me sort of specific examples?

Well the, I think we might have mentioned earlier, that friendships are formed based on a shared experience, shared experiences in adversity

produce unshakable friendships, I made so many friends in the services, that it was important to me and my family to enjoy those associations. And it’s very interesting now, people like Joe Jopling from the 2/2nd Field Company Association, for so many of those members of that association, their entire

social lives have been planned around that, the people that met in that association. Whereas, those of us in a more senior, the executive group of the community, we have, you know, other opportunities for wider associations. And it was important for me from a sporting point of view too, we played a series of cricket matches for about 25 or

30 years, between engineers, artillery and infantry. And we developed a team called The Glorious International Sappers and we went to England and played a series of matches against Royal Engineers in England. Three test matches, won one, lost one, drew one. And then played so many social so called, this was social too really, at

Oxford University and the founder of the air force. So we’ve had wonderful associations with those service people. But of that lot there are now only two of us left out of all that lot. They’ve been dying pretty rapidly in all services. So it has been enormously

18:30 socially attractive and very much acceptable to our respective families.

You said before that after six years of war you felt that you'd lost six years of your life to this war, or given six years of your life to this war, and yet

19:00 **since then you've talked about all the wonderful things that have come out of it. I mean, the company that you formed, the friendships, these associations. How do you look back on the war?**

Well, first of all, the war deprived me of a couple of years at Cambridge University,

19:30 which I had, my academic performance was pretty ordinary but it looked as if my qualifications were favourable, that I could have gained a place, in which I would have loved to have done. So the war deprived me of that. I didn't see that great place till I'd been whizzing through it, but never had a close look at things like

20:00 King's College Chapel, that wonderful fan place, the (UNCLEAR) in the ceiling. I did spend a weekend there during the war, but would have loved to have gone back there, been a student there. So that was a (UNCLEAR). The man management skills that one required during the war, were of great assistance to me

20:30 in leading a company. The contacts that were made during that war were again very, made a positive contribution to the success of the JH Group in creating opportunities. The overcoming of challengers which were imposed during the war,

21:00 it's certainly a great boost to confidence, and you feel that you can cope with anything that comes, you feel you can cope with it. So the negative, and of course, the other negative of course was the hardship to

21:30 my family, my mother and brothers and sisters, and of course, to my wife and her family. The anguish that they had was a great negative. And I think they had more. The mystery and the uncertainty, you know, whether they'd be a telephone call or a message at any time, they had six years

22:00 of that. And my association, exposed to hazards, really hazards, hot hazards would be only a fraction of the six years. So I was probably, might have been playing cricket somewhere and they think I'm probably being shot at. Of course, if there was any action from 6th Division they assumed that we'd be in it. I suppose we were, but

22:30 so, I've forgotten what you were going to ask me now. I think, what is the balance? Well put it this way, I certainly don't want another war. War to me is abhorrent

23:00 and I thought that when Australian troops went into Timor, I had a grandson that was older then than I was when I first set out to the Middle East. And I was very concerned that might spread near towards Indonesia, which I wouldn't want. And I don't want it, don't like it

23:30 in spite of the, I suppose, the positive advantages which it brought my way.

Do you feel that the war had changed you?

I was pretty rotten when war broke out. Yes, I think I'm, seriously, I'm a

24:00 better person, probably a more responsible person than I was. I think I have a great concern for people than I perhaps had previously, having the responsibility for the lives of so many at a young age, that does develop a sense of responsibility.

24:30 **You said before, that when people would ask you, after the war, about your war time experience, that you would basically tell them to mind their own business, you didn't want to talk about it?**

No. I think it was a period one felt that in some ways

25:00 it was a wasted six years, you know, that could have been, either could have built more bridges or could have built more dams or someone during that period could have had a family earlier. But then those other, the pluses that come out of it, they were indeed, quite significant.

