Australians at War Film Archive

Richard Holmes (Dick) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 15th August 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/224

Tape 1

00:30 **Tell us about Devonport.**

01:00 My name is Dick Holmes and I was born on the 22 May 1923 at Devonport, Tasmania. The place where I was born was on the farm of my great-grandfather whose name was Charles Oldacrer. The farm was about a square mile, or six hundred and forty acres and the western boundary was on the banks of the

01:30 Mersey River at Devonport. Shortly after I was born the family moved to Melbourne, and I was brought up at Camberwell and also at Canterbury at Mailing Road, the famous Mailing Road, number 2 where I lived until I went into the army. I registered for the army in October 1941.

02:00 **Tell me about Devonport again, and your history there in Devonport, that's fascinating.**

I was one of eight children born, seven of them in Tasmania and my youngest sister in Melbourne. The farm consisted of cropping and cattle, and my great-grandfather had quite a lot of people working

02:30 for him - for its day, quite modern machinery. He emigrated from Canterbury in Kent from England. Prior to that he lived at Pershore, where he had a solicitor's practice and he was born and lived at for many years at Stratford on Avon. When they moved out from England to Tasmania, they came out on a

03:00 little sailing ship and it took several months to arrive. With all their family and all their possessions. The vessel that they were sailing on ran a ground at the head of the Tamer River just out from Launceston Tasmania. They had to leave everything behind on the ship. At a later date when they became settled in Devonport they went to

03:30 Launceston one time, and found a lot of their own china and possessions for sale in the shops in Launceston, the vessel had been pilfered. Today I have in my cupboard some of the pieces of china, which were rescued from the ship.

How extraordinary, what a discovery, how long were you in Devonport for?

04:00 Only for a few months, a very short time I was over there, the farm was sold and the family moved to Melbourne.

Why did they move, what was the reason for shifting?

Economic situation at the time, my father had been a headmaster and an inspector of schools and he moved around throughout Tasmania, such places as Derby, Scottsdale, Waratah, Somerset,

04:30 Macquarie Street, Hobart. Eventually he decided, because his brother was working for the AMP [Australian Mutual Provident Society], in Melbourne, he baited him away from Tasmania from the education department, because he thought that he could do much better financially, that wasn't many years before the Depression, it was possibly an unwise move in one way. They moved, and my mother also was

05:00 a schoolteacher and she was teaching at Penguin in Tasmania. One little story about my father, when he was teaching at Waratah, my two brothers at this stage were only little chaps. They were old enough to cause some damage to the school, they picked up stones and threw them and broke every glass in the window, throughout the whole school. My grandfather who had been a military officer

05:30 in India, he was living at Scottsdale and my poor father rang up and said, "Whatever do I do?" The glass was replaced. My little brothers, they didn't get into much trouble except a scalding from my father.

What type of a man was he, your father?

He was a gentleman, he was highly intelligent being a teacher, an inspector, gracious.

06:00 I had the misfortune that he died suddenly when I was only fourteen, after moving to Melbourne. I was

only a little child when we moved over and I didn't know him very much because he worked for the AMP society and was doing country business that was quite successful for many years. The Depression came and things became rather difficult.

06:30 **You were living at Mailing Road in Canterbury?**

No. 2, Mailing Road, Canterbury, the famous Mailing Road.

It has an amazing history? Can you tell me a bit about life as a young boy, in Canterbury, what you did, the things that you did the schools that you went too?

Some of my sisters, with whom I've had five, went to Canterbury State School, it was called in those days and I was there as well. From the first grade up

07:00 to about six. It was a very large school, approximately one thousand children at that school - by today's standards it's huge. Class sizes were very large compared to today, we they complain about twenty to twenty-five children. A typical class at which I was located was sixty-five children.

07:30 I did fairly well at school. I wasn't a genius by any means but I got through my exams fairly well. In grade six, I was ninth out of sixty three, which I was pretty proud about, because it enabled me to get an entrance into the next school, which I was very keen to get into it, Mont Albert Central School it was called in those days, because my father and the family wanted me to do a profession,

08:00 and to be a doctor. That came to a sudden halt when I was fourteen, my Dad went off to play tennis on a Saturday afternoon and I never saw him again. He dropped dead on the court, with a cerebral haemorrhage. He injured himself as he fell on his face in the gravel of the court and my brothers wouldn't let me see my father. I've got that memory, which I've always been disappointed about,

08:30 but it probably was best that I didn't see his injured face.

You said that you had five sisters and one brother?

Two brothers.

Were they older, where did you come into the picture?

I came second last, actually there were nine born but one little child died at birth, but I was the second last. My eldest sister Constance, Frank, Terrance, Margarette, Josephine, Avis,

09:00 myself and Etholwin.

Who were you close to in the family?

I got on pretty well with all of them. I suppose the closest of all was my youngest sister, she and I had some real fun together. When we were children we used to learn how to whistle, like a real postman, and I will tell you a little bit more about that later.

09:30 I taught her how to jump off the top of the shed without hurting herself. We had a little dog called Tony, who loved to climb trees and she and I used to have such fun with the little dog, there was no use the cat going up the tree for safety, because I taught the dog how to climb up branches. I taught her how to climb up a ladder, to jump off the ladder

10:00 onto my chest. That was some of the fun that we had at Mailing Road.

How did you mother cope with all these kids, were you given a lot of freedom?

We were given plenty of freedom. Fitting most of the family into one small house at Mailing Road was difficult. Me being the youngest boy didn't have any say where I slept, so I had to sleep out on the cold veranda of the house. With the cold wintry winds flapping the blinds.

10:30 It didn't do me any harm because it served me good training for when I went into the freezing cold conditions of the army.

So you didn't mind that, being out on the veranda?

No, I didn't have any say in it. I managed that.

What about during the Depression, how were things for your family?

It was very tough. Dad's death caused a calamity in the family. Although he'd earned

11:00 a quite substantial living when he started at the AMP, the Depression hit him very hard. I had my second eldest brother who was, had Melbourne University and just the normal weekly expenses were very high. It was hard on him, very hard on him. When he died, he left a free hold property at Canterbury, a block of land at Ringwood and

11:30 no cash in the bank at all. He was dependent on his weekly salary. So my mother was in a predicament. I was fourteen at the time, we literally tipped draws upside down in case a coin would drop out and in those days a penny would pay for a tram ride for two or three sections. Six pence would pay your fare

all the way to Melbourne from Canterbury

12:00 station on the train. It was pretty difficult times. Shortly after his death, as I said before, I'd plan to go to university and my aim was to be a doctor. All that came to a sudden halt. The lady who we knew said to me, "Would you like a job?" So I said, "Thank you very much."

12:30 So I left school and worked for the Queensland Insurance Company at 84 Williams Street, Melbourne and I was earning seventeen shillings and four pence a week. I used to give mother ten shillings of that, my weekly ticket on the train cost three shillings and four pence, which in simple language - about thirty five cents. That left me with four shillings for myself, for any

13:00 expenses I needed for clothing or shoes or whatever. That gives you an idea of how tough things were. My mother couldn't even exist without my help and my brothers gave her a little bit of assistance where they could. They were married as well. They had their own responsibilities. The post-Depression years were extremely tough. Even in the recessions we have today, they can't be compared with the toughness of that as it was

13:30 back then.

So, you were able to stay in the house in Mailing Road?

We were about to stay in the house because it was freehold fortunately. We managed to pay the rates and taxes. To supplement my earnings there was a lady in Canterbury in Mailing Road and she and her sister, they were the Milner sisters, they had a haberdashery shop there and

14:00 I used to go around to their place late in the afternoon on my pushbike. I would ride all over Canterbury delivering parcels and for the whole afternoon after school, I've gone back a step as you will see, I'm back at school now. After all that riding around, they'd pay me a total of three pence,

14:30 that's around about three cents, for all my work, it was hardly worth the trouble but nobody could afford to pay me and you couldn't grizzle about that much.

You could see people around you, friends and neighbours in the community all struggling?

Everybody was struggling. People would have a few WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s and they'd try and sell the eggs. Finally, going back to when I started work.

15:00 My four shillings wouldn't cover any of my expenses that I needed for just normal daily entertainment, clothing or whatever I needed. It occurred that I had to walk or ride my bike many, many times to work, and that was six miles and generally if I went on foot I'd run all the way. That helped me save a few pence.

15:30 **It wasn't a soft life?**

No, it was a very difficult life.

I'm curious, how many children were still at home with your mum when you were working and helping to support the family?

At that stage I had my sister, Josephine and she was living at home and she worked at

16:00 a company called Spices and she worked there for many years. Then my sister Avis, she was at school with my sister Etholwin. We used to all go to Canterbury school, and my sister Margarette, she was there as well. You will hear more about Margarette at a later date when we get more into the army.

16:30 It was quite remarkable with the places that they got too, by just simply hard studying and work.

Your mum, did she go out to work when your dad died?

No, she didn't work. She'd been a schoolteacher and after she got married she gave it up, she didn't work. She was fulltime looking after a large family.

Tell me about school days,

17:00 **Mont Albert Central School?**

Mont Albert Central School - that was the height of my enjoyment of school. I loved everyday there. I was keen on my work, I was keen to study and that's where I was when Dad died. That caused a great disaster in my studies. I got to the point that I couldn't think, for my exams and my form

17:30 masters whose name was Mr Lachlan, called me out to the front of the class for my exam papers to see if he could find a mark, pass. Yet the year before I'd come, ninth out of sixty-three at Canterbury. We managed to find a few marks and got through my exams. The next year was quite successful.

How was your mum feeling, dealing with your father's death?

18:00 The poor lady, she had a dreadful experience, she just didn't know how to cope, that's why I left school. I thought, although I was only fourteen, I had the great responsibility of caring for my mother. I could

see the predicament that she was in, trying to keep a home going, no income, no social service, nothing. She was dependent on

18:30 whatever could be contributed by the family. It's hard to believe, compared to today when you've got dole, there was no such thing available to us at all.

You were seeing all that happening at home, and you father had like you said had suddenly gone?

He's gone.

Out of the blue.

Absolutely. We'd gone from a relatively comfortable income, he was doing

19:00 fairly well with AMP but the Depression brought it all to a halt, we took a big nosedive.

So, a fourteen year old boy, working in an insurance company, what were you doing?

I was delivering letters, answering the switchboard, which is unbelievable compared to what it is today. We had all these plugs that we put into a socket. I was checking insurance premium invoices, and

19:30 learning all about insurance. I went to the underwriter's insurance training, which I did for a couple of years and hated every day of it, it was no good to me. I just wasn't office orientated at all. After I'd been with the Queensland Insurance Company for two and a half years a friend of the family said to me, "I can get you a good job with a firm called McPhersons." I thought

20:00 that this sounds pretty good, an increase in salary. I left the insurance and got into the McPhersons down at 540 Collins Street, Melbourne. I was there until I was called up for the army. They were very good to me.

Just going back to the insurance company, what sort of insurance, what sort of things were being insured?

Household,

20:30 comprehensive insurance, motor vehicles, marine, personal accident, employer's liability, just the same as today, anything excepting life insurance. The Queensland Insurance Company was a very large and profitable company, I think it is affiliated with others at the present day. After all these years, it's still going.

21:00 **Why had you decided to take this other career move - into engineering?**

I wasn't getting paid enough, I was not happy with the insurance, it wasn't my life at all. The thing that influenced me also was the fact that poor unfortunate people would come to make a claim, for having been involved in an accident, and they would

21:30 probably had been completely innocent, and yet they would get the blame by the insurer, and I thought that that was so unjust and I didn't like it. Although I didn't complain because I had no authority or anything to enable me to complain to the management and I observed what was going on, and I thought it's not fair, and it influenced me to get out of it. Even today, it's not much different. A lot of the innocent parties

22:00 are the ones that get the blame. I thought that I won't have anything to do with it. This other job was offered to me from McPhersons, it was on a sales basis, learning how to be a salesman. That was the beginning of my career, which lasted till this present time, which I'm still employed at Sully.

Were you excited at the prospect of learning sales?

Yes, I was. I had to go through the ground work, the

22:30 very basic work at McPhersons and I was doing pretty well, I was there until one afternoon, in December, I think it was the 6th or 7th December 1941, when the Japanese entered the war, and because that was the end of my time at McPhersons, until after the war.

How long were you working at McPhersons before the war?

23:00 About two years, approximately, I'll have to think pretty hard, but I could calculate it, it was about two years before I went away.

What sort of work?

I was working in the abrasives department, which was grinding wheels of all sorts. In those days very few abrasive wheels were made in Australia, some were, but most of the came from England. I was responsible for

23:30 supervising the unpacking of all the crates of grinding wheels, which were done up in something like a beer keg, and packed in sawdust. We use to put them on the racks and when the opportunity arose, with customers coming in, I'd help on the counter with a person by the name of Neil Sterrit. Neil and I were

there and Mr Weeks was the manager of the

24:00 department. We were a nice little team in that section of McPhersons. We quite enjoyed it really.

You would have been about sixteen?

At that stage I was eighteen, I had already turned eighteen by now and that's when I was called up.

Were you about sixteen when you went to McPhersons?

Sixteen, when I went there.

24:30 **You're still very young in the work force?**

Yes, I was very young.

How were you accepted into the company, as a young boy, how were you treated?

Very well. I was the youngest in that department. I was always diligent in what I did, and I took on the menial tasks along with the good ones and I never complained about doing

25:00 the little jobs that were not so pleasant. That stood me in good stead.

What did you like about that job, what were the tasks that you did like?

I think we've covered most of what I did there, with the unpacking and the store.

What did you actually like, I'm trying to get an idea of what, your experiences working there?

I'd be very proud to be working at McPhersons, as with the premier hardware merchants.

25:30 Just the status that they had it was such that should I had decided to move somewhere else and said that I'd work for McPhersons, it was like Vincent saying that I worked at the steel works at BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary]. It gives you a status. I was very conscious of that, although I was young I was thinking it was the best thing that could have possibly happened to me working at McPhersons, just like getting into Mont Albert School.

26:00 I was so proud to do that because I had to fight to get there. I really enjoyed my time at McPhersons.

What was happening at home with the family?

My sister Avis, whose two years older than me, decided to go to the Royal Melbourne Hospital and trained as a nursing sister. My youngest sister, Etholwin, she was at Strathcona

26:30 Grammar School and she continued on there and I helped pay for her fees there, contributed all the time, even while I was away at the war. I helped by sending money home, so that she could keep at school. My eldest sister, Constance, she married in 1929, then there was quite a gap of years before the next

27:00 two got married. Strange to say that Frank and Terrance both got married on the same day, one in Victoria and one in Tasmania. It made it a bit hard for my father to be in the two places at the one time. My sister Meg, or Margarette, she did a nursing profession, she trained at the Children's Hospital. She

27:30 had a very successful nursing career, she became matron of many hospitals. Although the war had started, she tried to enlist in the nursing service, but for the reason that I don't remember, she got a knock back. She wanted to go overseas to the Middle East with the nursing service. In fact she switched from the nursing service to the

28:00 AWAS, or Australian Women's Army Service, where she became an officer, then Josephine, she was in a more clerical work. She went to work for a company, as I had mentioned earlier called Spicers, the paper people, writing paper and typing paper and all that type of stationery.

28:30 Avis, my next youngest sister, she trained at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. She won a scholarship to the Melbourne University, but instead of that, she took up an interesting position that was offered to her at the Women's Hospital. The family had been largely associated with the nursing profession.

29:00 **And that influenced you?**

I had already made up my mind. When I went into the army, of course that was my chosen part of the services to go into, and in fact I successfully got into.

You were called up, when you turned eighteen?

29:30 Yes.

Tell us about that experience of learning that you were being called up, that you had to leave your job, what was involved?

When I was eighteen, back in 1941. All the young boys of that age and even nineteen and twenty, they

were all told to register. You went to a post office, picked up a form to register for military service.

30:00 I posted my application away and about the middle of October 1941 I got a notification to go and have a medical examination. That was an interesting experience. I turned up at the appointed time at Robinson Road drill hall, which was the headquarters of the 24th Infantry Battalion.

30:30 All these dozens of young boys, neighbours, schoolboys, friends of mine, the whole lot of us had to go there by the appointed time. We were examined by two doctors. You had to strip off, there was no privacy. It was quite an experience to see all these bare boys.

31:00 They did a urine test, that was quite a problem. Because you found that you couldn't start, so the doctor said to me, "Go over to that trough, and turn the tap on." I'm being quite frank, Catherine [interviewer] in what I'm telling you. I went to the trough and turned the tap on and that started the works going". That was what most of the boys had to do.

31:30 I never met these doctors before. One was Doctor Copeland, the other one was Doctor Ian Wilson. It wasn't until more than fifty years later when I got my records posted to me from the army records, that I found that those two doctors were actually the doctors that I was working with at a later date in the army. I didn't recognized them,

32:00 because it was only a brief interview with them at Robinson Road, Surrey Hills.

They were in New Guinea with you?

Yes, but I didn't recognize them. There were all these dozens and dozens of men in this drill hall and you just speak to the doctor and he sends you off and you're not necessarily looking at his face, and noting his features, I certainly didn't. My records show

32:30 by the signatures that they said I was physically fit. Would you like to know what happened after that?

Yes.

I was sent off home and I went back to work. Then the next thing that happened was the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. Within days I had a notification

33:00 to report to Robinson Road drill hall. On the 24th January my brother took me, and my next-door neighbour, Alex Moresby around in his car and he took us up to Robinson Road drill hall. We reported to full time military service. They told us to bring, cutlery, mug, plate shaving gear, toilet bits and pieces,

33:30 that's all we had, and we were just dressed in our civilian clothes. That was on the Saturday, the 24th January 1942. Then they spoke to us about what we were going to do but they told us no particular details of locations but that we had to get onto that train. We walked up to the Surrey Hills railway station and got onto a special train that was waiting

34:00 for us. They took us into Spencer Street and from there we transferred onto a country train, still not knowing where we were going or whether we were going to see our parents again that day, or anybody that we knew. Off went this train and we finished up at Seymour, and there were hundreds of young boys on the train.

34:30 We all got off and were put into three ton open trucks, and we were taken up to Nagambie Road, which today is called Goulburn Valley Highway. There we went into a huge camp where there were hundreds and ultimately thousands and thousands of boys went through that camp, which was known as Boys Town.

35:00 **This is very sudden, wasn't it, how were you feeling about the suddenness of it?**

We didn't know what to think. We arrived at this huge camp, and it was just absolutely smothered in dust, the wind was blowing, and there was dust everywhere. It got into you lungs, went through the tents, it went everywhere.

35:30 You couldn't escape the dust, which had been stirred up by all these hundreds and hundreds of feet going over the soil and loosening it all and the wind would pick it up and blow it all over the place. Yes, you were wondering what was going to happen to you. It was just sort of, every second that went by was a new experience. You never could have imagined before. We were shown to tents that were flapping in the wind,

36:00 it had floorboards and the mattress was made out of hessian and filled with straw and was known as a palliasse. They issued us with a couple of blankets but we didn't have any pillows. There we were, that was our new home. We were called up onto a parade ground. We were still in our civilian clothes, which we were for several days, in fact. We were called up and

36:30 introduced to the commanding officer, his name was Captain Butterworth and he came from Warragul. He just told us a little bit about what we could expect, that we will be issued with a military uniform and we had to put up with what we had for the time being. We were introduced to a lieutenant who was just a young fresh

37:00 faced young man. We were told that although he had cloth pips on his shoulder, it was they same if they were made of metal, and that we had to obey his instructions. This was our first taste of military discipline. We had to obey what we were told and do what we were told.

How did you take that?

37:30 You just had to take it. It was just an experience that you had to go through. There was nothing, there was no training, this was our basic training.

With your mum, how was she feeling about you being called up, this happening so suddenly?

My mother was devastated by the whole thing. She was on her own,

38:00 because my sister Meg, as I mentioned earlier she joined the army and was posted to Queensland and my sister Josephine being in a clerical position she was taken over by the American, who by now had come in huge numbers to Melbourne. She got clerical work at Port Melbourne then she was eventually sent away to Queensland. My sister Avis

38:30 was full time nursing at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. That left my mother depleted with all the family, except my youngest sister and now I'm gone of course. It was terribly tough on her. She used to find it hard every day that went by, she found it very hard. A lot of her time she was on her own. She was a person who loved company.

