

# Australians at War Film Archive

## John Burridge - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/2263>

### Tape 1

00:33 **Whereabouts were you born John?**

In Subiaco, Western Australia.

**In a home or in a hospital?**

At the King Edward Memorial.

**What was your family doing at Subiaco?**

Well that was the baby hospital I think of Western Australia. We were living in Claremont, we've always lived in Claremont.

**What was your**

01:00 **father doing?**

Dad was a fruit exporter shipping apples and the likes to Singapore and places like that and also involved in chaff cutting. Chaff for race horses and zoo animals and that type of thing.

**Where was the chaff cutting done?**

That was all done up around the York, Northam, Grass Valley area.

**So what are you earliest memories of growing up**

01:30 **in Claremont?**

Really the river I think, the freedom. It's one of the twee suburbs in Western Australia now when you consider we were growing up with blokes like Doc Johnson had a milking cow in his backyard. All the race horse blokes used to hold race horses all round the river, particularly trotters. You'd see them training.

02:00 Kids down on the river making dinghies and kayaking and all that type of thing, fishing and spending a lot of time down on the river. It was great days, good freedom.

**Did you go to school in Claremont?**

Went to school in Claremont and finished up going to Guildford Grammar School.

**Did you complete primary school in Claremont?**

No, just the first year. I did most of my primary stuff

02:30 at Guildford.

**That's a fair hike from Claremont.**

Well what had happened was that Dad's Mum died when he was very little. He was the youngest boy at Christchurch. Guildford was the accepted boarding school at the time so with my grandfather being away a lot he put Dad into a boarding school which was then Guildford Grammar School was the boarding school. So Dad as an old boy of both Christchurch and Guildford

03:00 gave my brother and I the option of where to go. I thought Billy Bunter stuff and all that, I'd go to Guildford. My brother went to Christchurch. So I boarded at Guildford.

**That's an unusual decision.**

Well I was one of those adventurous types I thought that boarding would be a great adventure so that's why I made the decision.

**So how old were you when you started boarding?**

I was about seven I think.

**03:30 Most kids that age are fleeing from boarding schools.**

Yeah, well I must admit in hindsight Guildford wasn't the happiest time of my life. It was tough, very tough and it was probably the most English-orientated school in Western Australia. Everyone caned you, every master in the school

04:00 including the prefects used to cane you too. I got more than my fair share there. The fag system and the bullying system and all that sort of thing was bloody tough. If you got through Guildford you were ready for anything in my opinion.

**So how many boys were there your age in the boarding house?**

I can't remember. Just normal full class rooms.

**Were you one of the younger boarders though?**

04:30 No I wouldn't have considered, I was just one of the many. A lot of farmer's sons went to Guildford. As I said Guildford was always accepted as the boarding school.

**So what are some of your memories of going to school at Guildford and boarding there all those years?**

As I say I was constantly getting myself in to some sort of strife.

**What kind of trouble did you get yourself in to?**

It could be anything from raiding orchards across the river to

05:00 just anything. Normal kids' pranks. Climbing out of the upstairs windows on knotted sheets. Almost POW [Prisoner of War] escape stuff. Raiding school dances when we were little and pinching food from the food hall section. All those sorts of things but as I said, my backside used to pay for it. The only thing

05:30 I will say about Guildford is that there was none of that kiddy fiddling [sexual abuse of children] stuff ever at any stage when I was at Guildford. But the brutality was, it was really quite brutal. There was many a time that the cane used to draw blood on my backside. My mother would attest to that. There were days, one particular year I think I was just a couple short of having one cane

06:00 for every day of the year. Bloke called Johnny Grouden from Merredon, he beat me by three. It was pretty brutal stuff. I left Guildford after I got my junior certificate and went down to the Harvey Agricultural School which is on that south west highway there at Harvey. I did the equivalent of sub leaving and leaving down there.

06:30 When I went there.