25:30 **Did your wife or children want to know more about what you had done?**

My wife would have liked to have known more, and she did, we did talk to her quite a lot later. But I could talk about engineering, she knew all about that. And having her rather distinguished

26:00 brothers, again, the family were very much service oriented. And she enjoyed the association too, with the old soldiers, old service people. She enjoyed those cricket matches.

The fact that you couldn't talk

26:30 **about things, that you had to hide certain parts of your activity from scrutiny by other people,**

do you think that had any effect on your emotional make up?

27:00 I don't think so. I think I was able to just turn it off. The same as I always had a philosophy in commercial life, that if there was a problem, and there were a few problems on the way I can assure you, that I felt that as long as I had done what I felt I should have done, I could turn it off and sleep at night.

27:30 And if you couldn't do that, you shouldn't be in this kind of business I've been in. So I was able to turn that off or I'd put that away in a compartment somewhere and open the door at an appropriate time. My grandchildren are now quite interested in what went on.

There's been a change in Australia over the past ten or twenty years, I think, with people being more interested in Australia's military

28:00 **heritage and more interested in celebrating the ideals of Anzac, whatever that may be. Have you, what are your thoughts on those changes?**

Well I think so, I think there's more interest in the history per se, which

28:30 I'm rather glad about. Which I think I might have mentioned, perhaps not in this interview, but I was kind of propelled into history, I was always interested in history, but I don't regard myself as an historian. But then when I became involved I thought, what a pity so many people are missing so much by not being aware of so much

29:00 fascinating history that we have. In fact I'm going next, I think, the Queen's Birthday weekend, going over to Sydney for an historical occasion, the bicentenary of the completion of Matthew Flinders' circumnavigation of Australia. There's a day on the harbour, and I'm invited because of

29:30 my association with the Flinders bicentenary functions, the bicentenary of his birth in '74. And so I think there is a greater awareness, not only of military history, I was looking along the, as we went to the Anzac march the other day, I was - one thing that impressed me

30:00 was the number of dark skinned people along the track, and I thought that was great. Showing how we're integrated, there's an integration process into a true multi-national society is very much with us. These people again are Australians and they're now interested in military history or they wouldn't be there. And lots of children there.

30:30 I don't like them in the march, but I like them being there. They bugger up the march, the march is not really a march but a shuffle. But I understand the spirit, and I want to encourage them to come. But I'd like little enclaves of children. But yes, I think there is a much greater awareness.

Do you think that awareness is accompanied by

31:00 **understanding?**

That I don't know about that. You see, if I walk down Collins Street today and spoke to ten people about the events on the Kokoda track, there would be very few that would know anything about it. And that I think is sad, that is so much a part of our,

31:30 such an important part of our military history.

Do you think that there is any danger in the way that Anzac is made alive by speakers, politicians?

32:00 Well I don't know the politicians closely enough. Of course, there are very few politicians who are ex-servicemen, particularly World War II. I suppose I don't know any World War II, there might be. But I don't think

32:30 they really have that much influence. But I think that the commemoration services at Anzac Cove, well I haven't been there, I've only been passed it, I haven't actually landed properly. That's most impressive. I like the dawn

33:00 service which is run in Melbourne with Tony Charlton, who is absolutely brilliant. And the spirit about that, you can feel it as you march along the street, there is definitely a great respect, I think, for those who served in World War II and now Vietnam.

You say your grandchildren

33:30 **are more interested perhaps that your children were in the period as much as in your own experiences. If you're talking to them about the war, do you feel it's important to paint a full picture? I mean, do you tell them the highs and the lows or do you give them an edited version?**

34:00 It's an edited version, I don't want to emphasise the horrors of war, I don't want them to visualise some of the scenes of devastation of which I became well aware. I want them to

34:30 visualise a world, well the world that we envisaged when we graduated in 1936. Now whether it was the idealism of youth or the amount of red wine we had that night which we weren't accustomed, but the consensus was about, several disciplines, a few of us from the same university college,

35:00 had a celebratory dinner. And the consensus was that by the time we reached sixty and people graduating from other universities around the world reached sixty, that most of the problems of the world would be solved. There'd be shelter, they'd be peace, they'd be security, they'd be plenty for everyone. Well, we had that ideal that night,

35:30 now all those people, those that I can remember anyway, that were there, all held responsible positions and have been positive contributors yet the world's in this terrible mess that we're in today. It's rather sad, but I think one still has to have, it's sad if one can't have ideals to achieve.