39:00 I'm a bit like my mother, I just love company. She would find the best thing to do was to go over and visit her sister who lived nearby or her mother and so she kept herself busy in fact looking after other people. She did some cooking, she made some biscuits and would take them to people. She was always looking after other people.

There would have been news coming throughout the war, there had been

39:30 **for quite some time, hadn't there?**

Yes.

Do you recall about what you were hearing it and what your impression was about it all?

In those days the government of Australia has this peculiar idea that they could make money out of selling pig iron, which was iron ingots which was manufactured at the steel works. They were selling them in huge quantities to Japan.

40:00 My mother said, I remember her saying it to me before the war that pig iron's going to come back to Australia in guns, and she proved to be absolutely one hundred percent right. A lot of other people thought the same but that was the policy of the government was just to export as much of this pig iron as possible. Today, we do it with iron ore but in those days it was pig iron, which was very heavy pieces of metal about a couple of feet long

40:30 and it was pretty heavy to lift. My mother was full of nerves because she could see what was going to come. By this time her worries were compacted by the fact that Japan had already attacked China, and they had this, what they called the [Greater] South East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,

41:00 in other words they were going to create a big empire with Japan as the headquarters, so they invaded China where they were very, very cruel and eventually as you know they began to come down the coast of Asia, Thailand, Malaysia [Malaya] after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. My mother had plenty of reason to be scared, like all the other

41:30 mothers of those boys.

Tape 2

00:30 We were just discussing the oncoming of the service in the army, and we were wondering whatever was going to happen. You sort of couldn't imagine what was going to happen. I was eighteen at the time, and then we got the call up, so we have now

01:00 covered the point of getting up to [Nagambie], haven't we?

Not really covered, but just going back there's this build up of tension I suppose, about the possibility of the young boys being called up, and so you would have been talking about that at home?

Yes.

Talking to your mum?

We were very concerned because at that stage the Japanese were flooding the market

01:30 with cheap toys and things, things that were almost rubbishy. They were getting ingots or large chunks of steel sent to them but it was coming back in to us as cheap toys. People like Coles were selling all these toys. People were quite worried about it. The toys wouldn't last.

02:00 My mother had an idea that things were not going too well and she was certainly right. Paper reports were coming of the cruelty of the Japanese in China, the massacres that were occurring there and everyone was really getting worried. As an eighteen year old, you think what are we going to do this afternoon? What are we going to play? What are we going to do? It sort of hasn't

02:30 struck you as seriously as it would have in an adult of more mature years. My mother was particularly worried. My father of course at this stage was gone.

Were your sisters, a number of your sisters were nursing?

Yes.

Had they seen soldiers coming back, affected and injured, were they aware?

Yes, it was pretty crook. The conflict in

03:00 Europe and North Africa was terribly serious. Everyday there would be lists in the newspapers of the casualties of those that had been killed or those that had been wounded. It was the common practice to read the daily paper, to see if you knew anybody that had been killed, or captured as prisoners of war. One day I was reading the

03:30 Sun News Pictorial, as it used to be called. Today it's called the Herald Sun, in those days it was the Sun News Pictorial. I was reading the list of prisoners being captured and I found my own cousin who had been captured in Crete, and taken prisoner by the Germans. He eventually escaped and got caught again. Those sorts of things you just read with real interest everyday.

04:00 **What did that conjure up for you?**

A certain degree of worry, it certainly worried you but you just thought that it was inevitable.

In being called up, did you ever have a moment when you thought I don't want to do this?

Plenty of times. When I was transferred, we arrived at Seymour,

04:30 and we got into these big, open three ton motor trucks and we were taken to Boys Town, now I know that we've covered that earlier, about the dust and the thronging.

We can still talk about that, because that's your first experience that would have been quite dramatic, I could imagine, and it would have had an influence on you?

Yes. I'm told, and I think that it is fairly accurate,

05:00 that there was something like five thousand young soldiers there, who would have gone in from the end of December until late January. Just going over that briefly, we were able to go down to the Goulburn River for swimming and they taught us how to use pontoons, and all sorts of equipment for crossing rivers.

05:30 It was a fairly swift flowing river in those days. We were able to have a lovely swim down there. It was quite a long walk - about a mile from the tent down to the river. We used to go down there late in the afternoon every day and it was a good experience.

You arrived at Boys Town and you were issued with a kit, and clothing?

It was very basic. We were there for maybe,

06:00 possibly one or two weeks before we got a uniform. We didn't even have any warm underclothes. It was fairly cold at night-time. Eventually we were taken by truck out to a place called Trawool, which was several kilometres along the Yea Road, where we were taken to a stores depot and issued with a uniform. The

06:30 issuing officer would say, "You like your size so-and-so", and they'd say, "There you are." They'd hand over a uniform, pants and a jacket. A khaki - it was like a shirt, but it was called a giggle jacket. I don't know what you call them, but some people call them a blouse. It was just short and buttoned up at the waist.

07:00 Working trousers and socks and boots. The boots were, there was no such thing as multiple fittings, you just took, in my case a nine and a half and that was called a nine five, which was nine point five. You just had to wear them until you got the boot to take the shape of your foot.

Were they too big for you?

Yes, they were too big.

07:30 They'd give you your slouch hat, and off you'd go and you would have to make that uniform fit you. It was terribly baggy. Then we would go back to Seymour and from that date on you had to wear your uniform for your parades.

How was camaraderie at that stage, after a couple of weeks and you getting your uniforms?

08:00 Very, fortunately we got to know one another. I was always keen to go in the 10th Field Ambulance, which was actually being formed nearby to Boys Town. Some of my mates, whom I knew in civilian life, had already gone into the 10th Field Ambulance and they got to hear that I was in Boys Town and they came over to see me one night and that was a great encouragement to me.

08:30 You had to have three weeks of basic training before you were allocated to a unit. The time came for me to be allocated and I had no say in the matter whatever. Although I had elected to go into a field ambulance, I was actually sent out to Wattle Vale to the 52nd Infantry Battalion. That was my first

09:00 indication of how horrible war can be. Shown how to use our rifles, we were shown how to do bayonet practice, and I didn't agree with it one bit, I hated it.

How was that? What did you do for bayonet practice?

We had straw bags suspended from a pole or from a horizontal bar and we had to charge the straw bag with your rifle with a bayonet attached to it

09:30 and shove it into the straw bag, which I didn't like one little bit. They also taught us such things as how to get through a fence without making it that the enemy finding it, that you'd got through, you'd roll on your back and lift it gradually, so the barbwire would make any noise as it got strained on the post.

10:00 That was the basic training in the 52nd Battalion.

When you were doing this training, the bayonet practice and getting under the fence, were you imaging that this was what you would be actually doing?

That was what happened. This was when I began to get frightened of war. I was not made that way at all. I didn't know how on earth I could possibly do it.

10:30 My aim was to save life, not destroy life, no matter who it was. I made an application to be transferred to the unit of my choice, which was what I wanted to do, which was at the very outset, which was to go to the field ambulance. Fortunately, I knew one of the sergeants in the 10th Field Ambulance and his name was Jack Urquhart.

11:00 Jack was almost a favourite of the colonel. Jack said to Colonel McKenzie, "Would it be possible for me to be claimed from the 52nd Battalion into the 10th Field Ambulance?" And Colonel McKenzie agreed to it. The next thing I'm on a track going to the 10th Field Ambulance and down the Nagambie Road.

How did you know Jack Urquhart?

He was a friend of

11:30 the family, and his mother and my mother were real friends at Davenport, Tasmania, and they were schoolgirls together.

All the way back in Tassie?

It goes all the way back to their childhood. I was very friendly with Jack Urquhart, we were close friends.

Did you know that he was with the 10th Field Ambulance?

Yes, I did. He'd been in there for about a year before.

12:00 Jack was very kind to me and claimed me and I got into a unit of my choice.

So you met him up there again when you were in Boys Town, and he was next door?

Yes, I did.

Was that a bit of a reunion?

It was quite a reunion. We use to go to Boys Town, at night-time I was able to go across to the 10th Field Ambulance and spend a little time together. I caught up with quite a few friends that I knew.

12:30 The whole lot of us all chose to go to the same unit having the same ideas and friendship and it was a great idea to be together if we would possible be, and it was the way that it worked out for a lot of us. I knew a lot of old friends, even from school days.

That's interesting - how friends gravitated?

We gravitated that way,

13:00 it was a good…

Suddenly you get permission to join the Field Ambulance unit?

Yes.So now I'm back to the Nagambie Road, and I always refer to it as I'd mentioned earlier, it's just known as Goulburn Valley Highway today. It's located approximately one meter north of the junction of the Hume Highway and the Goulburn Valley Highway .

13:30 I will show you presently a photograph of the memorial plaque, which is set to be erected at that location, which is being done through the Veterans' Affairs. We spent about from January or early February at that location until I think it was the 28th or 29th April.

14:00 By this time Australia is being invaded by thousands upon thousands of American soldiers. They wanted campsites and facilities as well. Simultaneously, the Japanese were moving towards Australia, and the urgency for us to move further north became more urgent everyday

14:30 and the whole of the 3rd Division had to move forward towards Queensland. Every truck and train and bus, everything that was mobile was practically commandeered by the army or the services and the Americans. So it resulted us in having to march all the way from Seymour to Albury or to Bonegilla.

15:00 About the 29th April they gave us our marching orders. The trucks could take the heavier equipment and the rest you had to carry yourself and you had to do it for nine days. We set off and we spent the nights sleeping on the ground, at a place called Lockwood or Lockly or something like that, and the next night we'd arrive at Violet Town, Benalla, Glenrowan, Wangaratta,

15:30 Beechworth, Bonegilla.

What sort of reception did you get when you arrived in the towns?

When we got to places like Wangaratta, it was just quite exciting because whenever we went through the towns the army also had a very good military band playing, you would have marched for about thirty kilometres or maybe more, about thirty five kilometres for the day

16:00 and you'd come into town and the band would be playing and you'd forget all about your aches and pains. On the routes, what you did at night-time, they'd have a mobile kitchen, which would have gone ahead and we'd arrive at a location which would just simply be some farmers paddock, you'd get through the fence and you'd kick a hole for your hip and lay the ground sheet on the ground and put a blanket over you and you'd sleep, even

16:30 if it was cold at night. There were no tents, nothing, no beds. You'd have a good square meal to start the day, but no entertainment, you'd just have to lie down and wait for dawn to come. Then the next day off you'd go and march and march. As we were approaching Benalla, along the Hume Highway, we went through a little place called Baddaginnie, which is still there today,

17:00 there use to be a general store, which is no longer there. There was a gentleman by the name of Mr Cook, and he came out with a can. It would hold about a four gallons and he'd have it with piping hot tea, and every soldier who wanted some would just dip their mug and have a mug full of tea and you'd drink it as you kept on marching.

17:30 After the war I went back to Baddaginnie, and thanked him for his kindness and for providing tea for me, and all the rest of the troops, he must of done it for thousands and thousands of soldiers.

It's amazing.

When we got to [Beechworth], you asked us about how they treated us when we went through the towns. Every town we went through usually there was a band playing. Literally,

18:00 you forgot all about your aches and pains. You just straighten up your poor old tired back and marched and kept in step and walked through the town. When we got to Beechworth, it was late afternoon, and of course Beechworth is very hilly country, no flat ground on which to make a comfortable bed. Three of us decided to club together,

18:30 by this stage we'd been issued with, each person had what we called a ground sheet, which was provided by ourselves, not by the army and you'd been given a waterproof cape. With a bit of string and a bit of ingenuity, we were able to stitch together three capes to make a tent on the sloping hill. We got into bed, which was just on

19:00 the ground and the three of us thought that it was better to do that and keep warm than to be single. Down comes the rain, and just flooded, went pouring down the hill straight over our ground sheet and blankets and we got saturated. It was so cold. There was ice everywhere, frost and ice. Little pools of water would become frozen. Just near where we were sleeping, this poor cow had

19:30 died, it was very cold. The next day we were up at the crack of dawn and onto the road and marching again and we were soon nice and warm. We eventually got within about eight miles from Bonegilla and nearby was a very steep hill, exceptionally steep, it's still there of course.

20:00 Although we'd been marching all day long, and we were as tired as can be. Someone said, "I'll give you

a race to the top of the hill." So off we go. We raced to the top of this hill, to see who could be the first up to the top. It gives you an idea of how young boys think.

Were there any other acts of kindness from civilians that you can remember on that long march?

20:30 Yes. They came all the way out, and they got to know of course that the military operation of the greatest secrecy, in inverted comas, nobody was supposed to know who we were, people got to know that we were there. They came out with food and drinks for us at the campsites. Somehow they got to find us. Although that wasn't suppose to be done,

21:00 but nobody got into trouble for it, none of our fellows anyway. Yes, people were very, very kind. Lots of people travelled long distances just to watch these young boys marching through the towns. They'd stand on the balconies of two story hotels in Wangaratta and cheer us and wave us on. It was quite an experience. We had one rest day, which was

21:30 when our unit was camped at Benalla show grounds and we had a twenty-four hour break from marching. Eventually, we got to the Bonegilla military camp there, which was something that we'd never experienced before. It was all in purpose made huts, which could contain quite a few men, it had wooden floors

22:00 and a palliasse on the floorboards, and proper messing facilities and toilet facilities. I would like to go back to the Nagambie Road camp again, there are a few funny stories. I'm reminded by that by the fact that I mentioned toilet facilities. Our camp, the 10th Field Ambulance site, was divided into three sections. It was headquarters in the middle

22:30 up the hill, to the north was called Toorak, where A Company was located and to the south amongst all the beautiful trees was called Ferntree Gully. The toilet facilities were located over in the Toorak area, and they consisted of a row of

23:00 toilets without any partitions, so there was no privacy whatsoever. The walls were made of vertical sheets of corrugated iron. The full strength of our unit was about two hundred and forty men. You can imagine with maybe ten or twelve toilets and two hundred and forty men it was normally quite well occupied.

23:30 There was one of our very good friends whose name was Ted Monno [?], and he urgently wanted to go to the toilet, but he couldn't get in because there was just no space. He went outside and picked up some pretty hefty rocks and threw them at the corrugated iron. You can just imagine the revving that he got.

24:00 It wasn't long before he was able to get in.

So there were a few high jinxes that went on?

Yes. Some of the personnel even in those days liked to let their hair grow long which of course wasn't permitted in the army. One person who had the nickname of Curly Blithe, he had extremely curly hair

24:30 and he had the habit of pulling his wavy curly hair out from his ears almost in the vertical manner. He was ordered to have his hair cut. We didn't have a barber some of the boys had their own hand clippers. The barber's chair just happened to be the nearest stump that you could find. Curly Blithe sits down on this

25:00 stump and the person who was going to clip his hair was John Bagshaw. John decided that he was going to remove some of the stupid looking hair that was growing out horizontally, well out past his ears being so curly it stayed in position. The next thing, John goes as hard as he could and straight up the side past his ears and poor old Curly woke up to that fact that he was going to lose

25:30 all his curls. He put both hands over his ears, so he couldn't get his hair cut anymore. Curly maintained that hairstyle thought his army days and he got away with it.

Were there many boys in the unit who sort of didn't want to be there?

There were many of them, many of them.

26:00 **That objected to?**

There was some of them, we had more than one that just vanished from the scene, they just deserted of course, that was an offence as you can imagine. Yes, that actually happened from out unit. I just happen to come across my records yesterday about that. They just couldn't stand it, they couldn't stand the discipline. They couldn't stand

26:30 the rough or tough environment and they hated being dictated too by sergeants and corporals and other officers, and they just didn't like it, so they vanished. I don't know what happened to them. It was something that we just had to accept.

I'm just trying to get, this is kind of new to me the idea of there were sort of moral objections?

27:00 There were a lot of people who were conscientious objectors, I was one who felt that I couldn't take life and that one of the reasons why I asked for non-combatant service, and that was respected by the officers and those in authority. At no time was I expected to carry arms, and that suited me because and I still

27:30 dread the thought of taking life. I don't like it, and still that was the way that I felt. That was respected by the military of the day. If you didn't want to do it, you could get a certificate, which could exempt you from taking military armed service and as you could imagine there were thousands of fields in the military service, which did give you

28:00 non-combatant service, like the clerical side of things and the medical side.

You mentioned earlier that the 10th Field Ambulance was being formed at Nagambie Road.

Yes.

Can you describe to me what forming a unit like that would entail?

A military unit is formed. I will start from the top. You have a commanding officer that is appointed.

28:30 He may in the initial stage be a relatively low military rank, could be a lieutenant colonel, could be made a major and he may even be a captain to start with. Then if it's in the case of a medical unit like I was in, then you've got so many doctors, you've got men that are trained what we call a bearer officer, and he was

29:00 generally a lieutenant. But before he got his commission he would have been a staff sergeant. They'd all be trained in their particular role. In our unit we had a normal doctor or a surgeon, a pathologist, a dentist and in our unit it was a complete little unit,

29:30 any role medically or physically like that. Then you've got your supporting staff. We had theatre staff, who were capable of carrying out the role of quite a highly trained nursing sister of today, or a medical male nurse, they were highly trained.

30:00 Then they had all their supporting staff. Then you had your nursing orderlies, you had your stretcher-bearers. So in the very beginning you have got the nucleus of the unit, they can't do everything, so they have to have a required number of A Company and B Company and headquarters and they have all got to be built up to strength, so that takes time. So that in the case of the 10th Field Ambulance, like any other field ambulance, you've

30:30 got a complete strength of about two hundred and forty men, maybe two sixty. So that the role can be conducted. When you come into the time when you went into action, you have your advanced dressing post, you've got a regimental aid post. If you're at the front line and someone's injured, the stretcher-bearer from the

31:00 battalion in the first place, he would take the patient to the regimental aid post. From the regimental aid post there he would get initial treatment and then he'd be carried to the advance dressing station and so on and eventually right back to a base hospital. But all that has to be formed, and it has to be thought up in the formation of the units, so you are trained to your various departments.

31:30 **It seems to be a small number of trained medical people into the unit?**

Yes.

At the outset?

Exactly.

You weren't trained in anything medical at that stage?

Not at that particular point. What we used to do was to recognize various gases, which were being used in those day, they use to use mustard gas, chloropicrin, phosgene,

32:00 and these horrible gases and we had to learn how to recognize them. What action to take issuing of gas masks, and making sure that everybody knew how to put them on. In the formation days, you'd also have a lot of training even as things which would sound ridiculous today, but we would have to go to the

32:30 nearest railway line and learn how to get on board with all our gear and equipment and how to get onto a train. So we did that at Mangalore, two or three times. We'd march for miles and back with all our gear and equipment and get onto a train, settle in, the train wouldn't move off. It would be just stationary there just showing us how to get onto a train. You wouldn't believe, but it is fact. We'd walk

33:00 all the way back.

What was the point of that?

Discipline largely. Another thing in the early days would be that many, many times you'd just settle down to bed and they'd say lights out at ten o'clock at night, everybody was supposed to blow out their

kerosene lamps and stop talking and everything would gradually get quieter.

33:30 You'd just be settled down to thinking that you'd be going off to sleep and a voice would be yelling, "All out, on the parade ground, get your clothes on and report to the parade ground." And everyone would have to get dressed. You'd go out onto the parade ground and they'd take you for a route march or they'd take you across a paddock with total darkness, no moonlight to help you. You'd just have to

34:00 go under fences or through fences, over creeks and maybe go for several miles across the paddocks, stumbling over sticks and rocks and logs and things. After a certain time they'd say, "Right, we'll return." And you'd go back in to bed, it was discipline, how to learn how to get onto a train, discipline, how to get through fences without the enemy hearing.

34:30 It was quite hard to take but you had to, if you objected to do then you got duties to do that were unpalatable.

Objecting would be, how would that be, if you said no?

If you said no, or if you didn't get up and get out to the parade at night time then you'd be disciplined because they would have a role call and the corporal or the

35:00 duty officer, or whoever was on duty for the night, he would know everybody who was present, you'd be ticked off his role call list.