**Why did you make the decision to go down there?**

I was going to go in to the rural industry and after all the family had been rural all our lives in the industry and on Mum's side of the family we had Mount House station and Glenroy up in the Kimberleys. So I went to the Ag School but I didn't know the difference between a Merino ram and a Hereford bull when I went there but

07:00 one of three honours certificates and runner up for dux I got at Harvey Ag School. Left Harvey Ag school.

**So not bad for a city boy?**

Yeah, not bad for a city boy. Left Harvey Ag School.

**Before we move on, what was life like at the boarding school in Harvey compared to Guildford?**

It was a breeze. As I said, if you'd done your hard time, I suppose it would be a bit like doing Fremantle prison

07:30 and then going to one of these prison farms. It was a bit like that I think.

**And you would have been a bit older as well I suppose.**

Yeah, we were all a bit older. The Harvey Ag School was great actually, it was really terrific.

**What kind of antics did you get up to there?**

Well it was just things like when occasionally you got gated, stuffing your bed, the same sort of stuff, riding your bike in to town to see your girlfriend, that type of thing. They used to take us in to

08:00 the movies I think it was a Saturday night and they used to take us in the cattle truck and we'd all stand up in the back of the cattle truck hanging on to the cage. You think about it today and all the occupational health and safety stuff and all these kids standing up in the cattle truck going in to the movies. They used to do two trips. The blokes that didn't have girlfriends used to go on the first trip back when the movies were over and the other blokes would hang around in the shadows for the second load.

08:30 They were good days.

**What about the actual courses of study at Harvey?**

I think it was very good because like I said when I went down there I absolutely knew nothing. I'm not saying I knew everything when I left but by God it made a difference. When I did leave I had no problem working in the rural industry. I finished up with Elders GM and used to go out

09:00 to the Midland sale yards there where they were training me up to be fat cattle auctioneer.

**Just before we go in to that John, what kind of practical courses did you do when you were at Harvey?**

Well we did all the animal husbandry, we did all the normal maths, English and all the rest of the stuff but we got involved in the farm side of it as well where we had various projects and

09:30 we did a lot of metal works and wood works and that which was stuff that I'd never done before. So I learned to weld there and in fact helped build the piggery. I was a reasonable welder. We had a chicken farm there. As I said, pigs, a dairy. But there wasn't enough work to keep all the young blokes employed on the farm so

10:00 they had a system of outside farms. So you'd get allocated to a farmer and you'd travel your bike out to the farmer and he'd have a marking sheet. So he had free labour for the week and he just had to mark you accordingly. If you got a good operator then that fella might be doing a lot of tractor work or something like that but if you got a bad operator

10:30 the young bloke would probably clean irrigation ditches or something. It was that sort of thing.

**So what kind of experiences did you have on those private properties?**

There was a terrific bloke, Alfie Day ran the Springston Hereford stud and he used to treat every bloke very decently. What he ate, you ate, that sort of thing. I had a tendency to feel that the other outside farm blokes were a bit miserable. You used

11:00 to take your jam sandwich out there and you'd sit in the hay shed sort of thing and have your lunch. They didn't look after you in the true sense of the word.

**Child labour?**

Yeah it was really but enough to sort of want to bring out a law suit if you know what I mean. They just were I suppose a bit miserable.

**So upon leaving the course**

11:30 **you got work with Elders?**

Yeah, worked for Elders GM and normally with Elders because the system in those days was Elders employed their own stockmen. Nowadays it's all contract stuff and I think even in those days we were probably one of the only states that did have their own stockmen. There was a tendency even in the eastern states to have all the stock work done by contractors

12:00 and then the auctioneers and the clerks just get in and do their thing and disappear but no, Elders had their own staff and it was almost like going to school again. When you went in everyone joined a department called the corro' department, the correspondence department. I don't know, there must have been about fifteen of us in there, young blokes and all we did was run around the multi storey building either picking up