Tape 10

00:16 **... to society?**

Well, I think to answer that question I'll have to go right back to the beginning. My parents had a very high sense of civic responsibility, and that has been passed on to several members of our family. So we do regard ourselves as responsible citizens. But I think the war experience has just firmed that, you know, that whole attitude to caring for other people.

01:00 And so it's, I suppose manifested in my case, I suppose, in, after we became established, first of all with the Legacy, I was looking after, I had about five families to look after. Four of them charming and competent, one an absolute horror. And

01:30 would ring me up at all kinds of hours and that worried my wife greatly, she said, "You know, you're spending more time with Mrs. Irvine's family than you are with your own." So that was probably true. But Legacy, again, is a wonderful organisation and it does give care. And in the engineering world, I suppose, I

02:00 was the founding president of the Civil Engineering Contracted Association and became a life member of that, served with it for some years. And the institution of engineers, I became a winner of the award called, the highest award the

02:30 institution gives, the Peter Nicol Russell Memorial Award. And the Melbourne University Medal, associated with that for many years. Then I became involved with the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

03:00 as a foundation member of what was called the Operation G. And this was a group of citizens who were invited to prepare for the appeal when Sir Winston died, to take advantage of the euphoria of the moment.

That's perhaps not the best expression, the euphoria of Winston's

03:30 **death. I know what you mean.**

Well, how do you put it?

Well celebrating his life, I think. Some people would have been very glad when he was dead, but I'm sure you're not meaning to say you were very glad he was dead.

No, I wasn't glad he was dead. It was an occasion of celebration, there was no question about that. And so I

04:00 became Victorian chairman and national director and still am a patron of that, it still goes on, a very happy association, a great lot of people. And the Queen Elizabeth Trust, I was a foundation member of that and became the joint chairman and then I was a so called distinguished life member, they had a classification,

04:30 and that's now amalgamated with, it was a trust established for a finite period of 25 years originally, and it was doing so well it was decided that, as distinct, Churchill was a trust in perpetuity, then decided there should be an amalgamation with the Australian Foundation of Youth.

05:00 And that foundation is now worth about 50 million, and still very active, and I'm a patron of that. The Churchill Trust is also worth, it went from about 5 million to 50 million and sends about 50 people overseas each year. Then became involved in Matthew Flinders

05:30 bicentenary of his birth, and that lead to other historical activities such as a series based on wrecks on the south coast, the focal point being the wreck of the Lockhart. I was chairman of that and then chairman of La Trobe, the birth of La Trobe in '75. Then Marcus

06:00 Clark, CJ Dennis, we had various functions to celebrate those occasions or commemorations. And they were run through an organisation known as the History Advisory Council of Victoria, the purpose of

which were to identify significant historical events and make recommendations

06:30 to the premier as to which ones ought to be celebrated or commemorated, and how, when, where and by whom and what it would cost. And we did a series of those until a change of government with Mr. Cain came into office and he decided it would run through

07:00 one of the government departments because they didn't need support of private enterprise, but they've hardly done anything ever since, which is a pity. So many major events have gone by virtually unnoticed, which is a pity. And then on the medical side, I became involved with I was on the board of Melbourne hospital, Royal Melbourne Hospital for about 16

07:30 years. And then caught up with the founding president of The National Stroke Foundation, doing a stroke research and treatment. Then the Mental Health Foundation, the Bone Marrow Donor Institute

Were you running a company at any stage?

Oh, this was after I retired, a lot of that. I retired in 1986.