Did you ever not go?

Never, I was always subject to the authorities. Not that I like it but I behaved myself, I was never in trouble.

Was it a pretty tight

35:30 **unit, were everybody in the unit very respectful of the disciplinary?**

It became a very respectable unit, a very friendly unit. It was a credit to the colonel. He used to get us on parade and he'd say, "All right laddies, you know where you're going to, you're going to a place called

36:00 X." And nobody knew where they were going, and he said, "I don't know where you're going but you know, it's a place called X and you've got to get used to blood and guts." Which wasn't very nice to be received when you're a boy of only eighteen from a very protected family. That was the way that he spoke to us. His discipline proved to be most beneficial and effective

36:30 to us, because it toughened us up mentally and the discipline and the exercise we got toughened us up physically. To answer your point, yes, it drew us together, he would provide opportunities for us and we did have opportunities of doing things that we liked to do.

37:00 A daily practice was to get up fairly early in the morning and they'd take us for a long walk and a long march up the Nagambie Road and then let you run home, and of course that was in the spirit of competition. Most of us tried to do our best and what I might speak of

37:30 was a great sense of camaraderie, friendship, we learnt to appreciate how other people lived and thought. We became a unit, which was moulded together in a wonderful way and still is with the remaining ones of us and we just love to get together, in the bond that was formed in those early days.

38:00 **Just going back to forming the unit, I'm curious about the supplies that you had, like the equipment and supplies that you needed. Was that all part, were you starting to work with that equipment that you would need?**

That is an interesting subject. We were short of supplies. The war ahead, Australia, which in my opinion was largely unprepared

38:30 for the conflict, which actually occurred. The result was that although we were an ambulance unit, we did not have an ambulance for a long time. Finally, we were given an ambulance, which was completely unsuitable, it was more like the ambulances these days around the roads or the streets of Melbourne. In those days that's not what you wanted. Really, we wanted a four-wheel drive ambulance,

39:00 and going into the rough and off the road circumstances. In fact, we didn't have anything like that. One ambulance was given as a gift to the unit from some charity. Practically everything that we wanted was in short supply. We had to make do. We didn't have any beds, nothing, no comforts.

39:30 We just had a tent, which was very inadequate protection for the winter weather, which we were experiencing. As I said before, as we wanted to move, we had to walk, we didn't have transport to take us.

The training that you were doing at Bonegilla, was more combat training, which isn't quite the right word but was more about being

40:00 **in the field and defending yourself?**

No, that wasn't quite what we did at Bonegilla. That was more or less equipping us, holding establishment and preparing us for the next stage of moving forward. Parts of the equipment that were not issued to us earlier was gradually, gradually supplied to us, so we were becoming more

40:30 and more fully equipped for any engagement, which we were going to have. For instance such things as medical supplies, [panniers] containing all the medical equipment, stretchers, anything at all that you could think off, they were becoming issued to us. By the time we were ready

41:00 to move off from Victoria to the northern regions, and by this stage we had a fair amount of what we needed.

Tape 3

00:30 It's a woven cane basket. It's about that long, about that high and by about that dimension wide. You'd put all your medical equipment into it and a handle at the end, so the chaps could carry it. That's what we called a pannier. Did you need to know that?

We do, all those details are important, that's going to be forgotten in five years fifty years time and they are going to want to go back later in time and know the details.

01:00 When we were at Bonegilla, as I mentioned a little earlier we were accumulating stores and equipment. In a field ambulance, a lot of the equipment is carried in a pannier, which is a woven cane basket and maybe about four feet long or a fraction less and about eighteen inches high and the same width,

01:30 you'd put all your bits and pieces, like surgical equipment and bandages and disinfectants, anything that you could imagine that you'd need for injuries that you'd need out in the field, or the front line or wherever you may be. A lot of the equipment that was not given to us when we were further south, we were now accumulating and ready to be transported by train up to the Queensland area.

02:00 We experienced a lot of interesting things at Bonegilla because the disappearance of horse drawn vehicles and the coming into the being of motorized transport, so that just on the outskirts of our camp where many horses and many horse drawn vehicles, which in fact were never used in the war again, because motorized transport had become

02:30 the thing of the day. It's hard to believe now but we are talking about 1942. It's not very long ago really. We used to go for routes marches down to the Hume Weir and just generally keeping fit with daily exercise, squad drill, and physical training. At night time we had the pleasure of recreational hut where a very out of tune pianos were played and lots of singing and fun and games

03:00 were occurring.

Can you remember any of the songs any of the specific songs sung?

Well, "Kiss Me Goodnight Sergeant Major" was a typical one. "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", was constantly sung as we were on our route marches. Names have just failed to come to mind immediately, but as we go on I may be able to think of some more. The poor old piano was never tuned and it was thoroughly out of tune

03:30 but quite a lot of fun occurred there. We used to write to our people back home. We got leave a couple of times and you'd get on a train in the darkness and you'd be awake all night and you would get to Melbourne about nine or ten in the morning and a very short trip, but yet it was very, very slow because every siding you'd have to pull onto you'd allow a train to pass going north, being a single line in those days.

04:00 It was a very, very slow trip indeed.

Once at Bonegilla, you were fully stocked?

Yes.

What was the next movement?

The next movement was the whole of our brigade, which was the 10th Brigade and the 15th Brigade and the 4th Brigade and all parts of the 3rd Division were eventually put onto the trains and we were able to move forward to Queensland over the boarder. We'd stopped

04:30 at places like Taree, where they'd give you a good feed on the station. We were sleeping on the seats or on the floor of the carriages. If you missed out on a seat in the train, then you'd grab the next best, which would be the floor. If the floor was occupied you'd remove the luggage off the luggage rack and you'd climb up onto the luggage rack of the single

05:00 compartment and you'd sleep up there. Eventually, we got to a place over the Queensland boarder called Kangaroo, where we got off the train and we just waited there for several hours for transport to

arrive and then they took us to a placed called Jimboomba, which was a few miles out of Brisbane out on the Boatershead Road. There we set up

05:30 our first establishment after Seymour. We had water supplied from the Logan River and we had a water tank, which was driven by a fellow named Mark Kelly.

06:00 There a lot of us made a run for the nearest general store, which was very small in fact and then we went around to [Jimboomba] to see if they had any potato bags to sell us. You'd wonder why we wanted potato bags but potato bags and put a few poles and posts was better than sleeping on the floor. We made these hessian bag beds in our tents, and

06:30 that was quite good. It kept us off the ground and it was a bit warmer than the freezing cold ground.

How were you coping with all that, obviously you're thrown into this situation and you're sleeping in luggage racks and on the floor and in the freezing cold and obviously you're not getting as much sleep as you're used too?

Of course you weren't.

How did you cope during the day?

We just had no option. You just had to learn to live with that. It was discipline

07:00 which you had to take.

Why were you moved specifically up to Jimboomba?

They wanted to get as many troops as possible up into Queensland. Because at this stage the Japanese were now into New Guinea, they'd come through Malaysia and known in those days as Malaya, Singapore had fallen

07:30 and they knew that you didn't have to have an understanding of what was going on to quickly pick up the fact that the Japanese were heading for Australia. The Coral Sea battle had occurred in May that year, 1942. The dreadful fighting in the Guadalcanal, the Solomon Islands had taken place and the Japanese had landed now in the northern part of

08:00 New Guinea at a place called Buna and were heading over the Owen Stanley Ranges and we were heading north to be prepared for any invasion into Queensland by the Japanese. Some of use went to Jimboomba and others went further inland and others went further up the coast. Our unit was located first of all at Jimboomba where we did

08:30 jungle training there and it was very, very intensive.

Tell us a bit about that?

First of all, fitness was number one. You'd be up at daybreak and have a roll call and go for a long march down the roads over the mountain tracks in the [Caloundra] area and you'd have to go down very steep hills, slippery.

09:00 Generally get used to jungle training. Then we were rewarded for the hard training with very, very nice surprises, for instance some of us were formed into a football team, and we were taken down to Burleigh Heads where we played our opposite number from the 4th Field Ambulance.

09:30 My records show that we were beaten on that occasion. On another occasion we were taken to Southport and we were able to play tennis and no ranks were recognized, it was officers and men, so that any man could play, and we had the fun of our lives trying to beat the officers.

How did you go?

In my particular occasion I won, but that was no real credit to

10:00 me, he was no tennis player.

What was your relationship generally with your superiors?

Very good. We were now becoming a unit, a bonded unit, each person playing his role very, very well. We knew from the very fact that the advancing Japanese had to be something to contend with and it was no use having disagreements -

10:30 we were now at war. We had to learn how to handle that. We would be given lectures by the officers who would be informed from army headquarters of what to say, telling us of the advance of how to overcome the problems that the Japanese were introducing a different method of warfare that we'd have ever known. For instance, one

11:00 of the lectures that he had showed us that whilst we would be advancing up the Kokoda Trail heading towards the Japanese, they were very, very cunningly sneaking behind us and would get in behind our lines. They were virtually bypassing our advancing troops. The thing about it was that you couldn't see them, and they went silently and their method of that

11:30 really tricked our initial engagement. We soon learned how to overcome that because we did the same to them. That was some of the lectures that we had. We had to learn that they used a different method of warfare, which we considered not being fair, and if you can ever be fair in war, but doing things which we thought were dreadful.

It was seriously considered that there was

12:00 **a threat to Australia shores?**

It was more than a threat, it was really on. We were really concerned about it. It was no use having disagreements between personal or officers and men and everyone had to pull together and real benefit like that that, we were pulling together.

While you were there in Queensland, how long were you

12:30 **there?**

At Jimboomba, we were there for about six to eight weeks. Occasionally, we were given the privilege of being taken into Brisbane for an evening of our choice. We could visit people or those who wanted to go to a picture show could do that. We were there just for that short number of weeks. We were transported from Jimboomba to Maryborough.

13:00 That was a two-day trip in those days, and in these days you'd do it in a few hours. The road between Brisbane and Maryborough was over sand hills and it was just an unmade road, it was just a gravel road. It was terribly slow with the convoy, with thousands of troops being transported up there.

At that time there must have been a lot of American soldiers in Brisbane and in Queensland at that stage?

13:30 They were coming down south at that stage. General MacArthur's headquarters was in the Menzies Hotel in Melbourne, which was located on the corner of William Street and Bourke Street in Melbourne. The Americans occupied Royal Park in Melbourne near the zoo, thousands of troops there between the zoo and the Royal Children's Hospital. It's hard to believe, that they occupied so many locations and they occupied

14:00 our campsite also in the Nagambie Road on the Goulburn Valley Highway, they took over our campsite. As they occupied our campsites down south we went forward to the north.

Did you have much to do with the Americans?

I did a few times. They were very kind to me, they were generous and excellent as far as I'm concerned. We

14:30 enjoyed the fact that they'd come to help us out, because without them we would have been in terrible trouble.

Back in Queensland and we've moved up to Maryborough, was your training now getting more specific?

Absolutely, they used to have mock accidents. One afternoon after we'd done our day's work and we were settling down for our evening meal, and we were suddenly called out that there'd been a mighty big train and vehicle accident on a railway crossing just near Maryborough.

15:00 Those of us that were required to go had to get our trucks loaded and ambulances loaded and off we went tearing along the road and to see what had happened. There were bodies on the road, but there was no train. We had to put them onto stretchers and it was just a mock accident and it just proved that how rapidly we could assembly

15:30 with our personnel and gear and equipment and be out at the scene. It was intensive daily training in the bush there.

Had you already been delegated a specific role?

Yes, we had been.

What was your role?

My particular role was the stretcher-bearer. I had to learn how to handle a very badly injured person, how to put him onto the stretcher, what to do and what not to do. If you had an injured spine, we were told to how to

16:00 handle a person with a broken back, so it wouldn't paralyse him if we moved him.

Can you tell us some of the specifics there? Obviously this is very important in terms of you being prepared?

Today's method of handling patients would be much the same in those days. Generally speaking, we required at least four men to pick up a person. Without four men, you just had to leave the patient there

16:30 until the rest of the personnel could come along to help you. Because severe injury is so critical to the spine and they result in paraplegic or quadriplegic person, so you had to learn how to do that. One's memory of the literal details of that, and how we used to do it, but it virtually would be the same as we do today, handle patients.

You said there was the mock accident, the

17:00 **train crash scenario, were there occasion when those skills were used in an actual situation where there were injuries?**

No, exactly the same, because that was a train, truck accident, or vehicle accident. By the time we got to New Guinea there were no trains or trucks to have accidents together. Yes, there were definitely head and spinal injuries, which we were trained to care for.

So we've moved to Maryborough,

17:30 **how long were you there?**

We were there for two months, approximately. From there we moved back to [Caloundra] where we were given one week of freedom. As long as we abided by the rules and regulations we were relatively free to go swimming as long as we didn't do the disappearing trick. One night, everybody did vanish

18:00 from the camp site, they went to the pictures and they were just enjoying themselves either at the pictures or having a milkshake or something like that and then the place was invaded by officers, and said, "Come on, back you go to the camp." So nobody was in trouble, and we were told not to abuse our privileges.

Tell me about the morale of the unit at that time, obviously there was a real sense that there is this major

18:30 **threat to Australia?**

Yes, that was true, but we were too young to let it worry us. We thought that we were part of a marvellous organisation. I will go back to Albury just to give you an answer to that question. After many, many tries I persuaded my dear mother to come up by train and stay at Albury. By this stage, Albury,

19:00 also that I forgot to mention earlier was the scene of thousands, upon thousands of American soldiers. The roads had jeeps and American trucks going around. It created a sense of excitement to us, to see such huge equipment that we'd never seen before, or imagined could be built even. Great ten wheeled trucks, which were known as ten by ten, in other words they

19:30 had two front wheels and then eight rear wheels, all of which drove. It was just an amazing thing. Speaking about my mother, I got her to come up but there was nowhere for her to stay, the hotels were absolutely booked out, so I went to the proprietor of the Hume Café, which was one that we frequented when we got an evening off. I said to this lady, "Is there anywhere that you can find a bed for my mother?" And she said,

20:00 "Well, would she sleep in there", which was between the counter of the restaurant or cafe, and the wall behind the cafe. And she said, "We could put a screen along here." And I said, "She'd sleep anywhere as long as she could get a bed." They found a folding camp stretcher and set it up with blankets and a pillow for my mother, and put a screen across behind the counter of the cafe and the wall, which was just wide enough for a bed

20:30 to be put in it. That's where my mother slept. I went for a walk with her after tea one evening and we walked down to the railway station and there we saw things that I'd never seen in my life. Big, low profile vehicles on the railway line, loaded up with tanks and tanks and tanks and guns and I thought, isn't this wonderful? My poor mother

21:00 must have been horror struck. She could see the reality of it, and I was too young to realise the reality of it. I was just one of thousands of young boys who were there thinking that it's not serious as it was but we began to learn.

That's real interesting, you were saying that you wanted to be a part of the Australian forces but you wanted to save lives.

Save lives, that's exactly right.

21:30 **And earlier on you wanted to go into medicine as you said. How were you when you came to these mock situations, not blood as such, were you ever squeamish at all, were you mentally prepared for what lay ahead?**

No, but that will come up in the next bit of my story. We hadn't seen blood at that stage, it was going to come before many weeks went by.

22:00 We were taught how to put bandages on, how to do what they call the Thomas splint. If a person had a broken or fractured femur or knee or foot injury, we were taught how to bandage it. What I was taught

then has stood me in good stead all my life. I've been able to help my family and others who had injuries, or needed a bandage for

22:30 a broken leg. I was taught how to do plastering of legs and so on. We now move from [Caloundra] where we had this wonderful week's break of swimming and just enjoying ourselves. They took us to Landsborough beside the railway line, between the railway line and the Bruce Highway. There we set up this camp, we were there for a few weeks during the months of September until about the third week in October 1942.

23:00 That's where we got those lectures on how the Japanese were tricking our soldiers and how we were learning to trick the Japanese, and eventually push them back towards the north coast. We did a lot of exercises there, one of which was to take us to a place called Ball Knob [?], it's out of Landsborough and my wife and I went recently ourselves.

23:30 One afternoon about four they told us to pack up and knock down the tents, pack the tents up and load them because we were moving. Within an hour or two with two hundred and forty men you can soon see how quick a place can be demolished. We moved off, and all that was remaining was vacant land and trees in Landsborough.

24:00 They took us up to Ball Knob and took us along a little gravel track where we stopped and it was lantana that was growing everywhere and they said we have to go through here, so they issued us with machetes, which were a big long knife about eighteen inches long. We had to literally hack our way into virgin jungle. Absolutely never been penetrated before.

24:30 We had to go over logs and in as near a straight a line as possible, for approximately one mile or one and a half kilometres, over logs. Eventually after about two hours, we got to our destination. As soon as we got to our destination and everybody was accounted for, to see that there were no stragglers, the officer in charge of us said, "Right, now

25:00 you can go back to the trucks." We were absolutely exhausted, some of those slippery, slimy logs and the more you tried to climb over the more you would slide back, you'd slide off them and finish up on the ground. Eventually we got all the [panniers] and what not back onto the trucks. Some of us decided as the vehicles weren't going to move off, that we'd lie down on the ground and

25:30 have a bit of a rest. We woke up to the fact that we were smothered with leeches. You had to literally just tear them off your legs. That was Landsborough and we did various exercises like that at night. Twice a week we were given permission to go on leave to a place called Nambour, some of us went to Woombye, which we have some friends.

26:00 We had a lovely time there. The army would provide vehicles to take us and bring us back. The important thing was to be back by a certain time. You had to be back no later than what we used to call twenty three fifty nine, which is one minute to midnight. Two of our boys, one was named Adam Gadston and the other one was Doug Johns missed

26:30 the bus to get back. They were pretty worried about how they were going to get back in time for role call at six o'clock the next morning. They went down to the railway line knowing full well that periodically there were freight trains going towards Brisbane. So they decided they were going to stop that train somehow. They went down to the railway line and they lit a fire in the middle of the railway track. The fire was blazing away and the engine driver sees this

27:00 fire and then pulled the train up and stopped it. Nobody was watching and these two soldiers jump onto one of the trucks, and they knew perfectly well that it would stop at Landsborough and they jumped off the truck. That's how they got back.

So basically all that training that you have been discussing, they knew that you were heading for New Guinea?

Yes. We were there for two months,

27:30 six to eight weeks. It was now becoming really hot, tropical weather. One afternoon, I was working away with my duties to which I'd been allocated that day and I heard my name yelled out. At that stage I was Private Richard Holmes. They called me and I had to report to the regimental office. Which was now

28:00 under the control of Major Gavin Johnson. Major Johnson said to me that our colonel had gone to hospital, that's why he now was in charge. Major Johnson said, "I've just received a signal from army headquarters in Brisbane, to be corrected, the advance army headquarters in Brisbane. That you are to report to Brisbane on the first train tomorrow morning on leave."

28:30 As it had come from a brass hat by the name of Colonel Steel, a full colonel. My commanding officer had no option but to accept his instructions that I was to be given the day off. Four in the morning, I had one of the guards wake me up and I got dressed and I caught the first train that came through to take me to Brisbane. I had to pay my own fare. It was because my sister Meg, who was now a

29:00 sergeant at the advanced army headquarters, she had arranged with Colonel Steel, so her younger

brother could see her before I went to New Guinea. I had this wonderful day off in Brisbane. We had a great time and took photographs and I always wanted to go to the gardens, the botanical gardens and so on and eventually after having our photographs taken by an official photographer in Brisbane,

29:30 I went back. Then a few days later, as it was almost imminent for use to move to Brisbane and be ready to embark overseas. We were told to throw in our surplus army blankets. We were allowed to keep one or two, I can't remember how many. Any surplus blankets had to be handed in. They had a three-ton truck with a canopy over it and everybody,

30:00 all the soldiers in our unit, the whole lot of us had to throw our blankets in without folding them and just threw them in. While we were doing that Captain Wilson, who was the quartermaster, he came up to me and said, "How did you manage to get leave to go to Brisbane? We are about to sail." I said, "My sister organised it from HQ [Headquarters]." He said,

30:30 "What was her name?" And I said, "Meg Holmes." And he said, "I knew a Meg Holmes and what school did she go to?" And I said, "Canterbury State School." And he said, "I went there too, would you like to go and see her again?" So I said, "Certainly, I'd love to go." So he said, "Jump in the back of the truck." So in I get and I climbed up the back and the blankets kept on coming and literally covered me over.