12:30 mail or delivering mail. We were the forerunner to emails I think. Then you graduated from the corro' department to whether you went in to finance or merchandise or whatever it might be. I finished obviously in the stock department. They were hard days and long hours. We used to get up, I used to get up at about three thirty in the morning

13:00 for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and go in, drive in to town. I'd have an Elders vehicle, come down the St Georges Terrace, pull over on the wrong side of the road to the old Elders building there that was on the corner of St Georges Terrace and William Street. The side door would be open, I'd run up stairs and I'd get all the advices that had been sent down on what stock

13:30 was arriving from where from the country branches, take them out to Midland and then we'd manage to get a couple of bits of toast and a brew in to us before the first stock receivals came rolling through the gates at five o'clock in the morning. Then you were busily, in my particular case I spent virtually the

whole time

- 14:00 on cattle. So I worked on the cattle and then although you'd think, "Oh good, we're going to be going home at three o'clock this afternoon," or something like that, no, the sheep blokes would want you because they'd invariably be loading out sheep boats from the Midland sale yards area and sending the
- 14:30 rail trucks down to the wharf for loading on to the boats so we'd have to load there. It wasn't uncommon for us to get home at eleven o'clock at night, barely been able to shower and you're up again. That was pretty constant. They used to say things like, "Oh yeah but you don't have it bad Thursday or Friday," because there's no Midland sale yards on then but of course on the Thursday and Friday you'd be shanghaied in to
- 15:00 something at Serpentine, something at Northam, whatever the hell was going on whether it be a pig sale at Northam or a sheep sale or a special stud sale where you'd go and groom bulls and the likes. So it was about, I think I worked for them for about three and a half years.

**They're pretty long hours to keep up.**

They were long hours, yeah. Most of the young blokes would do about

- 15:30 three to six months at Midland and get shunted off to the bush to one of the country branches but they held me back I think with this view to eventually be the cattle auctioneer. That's why I stayed much longer in the Midland system than the average young bloke would have.

**Is that what happened?**

No, because Vietnam came along and I never went back.

**Okay. You'd had enough.**

Yeah.

**Whereabouts were you living for those few years?**

- 16:00 **I was living at home and I had a little what I called Bidalkeef trading company or grazing company I should say down on the river. I used to have eight poddy calves that I used to bucket feed down there. I had twenty six Suffolk lambs, that was on one occasion, but I always had livestock down on the river. It was a whole different attitude. I remember once when my calves got out**
- 16:30 **they went down the river and wandered down the end of the Claremont jetty and the council just rang up and said, "Oi, can you get your calves off the jetty." I'm trying to picture what the hell would happen today. They'd be having coronaries.**

**Front page of the Post.**

Yeah but they were the days. When you think about it, it wasn't that long ago, it was in the mid to late sixties.

**Whereabouts did you graze them?**

Down on

- 17:00 the river itself. We had a big block that ran down on to the river and we had a lot of spare dirt down close to the river.

**Whereabouts?**

Down the bottom of Watkins Road.

**Has that been family property?**

Yeah my grandfather built the family home there in the late twenties. His choice in those days

- 17:30 was Mount Lawley because that's where the businessmen tended to go or he was a sort of a pioneer down there. We were the first house built down there. It was a lot cheaper to go there than it was to go to Mount Lawley. How times have changed.

**What kind of relationship did you have with your grandfather?**

Great, terrific, I used to love going round and listening to his stories.

**What was his background?**

- 18:00 Well he was also one of these produce merchants and fruit exporters and the likes but he started it all up from nothing.

**And you said on your mother's side of the family they were land holders.**

Kimberley, yeah they had the Mount House, Glenroy Station up there, cattle people. Mum never swore

in her life but I can remember her saying once, "Those bloody Duracks, you'd think they were the only people that ever went to the Kimberley," because they've really made a meal of it

18:30 over the time but the Blyths were actually up there before the Duracks.

**Did you visit the property up there?**

Yeah, only as a young tacker though.