08:00 But it was mandatory in our articles, they made you retire as chairman when you reached the age of seventy two. Then I suppose my latest one, well my local gold club. Then the Children's First Foundation, have you read about Moira Kelly?

Moira Kelly? I don't know.

She's a Mother Theresa.

08:30 She's a wonderful girl. She started doing, demonstrating her sense of compassion when she was at school somewhere north of Melbourne, where she used to share her lunch with kids that didn't have a proper lunch. And at twenty-three she was on the streets of Calcutta with Mother Theresa. And a couple of years later she was in Brooklyn giving, assisting with the

09:00 lives of HIV [Human Immunodeficiency Virus] infected babes of single mothers. She was caught up in a gun battle over there, she wasn't the target, but she and a friend happened to be crossing a particular bridge and two gangs were having pot shots at each other. And so at an interview for Dunlop Memorial Award, I asked her,

09:30 "Were you at all nervous, Moira?" "Oh, no, Sir John, I wasn't at all nervous, my friend and I, we knew God would look after us because we're doing good things." That's the wonderful faith that she's got. And she'd established a home for children up at Kilmore. Land donated by Rotary and a lot of work done by Rotary. And they bring in children from

10:00 overseas, from third world countries who need medical treatment, which is not available in their home cities, in the home country. Brings them out, organises medical treatment.

You mentioned Moira Kelly and how her faith sustained her and gave her the strength to do a lot of things. I'm wondering

10:30 **if religion was important to you during the war?**

Well, I have faith in an after world and just what form it will take I haven't the faintest idea. I do have faith in a God, but again, in what form, again I haven't the faintest idea.

11:00 But I inherited faith from the mother who had great faith in anyone I've ever met. I saw her the night before she died and she said, "I think I'll go home now dear." With absolute conviction, she was going straight to heaven. I thought, what wonderful faith. She as a simple lady but she had these ten children and still had

11:30 this wonderful faith. So I suppose I've inherited that, I think. But I'm not, couldn't be regarded as a religious person.

Was your father religious in the same way as your mother?

Yes he was. But his faith was not as evident as hers. But a regularly church goer and

12:00 he was grand mason of the Masonic Lodge in this part of the world.

Were you a lodge member?

I was for a very short time, but then started travelling and didn't have time.

Was that before or after the war?

It was after the war. I was just so occupied building a family and looking after all those other

12:30 kind of activities.

Your father died the year before the war started?

1938.

Were you in Sydney at the time?

I was in Tasmania because I was project manager on that terminal for Commonwealth Oil Refineries.

Were you able to come back for the funeral?

That was the first aeroplane flight I'd ever had, yes. I flew from

13:00 drove to Launceston and flew with Ivan Hollingman, a daring flight across Bass Straight.

Did you think much about your father during the war?

Not a great deal. He had then run his course, he was very, of course,

13:30 expressed great grief that there should ever be a war and that worried him a lot.

We talked a little bit about Anzac Day and

14:00 **you also mentioned looking at Anzac Cove and the sorts of celebration as that event occurring more recently. In terms of patriotism, patriotism in Australia has ebbed and flowed, it's different now perhaps than it was**

14:30 **in the inter-war period when Empire was still very much part of patriotism, I'm wondering if you can just reflect on changes in national identity that you've witnessed, given the various activities and organisations that you've been involved in.**

Well,

15:00 there's no doubt, there's a marked difference in attitude to patriotism amongst my generation and probably yours and those that who are younger still. But I don't think that, generally, we are a very patriotic nation. And I think it's a pity. We have something which we should be terribly proud and we should be telling the world that we're proud of what

15:30 we've got and the part we want to play in our world. I was never so impressed with patriotism, when on one occasion travelling around the Baltic, we called int, the ship, to a place called Gdynia in Poland and we struck a festival day the next day. Now everything around about was grey and drab and dreary, including the weather,

16:00 but on this great day of celebration, practically every second window, there was a Polish flag and you could feel that sense of patriotism that existed. They didn't have much to celebrate at all right at that time, this would be about twenty, twenty-five years ago. But the sense of patriotism. And I can remember, on an Intourist bus,