31:00 At the appropriate time he gets into the front of the truck and the driver take him off with me in the back under the blanket and he smuggled me out of camp. When we got out onto the Bruce Highway, not far from the camp, he got the driver to stop and I emerged from under the blankets and got into the front of the truck with him. He took me to Brisbane and we got rid of all the blankets and then we went down to see my sister Meg at army headquarters.

31:30 There, I met the person who organised my day off a few days earlier, Colonel Steel and he, his instructions to me, he said, "When you go to New Guinea", and that was the first time that I was told where we were going because it was always so hush, hush. He said, "When you go to New Guinea make sure you take a tin of Johnson Baby Powder." He said that "I'd need some powder up there".

32:00 We went back to the camp and of course everybody was wondering where I'd been for the day. We managed to keep it quite until it was safe to talk about it. Now we get transported down to [Eagle Farm Racecourse in] Ascot in there near Brisbane, which was known as a staging camp, for us to be finally checked and ready for embarking on the ship to go to New Guinea.

32:30 We were just wondering around aimlessly at five o'clock or thereabouts in the afternoon and then in comes a grey cheviot staff car. It just drove around the racetrack and gradually going along and it happened to be my sister looking for me. She was at that stage was able to drive a staff car and she had managed to borrow one.

33:00 She caught up with me to say goodbye.

You saw her three times?

I saw her three times, and all the poor other chaps weren't even allowed to say boo to anyone.

Sounds like she had a fair bit of influence?

She had a great personality. She went on to become a lieutenant and was in charge of about two hundred girls up in a place called Wallangarra, an ordinance depot on the boarder of

33:30 NSW and Queensland.

It sounds like she not only had personality but you were looked on favourably as well by your captain?

I was very favourably looked after.

Why was that do you think?

I don't know. It was always my aim to get on with people, to treat them nicely, to respect them and I got rewarded for it I suppose, not that I wasn't looking for it but it just happened

34:00 to work out that way.

What would the other fellows say after that, what was their response to?

I think as the year 2003 has arrived, and I'm amazed that it happened, because security was absolutely tight as it could possibly be. She was able to tell me exactly where I was heading for and I never divulged it, she entrusted me with the information. She told me

34:30 when I was going, where and when because she was in the know. I just kept that very much to myself. I knew ahead of my colonel.

Really?

Yes.

Was it hard for you to not say anything?

No. I couldn't break that honourable commitment.

It was Ascot Racecourse, and

35:00 **what happened from there?**

We were there for about two days and then we were allocated to two ships. Mine was a ship called the Maetsuycker, it was a steam ship and the other was called the steamship [Barwon] [?], both belonging to the Dutch. The Maetsuycker was

35:30 a modern ship and it was constructed only a few years before the war. It was quite a fast ship but that wasn't able to be utilized because it was a very slow old steamship. It brought its own problems on our voyage to New Guinea. It couldn't keep up with us if it sped up and we became an easy target like it was if we got into trouble with any

36:00 submarines, which in fact occurred. We were, escorted by a destroyer by the name of [HMAS] Arunta, and it's been superseded by another Arunta, which is still in commission with the navy today. We sailed up to Townsville but because of the slowness of

36:30 the advances of the Australian troops, because it made it an almost impossible situation on the Kokoda Trail to dislodge the Japanese, we had to wait in Townsville harbour for about two weeks, just waiting for the go ahead to go to Port Moresby, or may have been Milne Bay depending which was cleared first. Eventually, we got to Port Moresby at

37:00 the end of November 1942. We stayed on board the ship, in fact we got there about the middle of November and we stayed on board except for a bit of a break and they'd take us off but we'd go back each day. While we were on board

37:30 we had some rather amusing incidences. The Maetsuycker and [Barwon] were manned by Indonesian sailors. In our unit we had a person by the name of Don Huddleston, who was an entertainer and as I have mentioned earlier in my notes we had a dentist on board and also a technician. Don Huddleston had

38:00 previously had all his top teeth removed, which was not uncommon years ago. He had a full plate. So he went along to Captain Marks the dentist, one day and he said, "Would you mind making me a dental plate with just one single tooth on it?" Which he did, and Wally Page was the dental technician. Wally made this expert job of the one tooth. Now we go back to

38:30 the Maetsuycker and we were on board at Port Moresby and Don Huddleston had his normal routine for starting off his tricks for his entertaining trade. All these Indonesian sailors were standing around him and he started telling a funny story and he had his full denture in. They were intrigued

39:00 by his tricks that he was doing. Then he very rapidly turned around and in a flash out came the full denture and was replaced by this single denture, a single tooth and he started talking to them and they just roared laughter and amazement that he could do such a thing in such a short time. Where had his teeth gone to? The other thing on board ship - that I was very

39:30 fortunate, was during a particular day the assistant doctor whose name was Andrew Tetaheroo, he was a Dutch medical doctor. He came and started talking to me while we were standing by the banister on the upper deck and we were just looking over the harbour at Port Moresby. We got talking about all sorts of subjects and he said, "Would you like to come down to my cabin?"

40:00 I said, "Thank you very much." And I went down to his cabin and he was dressed in his naval uniform and he said, "Would you like a nice cold drink?" And I said, "I'd love one." It was a real experience, rather than lukewarm water, out of a water bottle. He pressed a button on the wall in his cabin and the next thing a fully uniformed Stewart comes along and

40:30 said, "What would you like? Would you like some black currant juice?" And I said, "I would love some black currant juice." So he comes along with some black currant juice and with ice with it. The next day and the next day and the next day, until we departed from the ship and he'd entertained me on the ship everyday. My poor friends, the rest of the unit didn't get any, they just lead a normal life. He looked after

41:00 me in such a wonderful way.

Tape 4

00:30 **You were on your way to Port Moresby. You just told us the story about black current juice, this wonderful man Andre Tetaheroo. Tell us a bit more about this man and why he treated you so favourably?**

We are talking about Andrew Tetaheroo, who was the assistant ship's doctor on the

01:00 Maetsuycker. He was good enough to give me a route plan of the ship, which I still have and I'll show you later. For reasons for which it was hard to remember we found there was a bit of an affinity between each of us. He was Indonesian and a real gentleman of a fellow. As I said earlier, he took me to his

01:30 cabin, which was very, very nicely appointed, on this fairly modern ship in those days. He gave me these drinks every day for several days of black current juice with ice and it was very refreshing. If my friends had known what was going on, I don't know what would have happened, so I kept it to myself. I enjoyed the privilege, which certainly was unsolicited.

02:00 Some time later after we'd been in action at Buna, the ship turned up at the Port of Oro Bay, I caught up with Andre Tetaheroo again and he said "He'd been to Melbourne", he told me "He had been in touch with my brother Terrance". So they knew exactly where I was, so I didn't have to break any rules

02:30 to let them know where I was.

You weren't allowed to divulge?

You weren't allowed to divulge any information on where you were. If you did mention, it would have been chopped out of your letter anyway, because of censorship.

Can you tell us a little bit about, obviously friendships had been established some way back, can you tell us a little bit about your mates, from Victoria up to Queensland and now on the ship and how the bonds developed?

03:00 A lot of us were brought up as Christians and because of the church in which we were involved we had that bond to start with, which was rather wonderful. It was our normal practice each day to have prayer and scripture reading whenever we possible could. I'll show you presently my little bible, which I carried in my pocket all through the war.

03:30 It was a comfort to me to be able to resort to the scriptures, if I needed comfort and that was every day. We had lots of friends like that. In fact we endeavoured to have a little bit of a fellowship whenever we gathered together. Some of them were old school friends, neighbours. It was quite remarkable, the 10th Field Ambulance was quite an interesting unit from that point

04:00 of view, and I'll go back to the Jimboomba days. One day when we were just idle after a day's work a vehicle came up the Beaudesert road and this person stopped at the entrance gate and spoke to the guard, and he said, "I want to see the colonel." The guard arranged for him to see the colonel.

04:30 It was a surprise to most of us when you look back. To see the colonel without an appointment was quite an astonishing thing. He just made arrangements for us, he said, "We want these young people to go to church on Sunday." And he said, "Well, if I let one go I've got to let the lot go. You can't discriminate between churches, we have all sorts of people in the unit, we've got

05:00 Plymouth Rocks, Rhode Island Reds and he named all these different types of WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s. If you let one go, you've got to let them all go." That was very interesting, because that was a break through for the entire unit, those people who wanted to go to church parade, could go to church parade and those who wanted to go to their own church some distance away. So a lot of us chose to go to some distance away, to Logan Village and that was about an eight mile walk, or

05:30 whatever we can do. That's what we did, we had a commitment to God in those days and as far as I'm concerned I've still got it.

On the ship, you talked earlier of how you'd been prepared for life in the jungles, with a lot of the training there and you had been told about the tactics that the Japanese were using?

Yes.

What other sort of preparation were left on the way?

06:00 We had daily training. We had pictures of Japanese profile in frontal facial of their faces and they were pasted up onto the walls of the ship. On the top deck, and you'd have to go pass and study that face, the face of a Japanese and a Chinese to be able to tell the difference between each. That was a very important part of the training.

Why was that, because there was a Chinese population in?

06:30 Yes, the Chinese population in New Guinea and that actually occurred with me and one of the biggest frights that I got in the entire time I was away was when I mistook a Chinese for a Japanese and it happened to be a Chinese. So it was good training that I'd had.

How did you differentiate, what were you told of the differences?

In the eyes,

07:00 the bones and in the facial features and you had to study them, it is a bit hard to remember exactly what I was trained. We had boat drill of course everyday - how to get out of a hatch, how to get out of a hole, and all sorts of difficult circumstances. Going back to the conditions on the boat, there were something like five hundred

07:30 soldiers on the ship. It was converted from a standard cargo ship with cranes above and they put bunks, multi-tiered bunks all around the perimeter of the haul. To overcome the lack of ventilation they had wind shoots, which were mounted from above the top deck, hoping that the movement of the ship would

08:00 catch the winds and blow it down into the haul, which did not work. One by one, we would get hold of your single bed mattress which was provided on the bunk and he'd have to climb up by holding his mattress and he'd have to climb up vertical ladder to get out of the haul and onto the deck and they'd find us a vacant part of the deck and that would become yours for the rest of the journey.

08:30 Nobody could take your part, only with a few belongings on board there.

As you went up, again the mood, what was the mood like, you'd been trained, you felt prepared but in terms of being in the thick of it, were you aware when that was going to happen?

Yes, we were worried. I will tell you what, we were now heading towards

09:00 the war zone. The very fact that we were being escorted by the Arunta was warning enough to us to know that something serious was on. It was a very fast moving vessel and it would go around and around and around circling the two ships all the time. Then one day when we were midway between Townsville and Port Moresby there was a submarine alert and depth charges dropped

09:30 and we finally got to our destination safely.

When you arrived at Port Moresby, what happened next?

For the first two weeks we were virtually stationed aboard the ship, we were taken by a small watercraft, of any description, anything that would float, with a few men.

10:00 They'd take us ashore and we'd go for long route marches - how to barter, and around the suburbs of Port Moresby. Then later in the day they'd take us back to the ship and feed us and we'd bed down on board the deck again.

What news were you hearing from the war front?

Virtually nil. It was very, very, hush, hush. There were no radios

10:30 that we could listen too. We were informed very little on board the ship. We were quite worried because by now with the increasing intensity of the Japanese aircraft, we were getting alerts each day of the approach of enemy aircraft, Zeros, and Mitsubishi bombers, we were a real target.

11:00 **I could imagine you would of felt quite on edge?**

Yes, we were getting quite on edge. That went on for approximately two weeks. There was little to do, they'd take us ashore and march and then go back to the ship, so it broke the monotony and that's practically all that he could say. It was during a time when I talked about Andrew Tetaheroo and that was a break for some of us, they'd entertain with Don Huddleston.

11:30 Then the day came when it was decided that they were going to disembark and we were told that we were going to be taken to a general hospital called the 2/9th Australian General Hospital, which was about nine miles out of Moresby on the beginning of the road that went onto the Kokoda Trail.

12:00 We were allocated to that hospital, and I worked in the surgical ward, which was my first experience of dozens and dozens and dozens of poor unfortunate, some limbless and arm less soldiers. Some would have amputations of legs, some with head wounds, and this was my first experience of nursing in a surgical ward.

12:30 In the meantime I might add, that I hadn't told you before that for some weeks I had been training as a nursing orderly and for that reason I'd gained my proficiency, so instead of being paid at the normal army basic wage and I was now a couple of steps up. I was able to do such things as administer

13:00 hypodermic needles and give injections. We worked there for about two weeks, and as I'd mentioned before there were quite a lot of us that were Christians and we made it a practice of ours as often as we possibly could to have a little gathering in the afternoon, a little time of prayer together. This little

13:30 group of us were in the kunai grass, which is the common grass in New Guinea. I heard my name called out. I heard the name of my best friend Ken Sutherland and altogether twenty-eight names were called out. We had to report to the orderly office it was called, it was only a tent, but it was called the orderly office. Individually, we were called in

14:00 and went in alphabetical order. My turn came and Major Johnson who was the acting commanding

officer at the time. He said to me, “You’ve been chosen to go to the front line, do you feel like going?” And I said, “Certainly, I’ll go.” I knew perfectly well if I didn’t say yes, I would be letting my friends down. You didn’t want to be separated from my friend Ken. When he came out

14:30 I said, “What are you doing, are you going?” And he said “Yes”, so now we were committed to going to the front line, and we didn’t know what to expect. By this stage the Japanese had been pushed back over the ranges to a point somewhere near Popendetta, which was the first village after Kokoda on the flats. Now that area has become

15:00 nearly freed up of the Japanese so that it was safe for our aircraft to land on a grass strip. On the 17th December we went down to the airstrip with all our [panniers] and all our equipment to load up the planes and it was too cloudy and too wet for us to take off. We had to go back and then the next day we went over

15:30 and that was the 18th December, we flew over and we landed at a place called Dobodura and they kept the engines of the plane going as hard as possible while everyone jumped out of the plane and grab our gear and equipment and went for cover and then the plane took off. Now we’re absolutely on our own. Guns banging away

16:00 and we didn’t know what to do. So we went down to where there were some American establishment on the Girua River and they fed us and they gave us cover and we slept there for the night. I’ve got my dates wrong, we went over on the 17th, we landed at Dobodura on the 18th, and we marched all the way

16:30 from there to the coast, along the most dreadful so called road that I’ve ever been on. Part of it was ok, just a sandy track and the rest of it was called corduroy, which was formed by placing logs about one hundred to one hundred and fifty millimetres in diameter side by side and wired down to

17:00 boards or poles running at right angles, so that jeeps could drive over the mud. That was the most dreadful experience. On our way, we were intrigued to see this low flying Douglas aircraft coming so low, and it was just above tree top height. We thought there was no airfield around here, what’s he doing and before we could say Jack

17:30 Robinson out come bags of biscuits and food stuff being thrown out of the plane and we just had to run for our lives to escape being killed by the falling bags, they bounced and bounced until they finished up smashing every biscuit in the tin. We arrived late in the afternoon of the 18th December 1942,

18:00 at a place called Hariko. Were we stayed for a while and moved towards the Cape Endaiadere, which was the target for the battle before Buna. We were shown to an area in dense jungle where we were going to hide a surgical hospital, surgical theatre.

18:30 We actually had to cut with the machetes. Mind you everything had to be carried by hand, tents, [panniers], every article that had to be carried all along this corduroy road and there was just no way that the jeeps could get there and worst than that there were not jeeps anyway. There wasn’t any road transport at all to help us.

19:00 We hacked our way into the jungle, which would possibly be about one hundred meters from the beach and we cleared an area big enough to establish a little camp, which was going to be for a theatre, recovery ward, cookhouse and enough area for us to put up little tents for which we had to sleep. By this time they had issued us with half

19:30 a two-man tent for each person. So it didn’t matter who you met you could always clip together and create a little tent, which you could crawl into on the ground.

How many men were there on that trek?

Twenty-eight of us, including officers and men, we put up the tents and somehow or other I haven’t told you out the story about the hammer.

20:00 Before we left Maryborough in Queensland, prior to going to [Caloundra] and Landsborough and Ascot, I went into a hardware shop and I brought a little hammer. The only hammer that I could buy that was small enough other than a claw hammer, which is an engineer’s hammer, which is just a hammer with a ball on the other end of it. I bought a few nails, never for a moment thinking that this was going to change my life in the army. I thought it would be useful

20:30 for hanging up a mirror on a tree or something, help me when I’m saving or combing my hair. Somehow or other it is a mystery to me that Major Jim Yates, who was the surgeon with us, he got to hear that I had a hammer, and thought that I’d must of been a carpenter. He said to me “Could I possible make some furniture for the theatre?”

21:00 In those days, there was no such thing as a cart, it was all wooden boxes. I went to the cookhouse and I asked one of the cooks if I could have some boxes and he said certainly, so he tipped out all the tins and gave me these boxes.

21:30 In a short time I’d turned boxes into little tables. I got some white towels and put them over the boxes

over the tables and put instruments, like forceps, kidney dishes. A little primus stove, one of which I've got over there. I had it blazing away and boiling up instruments to sterilize the instruments.

22:00 When he came back he found the operating theatre ready to go, he said to me "That he was so pleased at what I had done that would I like to join the surgical team?" That changed my life in the army completely. It took me from being a stretcher-bearer into a surgeon's assistant,

22:30 which was quiet an extraordinary thing. The actual operating table happens to be an ambulance stretcher, and to bring it up to suitable height we went into the jungle and chopped down some saplings. Which had a V on top of the trunk and we drove those into the ground and the V supported the handle of the stretcher.

It sounds like you almost expected to have

23:00 **to improvise and it was just the way it was?**

We were taught to improvise, I haven't told you this before. We were taught to improvise - how to make stretchers, how to purify water and all sorts of things. Right back as far as Seymour days on the Nagambie Road, we were told how to turn muddy water into suitable drinking water.

It sounds like every bit of training you had, the machete through the

23:30 Yes.

lantana, all that has?

Yes. It was all now bearing fruit. So that the prediction of Colonel McKenzie back in the Nagambie Road days, he said, "You're going to a place named X." He must of had a wonderful foresight into what was going to happen. He could see that it was going to happen, but we didn't have a clue.

Just going back, because obviously a lot has happened from Moresby,

24:00 **waiting to fly across the Owen Stanleys.**

Yes, no I haven't covered that at all.

Could we hear a bit more and just go back a fraction and that experience of flying over the mountain, and you said that you heard the battle?

Yes. The plane that we flew over was what the Americans called a Douglas C47, commonly known as a DC3. It had a large door on the side of

24:30 the plane, and it was so big that a jeep could be driven into the plane. It just had aluminium seats along the side, right down the side on each side of the plane. With a depression, so that you wouldn't slither or slip and you just had to go over the mountain range in this opened door plane, no door on it at all.

25:00 The route over the mountains, which was over what they call the Gap - in the old language about seven thousand feet - it is normally covered in cloud, so they had to pick their time and act on it, without any waste of time, to make sure before the clouds came over the Gap. We went through the Gap so low that you could see down, and see

25:30 all the natives in their villages, with their children playing it was an extraordinary experience. Then we slithered down the mountain slope on the plane.

Just continue on that journey, the landing there, you said that you could hear gunfire?

We landed and we had to spend the night beside the Girua River

26:00 with the Americans and that was really worrying because every time a gun went off, or every time a plane flew over, we thought it was - came straight at me or you, everybody seemed to be targeting every person that was there. At that stage, the actual fighting would have been only two miles away, and that was a very, very testing initiation.

26:30 One of the big problems that we were faced from this point onwards was the fact that in our training, we were warned in no uncertain terms - do not touch foliage, if we could possibly avoid it with our bare hands, or skin or arms or whatever, or legs. For that reason we were told that we must wear long pants

27:00 with gaiters - we must wear long sleeved shirts, buttoned up to avoid touching the foliage with our hands. Scrub typhus was prevalent. People and soldiers were going down in droves from scrub typhus. Nobody knew exactly where the disease was coming from. They knew it was carried by rodents such as rats and things like that. To safeguard

27:30 us the officers said, "Don't touch the foliage with your hands." That was a major worry, all the time you were scared that you'd rub against something where one of these little mites would be picked up. It was later in the story and we come to the point where ever so many were affected by scrub typhus.

28:00 **You improvised brilliantly, you got the theatre set up there, the tables and stretchers.**

Yes.

What was the name of the captain there?

That was Major Jim Yates.

It was Major Jim Yates who asked you to join the surgical team?

Exactly. Major Jim Yates seemed to have taken a personal liking to me, for reasons, which I don't understand but anyway it happened.

28:30 There was Major Johnson, Major Harold Gatenby who came from Launceston down in Tasmania. The surgical team consisted of Sergeant Jack Caldwell, Corporal Andrew McCaddie [?], Private Phil Ailwin [?], Private Ted Turrell and myself, so that gave us full strength of the surgical team. We are now up to the

29:00 19th December 1942. The virtual green light was given for us to receive casualties. It wasn't very long after the inspection of the theatre by Major Yates that he said that we could go ahead and get things ready. The organisation of equipment was all

29:30 ready, the bandages and everything we needed was all ready from the panniers. Shortly after, he said that we could receive patients. Now, just bear in mind that just a short distance away was the portable hospital called the 2nd American Portable Hospital. They were the ones that were receiving the casualties up to this point.

30:00 Now we've come to help them and ourselves. Shortly after we got the green light, the first casualties came in and the first person to come in was a poor unfortunate soldier that had a bullet through his wrist, or his hand, just here. I was with the major at the time, and by this stage the

30:30 poor chap was under anaesthetic, we were going to try and save his wrist. There was a consultation between him and Major Johnson who was also a doctor. They had decided that there was no way that they could possibly repair that shattered hand, so they had to amputate it, at about that point just there. Major Jim Yates got

31:00 a white towel, put the wrist into the towel and wrapped it and said, "There you are Dickie, take it away." That was one of the hardest things that I've had to ever do. I'll never for a moment realised the weight of a hand. You might say - what did I do with it - nothing but to bury it, we did have a spade. So I went out of the theatre,

31:30 not far from where I was and dug a hole and had to bury that hand. It was a painful thing for me to do. It stung like one thing as far as my nerves are concerned. It made me realise that what I had decided in the very beginning, I was there to help save lives and I just had to realise that there was no use me buckling under. I just had to take it.

32:00 Then a poor chap came in that had been hit in a Bren gun carrier, that was the most ridiculous thing having a Bren gun carriers. Do you know what they are? Instead of having a top on them like a tank, they are just completely open and it's designed for desert warfare, not for jungle. Of course the Japanese are up in the trees and they'd just fire straight down into the Bren gun carrier and this poor chap

32:30 whose name was Jock. He was hit on the skull and quite a chunk of his bone was blown away. Major Yates started to operate on him, by of course, by now, which you can appreciate because of an injury, is now under anaesthetic anyway. Major Yates said to me, "Would you run down to the 2nd Portable Hospital and get a pair of bulldog bone nibbling forceps?"

33:00 So I went like a gazelle, I ran as hard as my legs would take me, down this jungle track, between the jungle and the beach and went into the American place and spoke to the American surgeon whose name I can't remember. I said, "Major Yates would like to borrow some bulldog bone nibbling forceps." The purpose of them was to tidy up

33:30 the fractured bone. We operated on him, and put a dressing over it and you could see his brain. We took him from the theatre into the recovery ward, which was only a tent, on an ambulance stretcher on the ground. For several days he was watched like a person in intensive care. Ken Sutherland,

34:00 Ted Lee who subsequently became a doctor himself, looked after him day and night for two or three days and they constantly asked him, "What's your name, what's your name, what day is it?" On about the third or fourth day and I don't remember distinctly, he said, "Jock", and he became conscious. We saved his life. Then he was transported by native stretcher

34:30 all the way from there to Dobodura, loaded onto a plane and then taken to the 2/9th General Hospital in Port Moresby. At that particular camp, and the one just nearby where I was transferred to as an advance party for the second theatre. We operated for twenty-one days, and we did ninety-one major operations, which lasted up

35:00 to five hours. We did every imaginable operation that you could think of: from abdominal, skull, leg,

arms, any part of your body. I haven't described much about the tent, but it was an American perimeter tent, lifted higher than normal so that a bit of the breeze could come under the side. We had a recovery stretcher to one side of the tent on the

35:30 the ground. For lighting, we'd now landed near Buna, because there was no power, no generator, you couldn't have a generator anyway, because the Japanese would hear it. We had to deal with the most basic lighting that you could possibly use.

36:00 We managed to get hold of a battery, from a jeep from somewhere, I don't remember where. We dismantled the headlamps, we mounted the jeep headlamps over the operating table and that gave Major Yates a little bit of light. My torch, which I've got on the table over there, was the one we used to shine into the abdominal or whatever, or the head,

36:30 or any wound that my little two cell everyready battery, is the one I used to help Major Yates with his operations, so that's how we had to put up with them. It was quite common to work, twelve, eighteen hours non-stop. On the 31st December we worked for nineteen hours non-stop.

37:00 And Jim Yates said to me, "That's it, we're going to get [rest] now." We slept for three hours and he came and woke me and said, "Come on Dickie, wake up", and we went back and worked for seventeen hours non-stop. The cook provided the most mega bit of food for us. Made of bully beef and a dog biscuit. That's all we had. The water that we used,

37:30 where do you get water? We had to get water that was suitable to drink. I managed to get hold of a biscuit tin. Now the tins that we used in those days in the army were about four hundred and fifty millimetres cubed. There about like so. We took the top off the tin with my hammer

38:00 and my nail and I punctured the tin all around the bottom and the sides, dug a hole in the ground with my spade until water appeared in the bottom of the hole. I dug a bit more and then I placed this holey tin down into the hole, as quickly as I could, before the sand could fall into it. The little holes would filter out the water,

38:30 and that became our water supply.

That's absolutely amazing Dick. You said that you operated on some ninety?

Ninety-one operations in twenty-one days.

So you were just thrown into the thick of it?

Yes.

Obviously it was a life changing experience and it sounds like you don't have any time to reflect on what it's doing to you?

39:00 What happened was these operations would last for four to five hours and then we would move the patient from the operating table onto the recovery area, we'd just exchange stretchers. Major Yates would tell me what to do. "Just look at his eyes." He told me what to

39:30 look for in the pupils, just keep checking his pulse. One of the hardest things that I've ever experienced after all those hours and hours to see a person take his last breath. I'd say, "I think he's going" to the Major and he would hand over his sterilized things to his assistant,

40:00 who'd be Jack Caldwell, the sergeant and he'd take over holding the tools. He would come down and pump his chest to try and make him breath. Occasionally it became impossible for us to have two doctors there at any one time. There would be an emergency somewhere and Major Yates would have to go, or Major Gatenby would go,

40:30 only the surgeon plus his theatre staff. He'd say, "Right Dickie you will have to do the anaesthetic." So I had to learn how to give anaesthetics. All this crammed into a few weeks. I had to learn to become virtually a sister or a properly trained nurse in a matter of weeks, which would take years in normal practice.

41:00 We achieved it, and we became a wonderfully together team, never a complaint.

Tape 5

00:30 We had times of quiet enjoyment at Port Moresby. We were well received by the locals there. I met Commodore Taggart, who was off one of the naval vessels, later to be in the Philippines where he was bombed and a kamikaze plane hit his ship.

01:00 We were very well received there. The native population, were very pleasant indeed. We went down the Hanawabarta [?], which is a suburb of Port Moresby and there we spend quite a bit of time by the sea and enjoying the new scenery such as the houses built on stilts way out in the water. You - sort of

walkway out to them. We'd have to walk quite a long way sometimes, or march just for

01:30 exercises. When we'd get a bit of a break, what we use to call a smoko, for nine or ten minutes. The routine was to pick up rocks and see who could hit a coconut and make it fall from a tree. There was one person by the name of Jack Cox who was always athletic and thought that he could do everything. He became a veteran tennis player and won competitions later in his years. This particular day he

02:00 threw so many rocks and he couldn't bring a coconut down. My friend, whom I've mentioned before whose name was Ken Sutherland, came along and picked up one rock, threw it once and brought down a coconut. Of course, you'd hear about fifty or sixty people laughing and what a wonderful joke it was, that Jack Cox couldn't bring it down after multiple tries. Generally speaking,

02:30 that was a daily routine, for about two weeks. Then we went up to the AGH, the Australian General Hospital.

Moresby's pretty hilly, isn't it?

Where the actually city is, it's very picturesque. It's quite steep hills. I mean it's not much difference to Exhibition Street in Melbourne. Yes, it's quite an attractive city.

Did you have much interaction with the local people?

03:00 Not at that particular time. There were too many of us, and we had our routine to carry out, which was marching and general exercises. No we didn't have an opportunity to speak to them at all, just the occasional one. We had lots more to do with the Indonesian people from the ship than we did with the native population.

03:30 **In Port Moresby at the General Hospital where you did your training?**

That's right. It was called the 2/9th. It was a very, very large establishment about nine miles out of town. It was capable of holding possibly two thousand patients it was so big.

Who was running that hospital?

I don't know the commanding officer at all. It was an AIF [Australian Imperial Force] hospital.

04:00 It was well and truly established before we got there. We were sleeping on the ground there, in very crude conditions because we weren't expecting to be there many hours or days, it happened to be two weeks. We were just waiting for a moment's notice to just, to travel by plane over to ranges to the north side of New Guinea. At night-time, it seemed to be the

04:30 regular thing was for the Japanese to bomb Port Moresby and we were pretty scared. We were so uninitiated there that we didn't know whether the next bomb was coming at us, or a mile away. They all seemed to be direct at us. So Angus Grant who was a veteran of the Middle Ease, he and I were working in the ward at the hospital and got up and ran for our lives and left everybody, and we ran into a recreation

05:00 hut and got underneath a table, we were so scared. It was so ridiculous thinking that getting under a table would protect you from a daisy cutter bomb.

Did the hospital get bombed?

No, it didn't at this stage. I don't think it ever got bombed, because it was well and truly marked with the conventional Red Cross, which it, preserved it from being bombed. The airstrips in Moresby were bombed,

05:30 like ward strip, all those areas they were harassed by the Japanese planes, until of course the alias got our ascendancy.

The hospital was full of patients?

Yes, mostly at that time patients had been wounded and sick with malaria from the Kokoda Trail. At which there were huge

06:00 number of casualties. Some of them were very badly damaged, injured. Some with amputated limbs, abdominal, head wounds. It was the focal point for all the areas around Port Moresby whether there were any hostilities at all. If anybody was brought down, or any airmen brought down or anyone

06:30 nearby from the ships or whatever and they needed hospital treatment that was the focal point.

This was quite a way to get an introduction into what is going on out there, in the country, in regards to the war, the battles, to see the injured coming in?

Yes, it was. It was an introduction, which I never ever expected. Nothing that

07:00 was coming that you could have possibly anticipated. Our commanding officer couldn't describe to us what we were going to expect. He had never had any experience, nobody, it was fresh. Every day was a fresh experience to both officers and other men. We didn't know what we were going to come up

against. We had to just face it as it came. It certainly drew out your sympathy, of those unfortunate wounded people.

07:30 **You would have got an idea though I guess from the hospital, or from those injured wounded people, of their types of wounds?**

Yes, that's true. I will tell you an experience which has troubled me all my life ever since. It's given me a great sympathy for other people that you see around that have been injured, like cyclist or people who have had a motor accident. We were doing an operation for a person who had a shockingly

08:00 damaged femur, that's your leg here. I remember Major Yates talking to one of the other doctors who was in the theatre at Buna. They discussed whether they could possibly save the leg and they couldn't, there was no way that they could patch up the whole patient, they couldn't and get him back to base it was so badly damaged.

08:30 It would have gone gangrenous if they hadn't of operated. They had to eventually amputate the poor man's leg. I was with him to watch him at the time he was coming out of anaesthetic and he was becoming conscious. The poor chap had just simply broke down when he realised that he didn't have a leg, but he said "I can feel it", but there wasn't anything to move. He

09:00 told me that "He could still feel his leg", but his leg had gone. That was a pretty awful test to me, I really got upset about that one, the poor man.

Did you find yourself counselling these men?

Yes, I tried to. It was very hard, to watch a person

09:30 particularly when a person died, I found that was terribly hard. My deep regret was that I didn't make a note of these, I was too young and inexperienced and I didn't even think of making a note of these patients' names, so that I could communicate with their loved ones back home. I wish I had of.

I guess it's a pretty special thing to share the

10:00 **last moments?**

Yes. I saw so many die. I was just glad that I was with them, able to do a little prayer with them. I just had to leave them to God after that, I had no way of helping them beyond that.

How did you deal with that, did you find yourself, I'm curious to what, you were there,

10:30 **you were at the field hospital, treating these people and some of them dying, did you take time out, did you write for example or did you?**

It was not possible to do anything about it. Absolutely no way we could do it. You were dealing with one patient there and there's but there's another ten waiting to be looked after. I had

11:00 no hope of helping them anymore than I did.

Just for your own, I guess, closure, or resolving it for yourself emotionally, I'm just wondering did you keep a journal or did you write poetry?

Unfortunately, we weren't allowed to do that. The only person who was allowed to diarise any of that

11:30 was the theatre sergeant, in today's terms the theatre sister. The theatre sergeant kept a diary but the rest of us were not officially permitted to do it. I did keep notes, which was of the most, briefest and most uninformative nature, so that I would have a memory prompter but beyond that, no I wasn't able to keep details.

12:00 You had no time to do it. There was absolutely no way of doing it, you were flat out from dawn till dark and then when darkness came you were still on duty in the pitch black dark except for my torch and my jeep headlights, there was no way of any spare time at all. If you had a moment's time to spare,

12:30 the theatre sergeant would say, "Could you make up some cotton balls?" So you would get a roll of cotton wool just like you buy up in the pharmacy today and break it into little pieces and roll it up into a ball, and it was used as swabs. Which of course naturally would have been sterilized first. I don't know how we did it, now. I forget now how we sterilized it. It was dry, maybe we just heated it in a tin or something.

13:00 **Medical supplies, were they a problem?**

Absolutely. One of the hardest things to do for me - one of my responsibilities was to give morphine or other injections, but we didn't have exchange or new needles. We had to try and reuse and reuse and reuse the same needle

13:30 to the point that they became blunt. That was terribly hard on me because even the sharpest needle hurts you, the finest sharpest pin. If you prick your finger with it, it hurts. I was using reused hypodermic needles. They were not sharp and I couldn't do anything about it. We had to get them

penicillin or

14:00 something like that or morphine and the patient had to suffer this awful injection, not because of the contents of the inject but because of the bluntness of the needles and that was terrible. You couldn't get supplies, replacements of anything. All that you had to live with

14:30 was the pannier, which I have explained earlier in my story. Which contained so many containers of morphine, so many of sterile water, some of plasma, some of sterile water for putting with the plasma, which was put into your artery in place of blood, all your field dressings, all your surgical dressings, your instruments.

15:00 What you took was what you had, and your supplies from the point when you left Port Moresby I'm speaking exclusively of our experience. From the point when we left Port Moresby that was the cut off point for our supplies, no more, and we had to make do with what we had. When we ran out of things, we had to seek the help of the American hospital, which was next door, which of course was the same size, about twenty-eight people,

15:30 about the same number of personnel as we did. The suffering was intensified by lack of replacement equipment.

How well stocked was the Americans?

Very much better than we were, they very much better off than we were, in every sphere they were better equipped. They had a jump-start

16:00 on us, they were involved before we were. Yes, they were better equipped.

Were they getting medical supplies through?

No more than we were at that stage and not at Buna. Supplies didn't become available for a few weeks later, when planes began to be able to fly into Dobodura, which was now becoming an operational airfield,

16:30 instead of just a grass strip. Eventually supplies began to flow. The Americans opened up a road from Oro Bay across and over the hills to Dobodura, which was a masterpiece of engineering, because it was done with such rapidity, and there we saw equipment for the first time, which we never believed could be produced, great big bulldozers and graders and things.

17:00 That was a few weeks later in the story.

When you were confronted with this twenty-one days and you did ninety-one operations, and this very small kit of medical supplies, that must have been a bit concerning?

17:30 It was terribly concerning. It was terribly concerning because we were doing our best. What happened because of the shortages of supplies the only remedy that we had now was instead of operating and holding the patients in our little tiny outfit was to put them onto a native built stretcher, which I

18:00 will describe in a minute, and send them straight back from our little surgical hospital to Dobodura, to catch the earliest possible flight from there to Port Moresby, so they could get proper treatment. Consequently, a lot of patients suffered for longer than we could be possibly help. It was a tragedy but that's what happened. They were suffering and we couldn't help them.

18:30 It used to be very testing to our surgeon, Dr Johnson, or Major Johnson as he was and Major Gatenby and Colonel Palmer, our commanding officer. It was a very testing time to decide whether you or you should go. He looks slightly worse, so he gets sent back, or he looks pretty bad, so you've got to wait. Sorting out patients is a nightmare

19:00 on the front line, because they are all in a bad way. You just couldn't cope, there was nothing that you could do for them.

Did you ration the supplies?

Rationed supplies, yes.

So for example anaesthetic?

Anaesthetic was not so bad. The ether, chloride and ether we had adequate supplies. It was about that time

19:30 that a new anaesthetic was introduced, I just can't remember the name of it, but it may come to me in a few minutes, oh yes, it was pentothal, and that was done by injection and I was never permitted to do that because

20:00 it was too touchy. Even with the experience that many of the surgeons and doctors had, it was very, very critical that it be done to the exact amount, and not over much. I will tell you a little story about that. We had a patient who was brought in one afternoon, he was badly damaged and he was given an injection of pentothal,

20:30 and it was the first time that our surgeon had ever done. The way that we could tell that the patient had gone into a state of unconsciousness was to get them to count from one upwards. We would say whatever his name was but first of all we'd say, "What is your name?" He had to tell us his name, then we'd say, "We want you to count", and he'd start, "One, two, three". This particular patient

21:00 must have had something to do with auctioneering because he got up to fifteen, sixteen and then he began to drag seventeen, eighteen in the advance, eighteen and then he fizzled out. He was a very strong man to last up to eighteen because most of them become unconscious at a much less number. He couldn't say his name,

21:30 so we knew that he was out to it.

Once you've operated and they've come out of the anaesthetic, what would happen to a patient then?

The patient was lifted from the operating table, which of course I've already told you, is transferred from an ambulance stretcher, held on fork poles just driven into the ground. That would be lifted off the post, put onto the ground beside

22:00 us and a replacement stretcher put back - a new operating table with an army blanket that would be draped and ready for the next patient. So that that patient who had just been put down there, he'd now be my responsibility, coupled with what I was doing with my little torch to help the surgeon. I would be watching his breathing,

22:30 checking his pulse, checking his eyes. Making sure that he was breathing and his heart was beating properly. I would do that until the surgeon was satisfied that he can be removed from the theatre just a few meters away to where there was what we called the recovery ward, which was manned by two persons, Ken Sutherland and Ted Lee.

23:00 **They would stay in the recovery ward?**

They'd stay there for the shortest possible period until the surgeon was satisfied that the patient was in a fit stage to be taken by foot, stretcher, all the way from there around about twenty eight to thirty kilometres from where we were to

23:30 Dobodura flats. It was a long trek, and it would be done by natives, New Guinea natives. We have nothing but praise for them - they did a wonderful job. They wouldn't use the ambulance stretchers, which were an army issue. They use to cut down saplings, which would be quite long, maybe ten or twelve feet long

24:00 and they'd attach blankets to them to create a stretcher. I don't know how they stitched them together but somehow they managed to stitch the blankets together. Now, these were much kinder for the patient, much more comfortable for the carriers, because having thick poles over their shoulders instead of the little tiny ambulance stretcher handles, that gave them comfort

24:30 and it was easier to cross streams because of the length of the shaft beyond the stretcher and the blanket itself. They became adopted pretty well by the army, these native made stretchers. It was much easier for carrying up hills and down slopes and as I said far easier for carrying over streams or depressions or gutters or whatever there may be.