16:30 there was a very articulate young conductor on this bus and he was asked a question by an American, he said, "I say, is there any improvement in the standard of living for the average Pole?" To which this young man made a reply. He was most articulate chemical engineer

17:00 and he said, "Well not really sir, but if we can be freed of the influence of our Russian masters, we could live well, but all our productive efforts are going into Russian munitions." He said, "We're a country which has, we have timber, we have iron ore, we have coal, we have a tremendous will to survive and create." That was almost verbatim

17:30 of what he said that day. If the wrong people had heard that remark he would have been chuffed off to Siberia or shot before he got there. But that sense of pride, it just did come through. And I'd like to see a greater sense of pride in our nation.

18:00 **One last thing. You've mentioned a few times about the fact that you didn't feel a need to talk about the war in its aftermath, then you had other things to do and you didn't really want to revisit those things. We've spent a whole day today, going over this material, do you feel**

18:30 **that there is now a reason to talk about these things, do you feel more reconciled about these things or do you feel it's important?**

Well, yes I do feel it's important. I just wonder why it's taken so long to get round to doing this. The people like myself are pretty ancient citizens and I feel it should have been done earlier than this. But it's nice to have

19:00 those records should be completed. And I believe the World War I records are a jolly sight better than World War II, is that so?

In terms of purely service records, yes I think so. And I think successive governments recently have done a lot more about preserving records.

Well good. But see

19:30 I've mentioned this today coming up with some of my friends and they say, "But why the hell wasn't this

done before?" You know, I think we are willing to talk more now, well I'm sure that's right, it's partly our fault I suppose, that we would talk, but now we will talk. There's a friend of ours just along the corner here, Roger Kempton, who died about two years ago. And his

20:00 family said he wouldn't talk until about six weeks before he died, then he wouldn't stop talking, he just wants to, he'd been bottling it all up, and then it all came out. He was a fighter pilot, a squadron leader. And tells a very good story about, he was a great cricketer too, I might add and a delightful bloke. But anyway, he was with a Kittyhawk squadron and they got caught up with some

20:30 Japanese Zeros and he said this day, the Zero was normally a much better fighter plane than the Kittyhawk, but this day the numbers were on his side and they knocked half a dozen Zeros out of the sky and on the way back, flying to Port Moresby, he looked down and saw a cricket ground and so thought there was enough room

21:00 and so landed his Kittyhawk on the ground and said, "Look there's a game just about to place, would you like to stay for a while?" So he stayed for a couple of hours and enjoyed some cricket then hopped into his Kittyhawk and flew back to Moresby.

If only every job could have it's recreational benefits like that. This desire to speak now,

21:30 **does that include everything? Are there things that you won't talk about?**

Well yes, there are some. About people whom I wouldn't want to hurt. I sound a bit like Sir Ian McLennan. We had great difficulty in getting him to do his biography. He ultimately agreed to have it done

22:00 on an interview basis and the chap who prepared the structure for the interview. Anyway, it worked out and he did it, but then he put an embargo on it for 25 years. His reluctance to record anything prior to that on paper, was that previous biographers at BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary] had made such a terrible mess of it, that he didn't want to repeat

22:30 some of the mistakes of previous authors. But he'd written this but now it's under embargo, that'll probably be the most interesting part of the book.

I like to thank you for your time today. I'd also like to give you a chance to say anything you'd like to say about the project or about your experience.

23:00 Well I knew you couldn't tap it all, but you did incredibly well. And I was very happy to speak about it, and I really do believe that a proper set of archives is certainly in the national interest and I would be one to know that that information is there, to me would give me great satisfaction. So I shall

23:30 be (UNCLEAR), probably too frequently, but thank you for the courtesy you've extended me by inviting me to participate today and I wish you well for the completion of a truly worthwhile national project.

Thank you Sir John.

INTERVIEW ENDS