25:00 **Does that mean that there was a daily convoy?**

There was most certainly a daily convoy. All those natives would come back, and they'd go backwards and forwards constantly. I've talked about the ninety-one operations that we did, but then there were the Americans and there were the sick, and those that had malaria or dengue fever or scrub typhus,

25:30 those that had minor injuries, which stopped them from fighting but necessitated hospital treatment, but they could walk or they may have to be carried. There was a constant stream of patients going from the front line back. There were hundreds of them every week, and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds.

Did the local native people assist you in any way

26:00 **in the hospital or around the camp?**

No, not at all, no they didn't. The only thing that they would do, which occurred at a slightly later date was to get food for us. Some of them would go into the gardens and get some fruit for us, which gave us a little bit of fresh food. I wanted to tell you a little bit about the food that we did have, but I think that we've covered that, haven't we?

26:30 **No, you haven't.**

We talked about it before we started recording. Our breakfast would normally be the army issue dog biscuit, which was about three by three, about three eighths of an inch thick to use all the old terminology.

27:00 Our breakfast was made of soaked water, soaked dog biscuits. The cooks would get a container and they'd put all these biscuits and pour some water over them and let them soak overnight and that would be heated up for breakfast and that was your breakfast, that was your one and only food that you had for breakfast. Lunch would be corn beef and a dog biscuit. Your evening meal would probably be dog biscuits

27:30 and beans. There was no variety in any shape or form.

No fruit?

Nothing, nothing, it just wasn't available, it couldn't be got there. So we had to subsist on what was available. That was mostly dropped from planes as I've told you earlier in the day. From what they call Biscuit Bombers, they were just thrown

28:00 out. They'd put two containers into a potato bag, stitch it up and then kick it out of the plane, it would get dropped and everything would get smashed, except of course the tins of corn beef, that seem to survive somehow. There was no variety, but it was nourishing. That was our main meal for the Christmas Day 1942.

28:30 **Who were supplying you with the food, was there another unit?**

Yes, they were. It all starts back in the capital city, they would be preparing the food and it would eventually get distributed and dropped off. Of course food is so vital if the planes couldn't drop it, they did their

29:00 very best to supply you with food, and nourishing food, to get you through that difficult time.

How frequently would the Biscuit Bombers come over?

We didn't see them very much because we were in an area where they couldn't drop. They'd come over two or three times a day, maybe more, maybe less depending on the availability of planes, and the availability of the food, the weather conditions, it all had an influence on it.

29:30 **With the native people who were assisting you as stretcher-bearers, how were they organised?**

They were organised by an organisation by the name of ANGAU,

30:00 which are the initials of the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit, and they'd be field officers either local or Australian army personnel and go around and muster up the natives. They were virtually conscripted into the service, they came from all walks of life. They had to leave home and come and work. They were looked after fairly well by the army, as long as they behaved themselves, and to my knowledge most of them did.

30:30 There were thousands of them, and how we would of got on without their help, I don't know. They were used to the jungle conditions and very well hearted and it amazed me how they used to sing while they worked.

Did you need to treat any of them at any stage?

Not us, no. If

31:00 they had needed treatment they would have gone to their own village and be treated there, at the missions. Sangara Missions was one of the missions nearby, which is still in existence when I was up there five or six years ago.

Were you aware of any traditional bush medicines, practices there?

No, not at all. No, didn't know anything about that.

31:30 **With the American portable hospital, did they share their supplies, what sort of interaction did you have with them?**

Marvellous interaction, yes, we were and will always be grateful for the enormous help that the Americans gave us. They were generous and kind in every imaginable sense of the word. They would give you anything, anything that you needed.

32:00 They'd help you in all sorts of ways.

Can you recall any situations where you went to them, that you needed something?

In that particular time in Buna, no, that's about the only time that I personally had anything to do with them, but I had lots to do with them other times in my service and found them extremely helpful and kind.

You were in Buna

32:30 **for three weeks?**

Yes, and that included one week, at a place called Simemi. I was one of about half of our team that was

sent forward into the fighting area again to set up another surgical hospital. That was at a placed called Simemi.

33:00 To find a location for the theatre on dry ground was nearly impossibility. We found a spot, which we thought was suitable and set up everything and got going and within days it was a quagmire. What happened there was, it was very close to the fighting and it became almost impossible to

33:30 sleep at night. You'd be on duty for ten or twelve hours during the day, but at night it became most difficult. I wanted to tell you one thing that happened, which was quite an extraordinary experience as I went ahead of my friend Ken Sutherland. I took my half of a two-man tent and I kept waiting for him to turn up. In the meantime I'm

34:00 in the jungle and separated from the unit on the driest bit of ground that I could find and totally on my own. There was nothing but fireflies, mosquitoes and myself. I put up my little tent and crawled into it with my mosquito net draped outside of it to protect myself and I was just sleeping on the ground on a ground sheet.

34:30 As the night was going on, I heard a bit of a crackling noise and I became mighty scared, and I knew that that crackling was not that of a pig or anything like that. I knew that it could only be Japanese going past me. I just lay there absolutely scared out of my wits,

35:00 I was frightened to breathe loudly or sneeze or make the slightest bit of noise. The crackling went right past where I was sleeping and you have just got to remember that this was absolutely totally dark and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Eventually, the walking disappeared and I eventually through

35:30 sheer exertion went off to sleep. When I woke at the crack of dawn I just peered out through the mosquito netting and everything looked safe to emerge and when I got out, just beside my tent was a Japanese wallet on the ground where I'd heard the crackling. I picked up this wallet and it had Japanese and Australian notes in it and the Australian notes

36:00 were the ones that were printed by the Japanese. It was invasion money. Anyway, I picked this up and I walked over to where my mates were to see if I could get something to eat and I'd found that there had been a red alert in the camp through the night. One of the persons by the name of Cook, whose nickname

36:30 was Pop because he happened to be a bit older than the rest of us. He got hit over the head with the butt of a rifle, because he had forgotten the password and the person who hit him, Harold Hay, nearly killed him with the butt of the rifle. It turned out that the Japanese had been in the lines through the night. Here I am today, still alive, thank you.

37:00 **I'm just curious, what's the invasion money?**

It was money that was printed, so that when they landed in Australia they had Australian currency, it was printed Australian currency.

They were being optimistic?

They intended to come here.

That red alert during the night, why weren't you aware of that?

37:30 I was many, many meters away from the nearest bit of dry ground, where the next person was. You kept dead quiet, because you couldn't afford to make any noise, otherwise your position might be found by the Japanese, they were around us anyway, they were through the jungle.

This was a nightly concern?

It could have been, but they were being gradually

38:00 pushed back by the infantry troops.

The person that forgot the password.

Pop Cook.

What was he, what were his circumstances?

He was a person who had general duties, stretcher-bearer, helping in the general way, whatever jobs needed to be done. He recovered from his injury and he lived for quite a long time.

38:30 **Was he coming into the camp?**

Yes. In retrospect he would have been better to have stayed in his bed, instead of being up, but everyone was trigger-happy. The slightest bit of noise, whether it was an animal, a bird whatever making a noise at night made you startle.

39:00 This was what upset Harold Hay. He didn't wait for Pop Cook to try and remember his password, but

instead he just belted him thinking he was a Jap.

Another very practical thing that occurred to me was the washing, with performing all these operations there would have been a lot of blood?

Yes.

Very messy

That was my responsibility

39:30 too, I had to do the washing. We had very little facilities, what we had was what you would call a kerosene tin and they carted a lot of fuel in tins, which were approximately thirty by thirty by about sixty, about something like that dimension. It would have a handle at the top, and they would be brought along by carriers, native carriers, would bring

40:00 kerosene for lamps, probably cans of petrol and all sorts of things. What we would do, we'd get a hold of one of these empty container, we'd cut the top off it and put a wire handle over it and put our washing, whether it was for the operating theatre or whether it was our singlets or underwear. We'd boil it up in one of those containers over

40:30 some sort of a heater, it could be a primus stove but there was no way of getting firewood because there was no dry firewood at all. You couldn't make smoke, even smoke would be a tell tale. So washing was a major problem. Then when you got everything washed, how do you dry it? It was extremely difficult.

41:00 A lot of the towels and things we used in the operating theatre, we would boil them up until they were sterile and hang them up, if we could or otherwise we would just reuse that in its wet state on the patient. It was terribly difficult.

Tape 6

00:30 We had approximately one week at Simemi and that brings us up to the 1st January 1943. The war was officially over at that particular area, but there were still plenty of snipers around. If there were any of the coconut palms that hadn't had there top shot off by artillery,

01:00 if they were still standing the Japanese would climb these trees and they'd use their rifle until all their ammunition was spent, and finally if they had nothing left, they'd throw a knife at an Australia or an American, hoping that they'd injure the person. The 1st January came,

01:30 it was noticeable that the gunfire almost stopped. I should have mentioned earlier to disguise the approach of weapon carriers and things that the army had or tanks they fly a Beaufighter or a Beaufort bomber, flying over and that would distract the Japanese, so they would realise that there was

02:00 a tank moving in. It was much later after the fighting had actually begun. We decided that the camp site, or the surgical theatre at Simemi was no long required, so every one had to congregate at a place called Soputa, so that meant that we had to put all our stuff into the pannier

02:30 and put everything that was not going into the pannier into boxes like surplus food and all that had to be collected. This particular day a colonel came along, and he could see that an extra hand was needed, and nobody would have known that he was our colonel because he hadn't any badge of rank. He didn't want the Japanese to see that he was a colonel. He

03:00 and I worked tirelessly carrying boxes of food and surplus equipment and through the swamp out to the main road, which was only a track and I thought that that was so noble of him to not discriminate between his rank and me being a private. He had won the OBE [Order of the British Empire], or was about to receive

03:30 it I should say, for his marvellous service in New Britain, where he escaped and being a doctor he was able to help many of the chaps that were escaping from the Japs to get right from about the southern end of New Britain and to escape to the mainland of New Guinea. On my working with him created a bond that was never

04:00 lost, it was just wonderful the relationship that built up between the two of us. I thought it was just lovely to mention his name at this stage. Lieutenant Colonel Edward Palmer OBE, his name has gone down in history as one of the greats of the World War II, as far as we're concerned.

Where did you met up with him, you might of said, but I've missed that?

04:30 No, this was when I met him for the first time.

Ok. This is at Buna?

Simemi.

At Simemi, that's right, that's where we are at Simemi.

He was an inspiration to the troops. We moved to a place called Soputa, which is on the banks of the Girua River, which was the main river that flowed through Popendetta, Dobodura, and Soputa and eventually ran into the sea

05:00 at Gona. When we got there we found that it was absolutely rat infested. Most of the men got either diarrhoea or dysentery. They worked in the most appalling conditions that I've ever experienced in the way of disease there, it was just awful. In the so called tents

05:30 that we were in, you'd hear the rats running up the canvass at night-time, there must have been hundreds of them. The great difficulty was toilet facilities, they dug deep pit latrines but you had to sit on logs, parallel logs and it was just terribly painful, particularly when you're feeling so ill

06:00 with the diarrhoea or the dysentery. The only redeeming factor of that particular location was that it was on the banks of the river and you could jump into the quick flowing water and that was a great help. We worked there for about a week doing surgical nursing there, because by now, as far as we were concerned the

06:30 fighting had moved from to Gona and Sanananda and it was a different sphere for us. So all of us, the twenty-eight people were moved to a placed called Popendetta. Now, you've got to understand that all that I've told you about Buna, Simemi, Popendetta. Now Popendetta.

07:00 The whole of the area was constantly wet it was rain, rain, rain, rain. You didn't know what a dry day was like. When we got to Popendetta we set up a campsite there on the banks of the river in the jungle. It had rained so badly that no planes could land,

07:30 and we went for days and days and days without getting any supplies of food and nor could we send any of the patients away. Instead of holding about sixty or seventy patients, which would be about the maximum that we were capable of caring for, we'd built it up to about eight hundred. It became virtually impossible to look after them properly.

08:00 Water was a major problem, having sufficient water, which was uncontaminated. Somehow they acquired a rain water tank and had it filled with treated water and to stop the men from just helping themselves liberally, one of the doctors put a sign on it that it was alkaline, which very few of

08:30 the soldiers knew what it meant. It was quite safe to drink but it stopped them from going in too quickly. So, people were very, very hesitant to take this alkaline or called water. Foodstuff became terribly short, any patient that was going to be sent back we would ask if we could have his emergency ration,

09:00 which comprised a little tin about three quarters of an inch thick, which had dehydrated food in it, so we would ask them if they would leave that behind. The biscuits, our meal consisted of approximately two and maybe three times a day, we were allowed to have one handful of broken biscuits.

09:30 Whatever you could hold in your hand, when you delved into the tin, whatever you could hold in one hand was your meal. Conditions at Popendetta were terribly difficult.

You said what, eight hundred patients?

We had up to eight hundred at one time.

Who was nursing?

I was, all of us had tried.

How many people were nursing?

10:00 We had a total number of about sixty of us. You have to try to remember that that would be officers, and the clerical staff you'd have all sorts of staff that would have to be part of an organisation. Then you've got your medical staff, you're bearers, nursing orderlies that had been trained in nursing.

10:30 It became a very, very big problem. The Americans who were also using the same airstrip, they refused to fly in and out of Popendetta. The Australian pilots realizing that we were in such an absolutely desperate situation with all these suffering, poor sick men. They decided to give it a go and land on the slippery east strip,

11:00 it was just mud, slithery mud as far as you could see. What they would do, they would come down the side of the mountain and land at the end of the airstrip, as near to the end as possible to start with and they would slither the whole length of the airstrip until they came to a stop. You'd see them coming in and the mud would be spraying out from the wheels and then they'd go the

11:30 reverse and they'd load with maybe twenty patients and that would be about the maximum that they could take off with, because of weight, because of the mountains and the end of the airstrip. They'd pull out the accelerator and go as hard as they could and take off. They helped us get rid of some of our patients.

They didn't get bogged?

No, they didn't get bogged, it was just a matter of

12:00 the surfaces.

That's amazing.

There is more I can tell you about Popendetta. That was basically Popendetta at the worst that we saw it. Popendetta is located at the very beginning of the southern approach to the Kokoda Trail and from there you'd go to Wairopi and then the Kokoda Trail and right up over the Wales,

12:30 it was about ninety miles to Port Moresby. It was many days walking.

My understanding of that area in regards to the native people was that it was the Orakivan people that were assisting the Japanese?

What was that?

The Orakivan people, were you aware of the tribal people up there and their tribal differences?

No, I wasn't.

Was there female

13:00 **nurses working there?**

Not at all.

Posted there?

No, we didn't see any women nurses and we went for many months without seeing a soldier lady, a nursing sister. From Popendetta we are now into the first weeks of February 1943.

13:30 We now moved to join up with the remainder of our unit. They were being brought over by air or around the coast by ship to a place called Oro Bay, which was a beautiful natural harbour. It was nice and deep, so that ships could come fairly close into the shore. The engineers that rapidly built a wharf,

14:00 so that Oro Bay became the next point of a well-established port. Up in the hills about three miles from the wharf area, we established a very large hospital with the 10th Field Ambulance. It was the most beautifully located place up in the hills and

14:30 in a nice grassy area with gum trees, which reminded us of home a bit. We constructed a little reservoir and we made a real good establishment where we could handle hundreds of patients. That became our unit headquarters for about eight or nine months.

15:00 Somewhere about May that year, I'm not too sure of the date, I do know it but I can't think of it. I was one of the first advance party once again to be sent away. We were put onto a little boat called the Tonguesong [?] and we were taken to a place called Morobe, which was located about eighty miles from Buna.

15:30 We went up under the cover of darkness and there was a huge amount of phosphorus in the water in the tropics up there and as the propeller was spinning it was stirring up the phosphorus, and if there was any night flying and the enemy aircraft, well the pilot could see the wake of the boat, so to overcome that the captain would stop the propeller so we would

16:00 drift forward for a certain time and then he'd start up again and that would let the water settle down. We got there in the early hours of the morning and it was pitch black and we were transported ashore by launch and taken to a hideout in the coconut palms at Morobe. That was where a pretty large establishment is constructed for a casualty clearing station, which is the next stage higher than the field ambulance.

16:30 They were capable of doing and holding and doing lots more and holding many more patients than the ambulance could possibly do. We were stationed there, and the object of that place for us as the field ambulance, was to escort the sick and wounded by vessel or anything that could float, between there and Buna where by now a huge hospital called the 2/11th

17:00 Australian General Hospital was established. The normal routine was that when the daytime was under normal circumstances looking after patients in the hospital, doing medical and surgical attention to the patients that could afford to be left there. When they were well enough

17:30 the patients would be sent down the 2/11th Hospital in Buna. There were a few instances that happened there that be of interest to you. One day I was, asked by the staff sergeant, Bob James,

18:00 if I would escort some patients down the coast. Now I'd done all my day's duties and this is about five o'clock in the afternoon. The two people that were actually had been detailed to take the patients down

had gone out into the bay, went in a little boat to do some fishing, it was their time off, so it was quite legitimate.

18:30 Anyway, they didn't arrive back in time to load up the boat before the departure time and Sergeant Bob James said to me, "Sorry, you'll have to take the patients." The story is that there were nineteen post-operative surgical cases and nineteen stretcher cases which included scrub typhus, one hundred percent mobilized

19:00 into themselves. The remainder were sick, stretcher cases, such as malaria or some of the diseases. We set off at six o'clock on the Tonguesong, I think it was, heading for Buna. It was totally unsuitable for carrying patients, except

19:30 the patients were all right that were on stretchers because they didn't have to worry about head height, but for anyone looking after them, there wasn't enough room between the deck and the floor above it. Consequently, you had to be stooped down like this all the time without bumping your head. The boat had hardly gone out of the harbour at Morobe, when the patients began to ask for sedatives,

20:00 either morphine or something to stop the pain, or they were suffering from diarrhoea or dysentery, therefore they were asking for a bedpan. I was on my own and literally had to handle all these poor unfortunate men all on my own. It involved lifting a patient with only one leg, and holding him on a bedpan

20:30 and he was in intolerable pain both from the dysentery and the suffering from his amputation. This went on all night. "Are you there orderly, can I have something to stop the pain?" So I'd give them the maximum amount of morphine that was allowable. I was given permission to give a certain amount of decision-making

21:00 myself because I could tell whether a patient had had enough or not. Throughout the night I didn't have a minute's time to myself, with thirty-eight patients to look after. In preparation for the voyage, which is normally a fourteen-hour time, the cook had prepared some porridge in two dixies.

21:30 This had been made earlier in the day, the previous day and now were around about around eight o'clock the next morning and I still did have time to feed the patients. I thought that I better look at the porridge to see, to get an opinion of what it looked like. I opened up the hot box, in which the two dixies were kept and it was all cracked like if an earthquake had occurred and it was all looked unpalatable.

22:00 I was too busy to feed them, so I just closed it all up. Shortly afterwards, we pull into port at Oro Bay and they let the gangway down and it was my duty to keep all the records of what had happened throughout the night, so I was up to date with the records. Up struts an officer and his name was Major Francis. He said to me,

22:30 "Good morning Holmes, have the men been fed?" And I said, "No", and he said, "Why not?" And I said, "I looked at the porridge, and I wouldn't eat it myself, I wouldn't give it to them." I made an idiot of myself. He got furious with me. He started bring out all the ambulance personnel and they took the patients away. I walk down with my equipment and records down the gangway

23:00 and when I got to the bottom of the gangway I saw greeted by my wonderful friend Lieutenant Colonel Ted Palmer, his name that I mentioned earlier. He said, "Good morning Dickie, who's was helping you?" I said, "Nobody sir." He got furious, he said, "You go and get into my jeep." So I got into his jeep like a good little boy and he

23:30 went and spoke to some of the people on board the ship. Eventually he came back and his driver took off in the jeep and we went up to the hospital. When we got to the main entrance to the hospital at Oro Bay he spoke to the duty sergeant whose name was Sergeant Jack Urquhart, whose name we've mentioned already. He said, "Sergeant Urquhart, you're to feed private Holmes and put him to bed.

24:00 He's to be relieved of all responsibility." The repercussions of this story, is that the officer who sent me on that voyage on my own with all these poor unfortunate patients was suddenly reprimanded. I didn't want anybody to get into trouble. I only spoke the truth. That's one of the difficulties in logistics and organisation in the war. Really, nobody was to

24:30 blame, but it was the way that it worked out. The ones that suffered shouldn't have suffered, but that was an awful experience. Shortly afterwards, I had two or three days there resting after that and then of course my headquarters was up at the coast not at Oro Bay now and all my belongings, I had to get back there. I went down to the beach

25:00 at Buna with a couple of other members of our unit, who were also wanted to get a boat back to Morobe. We went down and spoke to the Americans who were using torpedo boats from that point. We said, "Any chance of a ride back to Morobe?" And they said, "Sure." We got onto their torpedo boat and went

25:30 skimming over the sea, we did an eighty-mile trip in two hours and twenty minutes. They took us to their hideout and in the meantime they gave us beautiful cold lemon juice, we got nothing but the best from the Americans. Now we had to go from Morobe back to Buna again with another lot of patients. I'm detailed to go again.

26:00 I went with a person by the name of John Bagshaw, and we were allocated forty patients on the stern of the ship with twenty Americans, they were being looked after by American personnel, and there was John Bagshaw and myself. It was a beautiful clear moonlight night. About eleven o'clock in the evening, I said to John, "Don't you think it's a beautiful night, it's a night for Nippon to come over?",

26:30 and he said, "Oh, I think it's calm enough for us to lie down for awhile." And we got an ambulance stretcher each on either side of the forty patients. We made sure that they had their life jackets. We had hardly got onto our backs and then the next thing there was this enormous explosion. The Japanese had spotted us and were coming over to hit us with bombs.

27:00 They, mercifully they missed the ship. The bombs just blew up a stern. We saw the plane and it circled and went way out to sea and before you could say Jack Robinson, the sky was ablaze of tracer bullets. We couldn't see the ships, the warships that were out there, we didn't even know they were there.

27:30 We were about fourteen miles off the coast. They didn't know we were there, and because they were shooting at this plane and they drove it back to us. We could see the jolly old Japanese plane coming straight back at us again. Our machine guns were ready by this time. They started firing away and our tracer bullets were going straight for the plane but they

28:00 didn't appear to get him, but he flew right past us. The bo's'n on the back of the stern of our boat, he got his naval gun onto him and 'bang' and he reckoned he got him. It was a bit of an experience travelling up and down the coast, and there are other occasions as well.

That was a different boat to the one that you travelled up the first time?

You went on anything.

28:30 There were little boats like the Tonguesong there was the [Karabee] [?], the Corrimal, they were all names of vessels that we sailed on, and in addition to that there were the tank landing craft, and there were personnel land craft for transporting

29:00 troops from the main ship and they could drive right up onto the beach, the gate would go and so that they could run off, anything that could float, for carrying the poor unfortunate patients. It was so uncomfortable, because they were flat bottomed and the sea would be about a meter or two high the waves and you'd be going bang, bang, bang, you just imagine the uncomfortable

29:30 patients there were, with amputations, abdominal or head wounds. It was just pretty terrible.

They weren't on mattresses, were they?

No, there was no such thing as that. You'd either be standing, sitting and the lucky ones would be lying on a stretcher, otherwise you'd have to lie on the deck of the boat.

Those boats - were they all Australian boats or were they allied forces, like American boats?

Allied Australian and American.

30:00 The cooperation was phenomenal, as far as I'm concerned they were just angels of mercy to us. They would lend you and help you. It was a team effort. So, that was Morobe. When it wasn't raining and it was a nice sunny day, we might go out into the lagoon and do some fishing with some grenades,

30:30 the boys would take us out in their lakatoi. We'd look down into the crystal clear water beside the boat and you could see the fish swimming around and you'd take the pin out of the hand grenade, which we got it from somewhere or a returning soldier and we'd just drop it and down it would go and then the next thing 'whoosh' and the fish would go everywhere, stunned. The natives

31:00 would dive off the side of the lakatoi and they'd go down and come up with a fish between each finger and both hands. Master in pigeon English is called "Toubada", and we could still see fish down there, and they'd say, "All finished toubada, all finished." They'd be down twenty feet and we couldn't dive twenty feet.

31:30 We had to go back and be satisfied with what we got. At Morobe we had some nice fresh fish to eat.

That was quite a change from being in Buna in the jungle?

It was a different part of the world. Today, if you went up there it would be just a wonderful tourist place to go to. It's not jungle there, not on the flats it's beautiful coconut plantations.

32:00 It had been a lovely little township before it was wrecked with the war.

There were quite a few ex-pats living over there, wasn't there?

Yes, plenty of ex-pats?

Did you have anything to do with them?

Yes, we did.

What was their involvement?

The ones that I met were involved with ANGAU, which I mentioned earlier in the day, the Australian New Guinea Administrative

32:30 Unit, and they would go out recruiting labour and making sure that the labour that was being used was done in a humane and nice manner. They were very nice people that I met, an Australian who lived up there all his life from quite a young age.

33:00 We were there from about the end of June until about October and we took a load of patients down and Captain Deer was one of them from Camberwell, I forget the name of the other patient, I do have his name. We took these patients down the coast and we came back,

33:30 two or three of us managed to get back, and when we arrived at our campsite at Morobe, there was just nothing there. The whole unit had disappeared. Here we were, the three of us, nobody knew where we were and we didn't know where they were, so we reported to the casualty clearing station, which was still operating nearby and found one of our

34:00 sergeants there and he said, "You better hang around with me." So we did, his name was Harry Cowan. He saw the predicament that we were in and he was able to verify that we weren't absent without leave and he organised a little vessel for us to go from there to Lae. This was called

34:30 the Black Fin, a little vessel, a tiny little boat. There were quite a few of the natives onboard. We pulled into [Nassau Bay] and spent the night there and the next day we got up to [Lae], and we rejoined the unit up there.

Why had they moved all of a sudden?

Because the war had advanced, that's what we were doing all the time, we were moving up

35:00 the coast of New Guinea, as the war had advanced. By now the Australian army had been very successful up the Ramu Valley and up around Nadzab, and all through there and we were now heading towards Finschhafen. I moved up to Lae, and we were established there for only a few days, and what happens

35:30 again, I get notification I'm to go forward again. I kept on being sent to the fighting zone for some reason that I can't explain to you. Quite a few of us were put on board one of these landings, the LCMs [Landing Craft Mechanised] they were called and we were sent from Lae to Finschhafen on the 5th December 1943

36:00 and we didn't get there till it was absolutely totally dark. There we landed amongst all the shells firing and the guns blasting and it was pretty awful, it was an eerie feeling. You couldn't see where you were. All you could go by was the voices of our own Australian men, not our unit, but the people who were

36:30 showing us the way into this hideout. They were yelling out, "Come across there, and turn across there", and anyway, we eventually managed to get ashore. That was a place called Launch Jetty, it was not pleasant at all. We set up a bit of a camp there in the jungle and then we had to work, not on our own but

37:00 at a casualty clearing station and that was very sad. I felt that was a real test to my spirit. I hadn't seen anything quite like it. A casualty clearing station has staff of many times the number of the field ambulance and some of the patients there that had been brought in from the fighting up just up the

37:30 coast a short distance. They were so sick and the poor fellows and one of them was a sergeant and I don't remember his name, but he'd been swallowing aspirin. He'd been chewing aspirin to relieve him of the pain. It caused him, and I think that he had malaria. It caused him to be so sick that he began to bleed internally with the aspirin.

38:00 I spoke to him and there was nothing that we could do for him. The poor man died. It was in stifling conditions, it was carved into almost an impenetrable jungle, it must have been terribly hard for those that cut their tracks through this hard - to penetrate jungle and establish

38:30 a hospital inside there. That was at Launch Jetty. While we were there, fortunately where my tent was located was down near the water's edge in Lamanac Bay [?], that's in Finschhafen and I heard this funny engine coming towards us and it was a plane coming.

39:00 It was obvious that it was not flying properly, the engine was making a peculiar noise, as I describe it, it's like a chaff cutter. Eventually the plane got so close that you could see it clearly, it was a Catalina flying boat and it had been badly shot up by the Japanese and they ditched everything that they could throw out of the plane,

39:30 all the guns and equipment, anything to lighten the plane had been thrown over into the sea. It was only travelling at about fifty miles an hour, it was just and only just airborne. It had come all the way from New Island. When it came to land on the shores of Launch Jetty, the plane just simply dropped out of the

sky into the water. Some people rushed out

40:00 to try and help the captain and his co-pilot. They were so weak that they could hardly walk and it turned out that they had been hit eleven hours or more before and had managed to stay airborne for eleven hours. They eventually landed safely there. Some of the experiences that you had

40:30 were amazing.

Tape 7

00:30 When we were at Launch Jetty, as usual we had great problems of washing our clothes, it was an ongoing problem. Anybody that has been to the tropics would know that if you put a clean set of clothes on, within a matter of a very short time, the perspiration has soaked right through. We had to devise some means of heating water.

01:00 There was a person by the name of Harry Meed, who devised a novel idea called a 'spit and dribble.' It consisted of a container of water holding about four gallons suspended over what was to be a little fire. To create the fire we used two jam tins, a cake tin lid and two pieces of V shaped steel. The jam tins were secured to the tops of the posts,

01:30 and the lid of the cake tin was put on the ground with the edges upwards. The V shaped channels were attached to the tins. We had oil in one tin, and water in the other. To create a tap we merely made a hole in each of the tins with a piece a twig, which we poked into the steel

02:00 tin, that acted as a tap. First of all, we let a little bit of oil flow down the V shaped channel and onto the cake tin lid. When it was sufficient oil we lit a match and set that burning with a few bits of dry paper or something, whatever we could muster to create a fire. As the cake tin lid got hot, it was now burning

02:30 quite freely, we let a little bit of water drip down the other V shaped channel and that would splash into the very hot tin, and send little flames everywhere. It turned out to be a marvellous little fire. It heated up the water quite rapidly, it not only gave us warm water but very hot water for our clothes washing. That was one little invention which

03:00 we had experience with real success. After we left Launch Jetty, we moved across the harbour, which was known as Lamanac Bay to a place called Drega Harbour. The American SeaBees [US Naval Construction Force] or the construction battalion had moved in there in vast numbers with bulldozers, graders and metal matting to create an airfield.

03:30 Within six weeks they had removed a complete hill, which was fairly sizeable and let the matting down and it was operational for taking Boston Bombers and Kittyhawk airplanes, and Thunderbolt aircraft. Having finished that we moved in right next to them. The object being that it could be an operational airfield for evacuating patients to between Drega Harbour and Port Moresby.

04:00 We established our very lovely campsite amongst the coconut palms there on the banks of Lamanac Bay at Drega Harbour. We established every convenience, which we could think of. Even a very nice table with a blanket over it, in our tent we were able to sit down to a meal or supper, it was excellent as far as army circumstances were concerned.

04:30 There were eight of us in my tent. Let's go back a step. From childhood I was able to determine and tell the types of cars by the tones of the engines, and played a real benefit to me in the army I was able to tell whether it was a Japanese or an American plane that was flying. I meant either staying in bed or get out according,

05:00 by simply the tone of the engine. This night, one of the men whose name was George Sangster said, "What sort of a plane is that coming over, Dickie?" So I said, "That's a B25 [Mitchell Bomber]." And we just carried on with lights blazing and everything as normal and we just kept on talking. It wasn't very many minutes later then we heard the bomb racks opening on this plane and down come the swishing of their bombs, which blew up amongst the picture theatre

05:30 just down at the end of the airstrip. In the meantime, we had heard the bomb racks opening on the aircraft and we dived for our trenches, which were very shallow but still we jumped into them and bits of shrapnel went flying through the tent and everywhere. None of us were injured. The end of the story - first of all there were four people that were killed.

06:00 One of our own staff, Ron Vernon, he was injured. In our campsite, which was about a mile away from where the actual injuries had occurred. The next day we found out what had happened. It was in fact a B25 bomber, an American plane which had been captured by the Japanese and flown over and

06:30 done this damage. Thank goodness we were saved from being more critically injured. A few days later there was a Boston Bomber, fully loaded coming in with one of his engines on fire. At the same time that he was coming in travelling in one direction, in the opposite direction we were taking off two Kittyhawk

planes, which were scrambling

07:00 to approach some oncoming aircraft, some Japanese aircraft. Now we have two planes approaching the same airfield but in opposite directions to each other. The pilot in the Boston Bomber was able to see the predicament that he was in, he got airborne as quick and as much as he possibly could, whilst the chaps in the Kittyhawk kept down as low as they could skimming the surface of the airfield

07:30 and at the last minute were able to take off. At the end of the airstrip in the path of the Boston Bomber was a great big ten by ten, American vehicle. Some very alert person saw what was happening and he rushed towards this vehicle, jumped in it and started it up and drove it away from the oncoming Boston Bomber, which finished up overshooting the mark

08:00 and went down in a ditch at the end of the airstrip. There was no damage, their bombs didn't explode, and everything resulted with nothing serious happening. That was a bit of experience at Drega Harbour.

08:30 **You told us about some of your brushes with enemy, when you were in that tent and there was the rustling in the night?**

Yes.

And you found out later that a Japanese party had been scouting the area?

Infiltrating the area, yes.

Did you have any other encounters with the enemy, like face-to-face encounters of any kind?

Fortunately not face to face, except at Morobe. I was standing amongst the coconut palms and a Japanese Mitsubishi

09:00 Bomber flew over fairly slowly and the pilot looked down at me and we could have waved to each other had we had the mind to do so. That was one experience. Fortunately, right there we didn't have any close encounters.

What about the field ambulance, obviously you're there to treat the wounded Aussie troops,

09:30 **did any wounded Japanese ever make their way to any?**

Yes, and I have in my possession an envelope on which I wrote my name to a Japanese prisoner-patient that came into our hospital, and I asked him to write my name in Japanese and I still have that. Yes, we did have plenty of patients that were brought in, Japanese.

They were treated as an Aussie?

10:00 Absolutely, we did most humanely. In fact one of them that came into our unit lines at Drega Harbour he spoke fluent English. He said that he never intended to be in the army but he was conscripted in. He had worked in Melbourne, in fact in Collins Street, with a firm called

10:30 Mitsu, Sogee and Kaesaha at Temple Court, 420 Collins Street Melbourne. He was a perfectly friendly man but he said that "He hadn't intended on fighting against the Australians. He was just told that he had too."

He was in Melbourne, but he was called?

He went back at the beginning of the war. I don't know whether he realised that there was going to be something happening there,

11:00 but under normal circumstances he returned to his home there.

We are at Drega Harbour, how long were you there for?

We were there for about four months, or the unit was, I wasn't, I was sent on again. On the night of that major air-raid when that B25 bombed the airstrip, there

11:30 were two people that were with us and they had set off for Seeky Cove [?] where they'd come from, they were friends of ours who had come down to visit us just for the evening. They were walking along a road when this air-raid occurred. When the bombs began to drop they ran for their lives, and they were crossing over a bridge of the Lamanac River and they were overtaken by two Negroes who were running

12:00 much faster than the Australian blokes could run and one said, "Lord, grease my heels." And the other one said, "And that goes for me too, Lord." So they were pretty scared as well. Interestingly, at Lamanac , up stream from Lamanac Bridge, which I've just spoken about there had been a Japanese hospital. It was interesting to me, because I had studied hygiene in the army

12:30 as part of our training. We found that the Japanese hospital had done everything absolutely in the reverse to what we had been taught. When we examined this hospital site, the lowest part to the river, was the cookhouse. The next level up the hill was the wards and the theatre,

13:00 and above that the latrines. We were doing exactly the opposite to that.

Did their system still make sense to you?

It didn't make sense at all, because it was all, wrong. We would put the latrines well away from any of the wards, especially the cooking area.

Those

13:30 **Japanese wounded that you said that you'd come across and helped, what would happen once they were treated, how were they moved on?**

If they were walking wounded, they would be treated as prisoners of war walking wounded and escorted to a Japanese compound somewhere where they would be cared for, probably in Port Moresby.

So they were being cared for by your unit, were they also being guarded?

14:00 Yes, there was a soldier guarding them, but they were too sick to do anything, they were harmless.

We are at Drega Harbour, what's the next thing?

The next thing was that I was sent on an advance party to Seeky Cove, which is further up the coast. That was more or less a rehabilitation camp. Where we went pending our return to Australia,

14:30 to look after us, to give us plenty of amenities and somehow they miraculously had a table tennis table, they had whatever sporting facilities, they had a quite a big area in the jungle where games were played. Our role by now, for the New Guinea campaign had come to an end, the fighting had progressed so rapidly up through North Hill up to Madang, Wewak,

15:00 that we were now bypassed by both the American and Australian army. We were now waiting for a ship to take us home, which took us quite a few weeks. It eventually arrived and it was on its maiden voyage, and the name of it was Klipfontein, and we sailed with that, visiting Lae,

15:30 Moon Bay and down to Brisbane.

How long had you been in New Guinea up to that point?

I went up there and arriving in November 1942 and we came home arriving home on the 3rd June 1944.

Leaving New Guinea, I assume you thought that you were going back to Australia for good at that point?

16:00 I thought that we would be.

How did you feel, knowing that after all time, that intense work by saving lives and going home, what was going through your mind?

We were just relieved to be out of it all. We didn't know quite what to expect, whether we would be involved or not, because nobody could tell us what we were going to do. Eventually, we had several weeks

16:30 leave and eventually we were told that we were going to be sent up to North Queensland for further jungle training, apparently to be sent back overseas again.

So, you had already been back to Melbourne?

Yes.

Can you tell us about that experience, coming home?

Well, we got home. I'd heard lots about soldiers about being unsettled when they got home, because of the war.

17:00 I was very smart and was thinking that I wasn't unsettled. I was to soon prove how wrong I was. My mother and family had planned a real welcome home for me, so I was met at Royal Park where I was given my leave pass for six weeks and I went home to join my family at Canterbury in Melbourne. We were having a very happy time with meeting everybody

17:30 at home after all that long time and I thought, I wonder what my friends are doing around the corner, about half a mile away. I left the party and went around and spent the evening with them, proving that I was completely out of sorts. Never mind, we had six weeks of wonderful time at home.

Can you remember what you mother said when you first

18:00 **got home, can you remember the first thing she said?**

No, I don't exactly remember that at all. Except that she was mighty glad to get me home. A few hugs and kisses I can tell you.

So, six weeks' leave, what did you get up to in those six weeks, was there any sense of what

the next move was?

We didn't know what was going on at all. I think I went over to Tasmania

18:30 to have a few days with my brother in Launceston. I went home again and did jobs around the place, which I would have done under normal circumstances, cutting the hedge and cutting lawns and just generally tiding up the place, which had been fairly neglected in my absence. I used to do most of the work at home for my mother. I was just about to go back and rejoin the unit and I

19:00 went to my local doctor because I had a bit of internal bleeding. He put me into Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital and I was kept in there for over a week. When I was discharged, feeling quite better I was told to report to the railways at a certain time, and on a certain date and I got onto

19:30 the train and went all the way back to Brisbane by train. I caught up with one of my members of our unit, who also was delayed in getting back, so we accompanied each other to Brisbane and from there we caught the Queensland train and went all the way up to Cairns. We spent one night there, at a big staging camp and the next day up to

20:00 Atherton Tablelands and we were met at the station by an army truck and taken out to Wongabel, which was rather an ideal camp as well. Colonel Palmer was a very just and helpful man. He used to train us using a great deal of common sense. For instance, he'd send us on a long march, but he would never tell us

20:30 that there was going to be a bit of a treat for us at the end. He'd sent us out on a march, which would end after about twenty miles or thirty-two kilometres at a lake, where we could have a lovely swim, but he had also sent out a truckload of food. He would feed us up and sent us back, and we'd march all the way back again. He really pleased the troops,

21:00 and he gained their respect immensely.

You had proven yourself in New Guinea, if anything that was pretty much deserved?

Yes. He and I had a great rapport. He had great admiration, not only for me but for many that rarely pulled their weight in the army.

What did that training in the

21:30 **Atherton Tablelands involve?**

Mostly, sports, exercises, we had a football team, cricket teams, basketball teams, it was just physical rehabilitation, mental relaxation. They constructed an excellent recreational hall for us, it was only a very temporary building, which it was built, it was a great success.

22:00 You could spend time in the evenings in front of a big log fire. They made arrangements with a milk producer who had a fairly substantial dairy to bring in fresh milk everyday. We had about a litre of milk at the end of the day, everyday, each person, thoroughly good meals, the best of everything.

22:30 We soon became very well and strong again.

That I guess, also helped in terms of your readjustment, you were a bit unsettled when you came back?

Yes. By the time I went back to Queensland, I think I got back to a reasonable state but after when you look back there it had been a pretty testy time. We experienced

23:00 far more than we could possibly have imagined. Experiences, awful experiences, things that we couldn't have imagined would have happened.

Were you able to discuss those things with family or friends?

Yes, but it never troubled me. Other people have just closed up, friends of mine that are around still - they just can't talk about it,

23:30 but it hasn't ever worried me.

Is that important do you think?

I think it's very important, yes, I do.

From Atherton Tablelands, I know you still have one more trip to do?

Yes. From Atherton Tablelands there was a major split in the unit. There was a big percentage of us that were just young

24:00 and we didn't know what to do. It was a matter of volunteering to go Ambon and Borneo or as a group, swapping units – a very large number of the unit went across into the 15th Field Ambulance. We were sent to Bougainville Island, which unbeknown to us was going to be just about as testing

24:30 as New Guinea was. We departed from Australian on the 29th December 1944 and we got to Bougainville Islands on the 1st January 1945. Where we set up quite a big establishment at Torokina.

25:00 We were only there for a few weeks doing intensive training again, marches, cycling and anything at all to do to get us fit. Got climatised again, we were sent across to a placed called Motupena Point where we set up an establishment and then to a place called Toko, and then we became involved heavily in the fighting

25:30 that started on the [Buin] road. My location there was called Hari River and we built an excellent main dressing station at Hari River, which had been the scene of very, very intensive fighting between the Australians and the Japanese.

26:00 We were there for quite a few weeks and we moved onto Ogorata River and Mobiai River and we had some pretty nasty experiences down there. The Japanese were infiltrating our camps, taking our food at night-time. Rather than shoot, they'd stealthily come in and watch what was going on and grab the food,

26:30 because they were pretty much starving. All their vegetable gardens had been discovered and had been destroyed by the Australian infantry and so on. It was becoming very, very difficult for them. Their supplies were coming in by submarine at night-time and they'd sneak away and leave their food behind and it would be picked up by the Japanese troops

27:00 and there wasn't enough to go around. The Japanese were becoming desperate. The result was, that after a few weeks, we'd moved forward fairly rapidly down the Buin Highway, which was only a mud track. It necessitated us reversing our guns, so they were firing four miles back, over our own troops into the Japanese, behind us, so that became pretty worrying.

27:30 Then we had to take precautions in our unit of putting booby traps around the hospital. The rain came down so heavily that it practically brought the fighting to a stop. It was a pretty difficult situation because whilst the fighting had stopped, it didn't stop the infiltrating of the

28:00 individual Japanese who harassed us badly.

How were they harassing, you are talking about the field ambulance?

Yes, they were. They were coming right into our lines. As I said, they weren't shooting, they were stealing, they knew that could get food by stealth, but if they started

28:30 firing then their position would have been obvious and they would have been gone after.

Was there a front line at this point, or was it more of a guerrilla?

Guerrilla, more like it.

So at any given time you were very, very close to the action?

Yes, we were very, very close to it. We were just meters away from them sometimes. They were everywhere. They were through the camps,

29:00 you could hardly call it a camp but through the hospital lines, which were very primitive. It started to rain about July 1945 and that became a terrible problem, the roads became impassable. What they had to do was to get several trailers, like a conventional small single axle trailer

29:30 and they'd link them together with chains and attach that to a bulldozer and they'd pull all these supply trailers through the mud with a bulldozer. It became almost impossible for tanks to be used successfully down that road. Getting anything - clothing or bedding dry

30:00 or whatever became extremely difficult because we had approximately six feet of rain in four weeks, it brought the war to a standstill. What they did in our unit was, they got a tent and cut the ends out of two forty four gallon drums and they put them end-to-end

30:30 but they had both ends chopped out of each drum. They put two high-pressure petrol operated gas burners blazing, facing towards each other. This was inside a tent, but by now with the fierce flame the drums became almost red hot and the heat that was generated by that enabled

31:00 with the washing hanging above them or the boots that heat would dry out the clothing. It gave us the ability to have some dry towels and things for the hospital wards and the theatre.

How busy were you kept in the theatre?

Very busy. It was now slowing up because of the extremely wet circumstances,

31:30 the dreadful rain and it practically brought the war to a halt. So much so, that some of us decided to go down to the Mobiai River, which was the very swift flowing large river, in front of us, which was between us, and the Japanese. We went down there and we saw on the bank of the river on the opposite side with the Japanese. They didn't try to fire on us and we didn't fire on them. They realised that

32:00 the war was just about at the end. It was obvious that they'd heard the Hiroshima in Japan had been hit by an atomic bomb and then Nagasaki, the same and that brought things to an instant stop, at the end of August.

Was there a moment there where you and everyone else realised this was it?

Yes, everybody

32:30 was jumping for joy. We had one of the officers, who had a bit of common sense and he managed to get a radio from somewhere and he had it mounted undercover up a tree. Everybody could simultaneously hear the news that was coming over. I well remember the announcement that the Japanese had

33:00 caved in and there was a roar of about two hundred men just yelling out with absolute joy that the whole thing was coming to an end. Shortly afterwards, Major General Bridgeford, he was a very popular commanding officer and he was in charge of the division in Bougainville. He came down and addressed us, and he told us officially that the war had ended.

33:30 We would return to base as soon as possible, he said, "All work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy." And he said, "We will educate you in the fields of your choice if you want to do this or that." They started to set up education facilities at Torokina, which he did, he kept his word. Logistics and getting

34:00 everything, men and equipment into a base area, it just takes so much organisation. It took several weeks before we got back. The war ended around about the beginning of September, it was nearly Christmas time before we got back to our base area.

34:30 The units then were being gradually, from now on were going to be depleted with numbers, because people were going to be returned to Australia. To work out what to do, first of all the married men with the most time away were the priority ones to be sent home. The ones, like myself that were

35:00 single and youthful or young had to wait for the older ones to go home. I had to wait until my points - each person was allocated so many points depending on what I've said, with marital status, age or time away.

35:30 Eventually my turn came around when the point's numbers got down to one hundred and twenty six. I was called up one day and told "Get ready, pack up your gear, you're going home". Several of us were taken down to Torokina and I was on a little ship called the [HMAS] Manunda. We sailed from there down to Sydney.

This was in 1946, if I'm not mistaken?

Yes, this was 1946.

36:00 **Do you remember which month?**

February 1946.

Soon after the war had finished had you had a chance to reflect on all those experiences and how it had perhaps changed you?

I didn't really, no. It wasn't the end of my military service. We were sent to a staging camp at Watsonia, which I suppose you know of,

36:30 in Melbourne. What happened there was we weren't ready to be discharged because of the backlog of numbers being discharged, there were so many thousands and it takes a long time to process everybody. When you look at the military records you can understand that each person takes hours to have all his records checked and brought up to date.

37:00 They were saying to this one and that one, "You can go to Albury, you can go here, you can go there." I can see that I had no desire to be sent back to Albury. I said that "I was prepared to go to Victoria Barracks and stay on for a while", which I did. I worked for the army in the salvage section of the army, for nearly a year.

37:30 I enjoyed that because I was getting re-established for civilian life whilst still be paid by the army, still being in my uniform but I really quite enjoyed that. I used to go to town every morning by train and got home at a reasonable time and lived virtually a civilian life.

Seems that we have come to, in some ways

38:00 **the end of the wartime experience?**

Yes, there's probably other things that we could think about, but that's basically it.

I know you have here in the house, some souvenirs. How did you get all that stuff back?

Wrap it up in sheets. It's very interesting, that's a good point that you've raised. After the war there was

38:30 so much equipment, and surplus equipment that they couldn't bring it all back. I know a lot of stuff was buried, a lot of vehicles though they were on a lend-lease program had to be destroyed. They used to at

Torokina, barge loads of motor vehicles out to sea and push them overboard into the sea. Others, they would drain

39:00 the motor oil from the sump and start up the engine and run it until it seized and pushed it over a cliff face. I watched that happening. I thought, this is ridiculous, all this stuff being thrown away. I went and spoke to a person in the unit where they had a lot of tools and I said, “Do you think I could get some tools before they’re all destroyed?” He picked out

39:30 a few hand tools and I had my souvenirs. Amongst the things that were being destroyed were a lot of hospital linen, which was stained or had been well and truly used. So, I tore it up into suitable sized pieces and wrapped up the souvenirs and sewed it all up and posted it home. So, that’s how that got home. The army handled it very nicely through

40:00 the army post.

When you returned, there were sort of two homecomings, there was that one when you had six weeks, then Bougainville, then back again?

Yes.

Obviously you went in with a very specific cause or mission almost, to go there was going to be wounded men and men dying, but you were going to go there to save lives?

Absolutely.

When you came back,

40:30 **did you look back at your experiences and what you achieved? How would you sum up that experience, did you achieve what you set out to achieve?**

I think I probably achieved more than I expected to. I learnt so much, which has stood me in good stead throughout my life. Things that I learnt about nursing and the approach to sick and suffering, it has really helped me.

41:00 I would never call myself a counsellor, but I’ve been a friend to those in need. My outlook today is to try and help others as much as I possibly can.

Do you think it’s possible, you said before how it seemed to be that you kept being sent to the front line, to be where there was perhaps the greatest need because of those attributes that you are talking about now?

41:30 It’s very likely. I think the officers that were responsible for sending me away had certain perceptions of my ability. I had a willing spirit, willing attitude, always wanting to help other people and do my best for my fellow men who are in trouble. I think it may have been obvious to the doctors and others who saw me.

Tape 8

00:30 **Before we end this evening, we’ve got a couple of artefacts from your time in New Guinea, what have you got for us, what is the first thing you have?**

The very first one is this little hammer. This is the little hammer that actually changed my role in the army, dramatically. I mentioned to you

01:00 that I was asked by Major Jim Yates if I could make a little bit of furniture for the operating theatre. It just so happened that in Maryborough in Queensland prior to our sailing for overseas I went, brought this at a hardware shop and thinking that it just might be useful. In fact, it was more than useful, it changed my role because I’d been sent away as a stretcher-bearer and finished up through this hammer, finishing up as an assistant to the surgeon in the

01:30 operating theatre. Simply because he liked my attitude - he said “Can I make the few little tables or stool on which to put some instruments for sterilizing?” I got busy and having gone to the cookhouse and got wooden boxes and I knocked them to pieces and made them into tables and things. It also helped other little

02:00 places like hanging up a mirror, for shaving. Little jobs, which a hammer is so useful for, I had a few nails. So that’s the hammer. It’s actually been recorded as one of the things in history from the 10th Field Ambulance, that little hammer.

That stayed with you throughout?

Yes, I carried it wherever I went. If anybody wanted a mirror hung in a tree they’d borrow my

02:30 hammer and I had brought that in 1942 and I’ve still got it to show you today.

I take it that everybody knew about Dick's hammer?

Quite a few did. I mentioned earlier I took a party of thirty-eight post-operative and sick patients down the coast on the ship called the Tonguesong,

03:00 from Morobe to Oro Bay. What I didn't mention earlier was the fact that total blackout conditions were on and we were not allowed to use lights whatever, because we were too vulnerable and there were too many Japanese planes, night planes, one of which was known as Washing Machine Charlie, because it had a rowdy engine and probably washing machines might have been rowdy in

03:30 those days. This plane spotted us and attacked us one night. On this particular voyage I had so many sick patients needing morphine, drugs to stop diarrhoea and dysentery and I was in a perplexity and I didn't know what to do. I went and spoke to the captain of the little vessel

04:00 and I said, "Can I use this torch?" You can see by the front of it, it has got a shield over the lens and you can lift it up like that. He said to me, "Providing you leave it with the cover down like that, and it just shows a little light straight down, I could use it." This enables me to see the syringes for the measurements for morphine or whatever I was injecting.

04:30 It also showed me around in the pitch black dark on the ship. It was quite a lifesaver as far as I was concerned that particular night. Amongst the funny things that occurred during the war, was the fact that innocent me thought that my mother might have liked a coconut - as if she couldn't go to the Victoria market and buy one.

05:00 I found this coconut down by the beach at Oro Bay and I thought I would see if I can post it to my mother. I don't know whether it can be shown on the camera, it reads, "To my mother Mrs Holmes, No 2 Mailing Road, Canterbury, Victoria." It was posted having no stamps but just marked, forward area. The

05:30 military post accepted it and delivered it to Canterbury and here we have it after all these years as a special souvenir to show you.

Did she write back to you on a granny smith?

I don't remember what happened after that. There are many other incidences which we haven't covered today but I think that gives you a little impression of the very

06:00 interesting time that I had in the army. All unexpected, everything every day was different and you couldn't possibly anticipate. I jumped into the back of a truck and be covered with blankets, or smuggled out of camp. I look back on it as a remarkable experience, a privilege to have served my country and an honour to have been chosen today to speak to you. I want to thank you very much

06:30 for that Colin [Interviewer] and Catherine [Interviewer].

Thank you very much Dick. What did you do after the war?

After the war, I didn't know what to do. I went back after being at Victoria Barracks, it gave me a wonderful opportunity to decide whether I wanted to go back to McPhersons, where I'd been before the war, and who

07:00 kept my position available for me. In fact they'd been excellent, it was wonderful how they would send me parcels of cake and things for the war. I went back to them for a year or so and decided that I might start up my own business. I was always keen on woodwork, and I decided to do reproduction furniture. I brought a lathe and all sorts of equipment to get busy making

07:30 reproduction furniture. To start with, I did quite well selling my products to Myers and the Mutual store and making private sales to friends and other people. Gradually my business was being built up quite nicely. When I suddenly became ill with a very enlarged gland in my neck and it put me into Heidelberg Hospital for

08:00 so long, that I ran out of money. I was perplexed to know what to do, because I had nothing to pay my bills with. I had to think differently. I went along and saw a friend whose name was Ken Sutherland and he said to me, "I've just left a job, why don't you see my former boss and see if the position is still available?" That happened to be with Fowlers & Cola, the fruit preserving

08:30 people, and sterilizing manufactures. I went down and spoke to Mr Hoskins and he was agreeable for me to take over the job. That landed me in a wonderful position doing country travelling for this company. I brought a little car, a little Austin A40 and that at that stage was an answer to my dreams. I had the opportunity of

09:00 visiting Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, and the Riverina and I loved every minute of the driving, visiting these country store keepers. Eventually, I met Margaret, my wife today. I realised to be travelling around the countryside would be no good to a young bride. So I changed after some

09:30 two and a half years and went into a company called Specialised Building Services, which were roofing contractors and they had a staff of about twenty people at the time. They were doing work for major companies like Ford and General Motors, Heinz International Harvester Company and it sounded pretty

good to me, so I joined up with them.

10:00 I was with them for twenty-one years during which it grew from twenty personnel up to one hundred and fifty. In 1970, the business had been sold and they asked me to carry on with the new owners, which I did for several months and I could see it wasn't as enjoyable as it had been.

10:30 I went to America, where I visited San Francisco, Toronto, then into Canada to study new ideas about the type of work that I'd been doing for the last twenty-one years. Before we came home, I said to Margaret, "I think we should go down and see some people in New York." Which we did and we stayed with them.

11:00 During our stay, their son who was on leave from university at the time, he came into the lounge room where we were having a cup of tea and I just happened to ask him what he did, and he said, "I sell these lubricators." He showed me one and I was immediately interested and I thought what a marvellous idea. I think I can have a go of it in Australia. The idea for which I had gone to America pretty well

11:30 soon became secondary in consideration. When we returned to Australia, a couple of weeks later I went to see the German Consulate in Melbourne and said "Could he possibly find where that was manufactured, and the name of the people in Germany?" A few weeks later I get a phone call from Mr Frank and he said to me

12:00 "I've got the name of the people in Germany." I hurriedly got some references from people that I was major company that I had been dealing with over the years in Melbourne. I sent off five references and a letter applying for the sole Australian agency for this Parma lubricator. A very short time later I got a reply from them asking me "Where is my order?"

12:30 By now I realised without being told officially that they had accepted me as their Australian distributor. We are now into our thirty-second year of marketing their product and we've grown from nothing and we personal have a staff of around thirty people. We became on a per capita basis the largest distributor in the world. Our

13:00 present future looks very bright. I actually retired four year ago but I still go to my office because Margaret and I own the company but we have handed over responsibility to our daughter and our son who are competently running the business. They are excited by the new products coming onto the market and so they look like they have a very bright future.

13:30 That gives you in a nutshell what I've been doing since I've come home from the war.

During the war, your time overseas, did you ever think ahead to what you might do post-war, envisage what sort of career you might have?

I didn't know what to do. I was

14:00 always very keen on manufacturing with timber products and for that reason I took the opportunity of going to Swinburne at night school to study cabinet making. That helped me in building my home. In fact, it was because of the problem that I had with the lump in my neck, though all

14:30 that threw my object out the window, so I had to make a fresh start and change my ideas.

Early this morning you were telling us how before the war, you had thought about doing medicine, during the war you were involved in that sort of thing. Was there an interest pursuing that after the war?

Yes, I did think about it.

15:00 Unfortunately, my education was such that I would have to go back to what is equivalent to year nine at school, because I left school as soon as my father died and I was only in year eight at school. I just didn't think that I had what it took to settle down and study again. Although I had lots of experience in the army, but there was

15:30 too much involved in doing a full course in medicine. I just simply let that go, although I made a mistake, possibly I made a mistake. I heard at a later date that quite a lot of my friends who had been in quite a similar position as myself, had actually done the courses in medicine and had become doctors. I did think about it but I didn't pursue it.

16:00 However, we finished up having a reasonably successful career.

Have you been back to New Guinea?

Yes, in 1995 under the Australia Remembers Scheme, I took the opportunity of going back to New Guinea. I went on a

16:30 Russian cruise ship, I can't remember the name of it. We went across to Guadalcanal and then from there we sailed up past New Island up the coast to Madang, down to Lae, Oro Bay, Milne Bay and home. That was an extraordinary interesting trip.

17:00 Margaret and I had to pay our own fare but it was subsidized and we got quite a concession from the government. It was most interesting to go through the old battlefield at Buna and see where the remains of the palm trees which exist, with their tops blown off, after all those years. We went up to Kokoda, Popendetta and thoroughly enjoyed the welcome

17:30 that was given to us, the cheering, it was quite a rapturous welcome by the hundreds of people there. We had to go through an archway in our honour. There were a lot of other people of course doing the same trip. It was a wonderful experience. We went for a trip around the countryside and into Lae, I thoroughly enjoyed that as well, but it looks so different

18:00 to what it did. It has all been built up, not bombed and blitzed like it did the last time I was there.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us before we go?

That pretty well covers it. You did ask me before about the equipment in the theatre, or we were talking about it anyway. Let me just tell you briefly. We ran out of supplies

18:30 of surgical bandages and things, we had plenty of unsterilized but wound dressings, so what we used to do there was to get cigarette tins, they were plentiful in those days. We used to put a piece of gauze in the tin followed by some Vaseline, more gauze and Vaseline. So we'd built up until we filled the tin with Vaseline and the gauze,

19:00 which we would sterilized and that is one of the simple things that we used to do. We used to make cotton balls, which we had to make by hand, and sterilize. We had to improvise all the time, but we managed.

Thanks a lot Dick, thank you very, very much.

You're welcome.

19:30 **INTERVIEW ENDS**