**What are your memories of visiting?**

Open spaces and aboriginal nannies.

**So you didn't spend a lot of time up there?**

No. I can't lay claim to that.

**What kind of relationship did you have with your mother and father, I know you spent a lot of**

19:00 **time at boarding school.**

Good. Mum's deceased now. Dad's still alive. We touch base all the time.

**What about as a kid though?**

Oh yeah, no problems at all, had a good relationship. I think I gave them a few headaches over the years, getting up to various things. We had a good relationship.

**Did they encourage you in your wish to go away to boarding school at age seven?**

19:30 They left it up to me, it was my decision. I suppose you could always bale out if you didn't like it the next year. I tend to stick at things.

**What kind of relationship did your parents have?**

Good, terrific. I know it probably sounds a bit strange. Would I send my kids to boarding school today? No, I wouldn't but Guildford certainly prepared me for the world.

20:00 I saw blokes in national service that were away from home for the first time in God knows how long. They were doing it tough. To me it was a doddle. Been there, done that.

**Good preparation.**

Oh yeah, good preparation for the world.

**Just getting back to your father's chaff cutting up in the, did you spend much time up there?**

No, not as a young bloke.

20:30 He had a couple of chaff cutters going all round the place. I did a bit post Vietnam but not before.

**I'm not fishing for anything here but how often would you take leave from school to spend time with your parents?**

Probably fortnightly or Sunday, all the long weekends and all that sort of thing.

**How would you spend that time together?**

21:00 Just at home, in the family home. We were living in Philip Road then. Dad built his war service house in Philip Road, Dalkeith. We were originally renting up in Boronia Avenue and went down to Philip Road. We used to do all the normal things that kids do.

**Did your father share his war experiences with you when you were growing up?**

No, he played it a bit close to the chest although

21:30 I was very involved as a kid going to all, they were a very tight knit unit. He was an officer with the 2/2nd Commandos which were on Timor in World War II and although you can't really claim it fully as a West Australian unit, it basically was. Double reds, they have the double diamond red colour patch.

22:00 They were a terribly close knit unit and in the post war they used to have a lot of things like Christmas parties where all the families would go to the south Perth zoo. I can still remember the ice cream in those green canvas bags, insulation bags, ginger beer. Every kid would get a present, that style of thing.

22:30 **Did the ginger beer come out of a keg?**

Yeah, out of a keg.

**So how old were you when your father started to share some of his experiences with you?**

He never talked about it a hell of a lot until probably when I really got back from Vietnam I think really.

I mean, occasional little things, never really about himself, it was always about something one of his mates had done or something like that.

23:00 **Did you do cadets at Guildford?**

Yep, I was a bugler in the Guildford Grammar School cadet band and I used to blow the bugle that my great uncle blew in the First World War. It was presented to him at Black Boy Hill before he went to Gallipoli. I've still got the bugle with the presentation on it.

**Can you still blow a tune on it?**

Oh, I can get a tune but she's a roughy.

23:30 **What experiences did you have in cadets when you were at Guildford?**

Well we did all the camps and all that. The only thing I can really say about Guildford is that it was very much like the way people envisaged the army to be. It was very, very strict. Their cadet under officers, it was all just a continuation of what was already there with school prefects and all this sort of thing. They took it really, really seriously

24:00 but being in the band I suppose I wasn't quite subjected to the same nonsense that some of the other blokes were.

**Why do you say that?**

I think we had to get on with practicing music and that type of thing whereas the other guys were in to marching and if you didn't have your arms up straight you got extras and all this sort of thing. Sure we had to do the right thing but all our webbing was white and we had to

24:30 Blanco it with the white stuff all over our webbing, being the band. Guildford really took it seriously. You would swear to God you were in the Guards Regiment there.

**It sounds like you really had a predisposition to join the army from age seven.**

Not really, no.

25:00 I don't know why. I can't really answer that. I wouldn't have thought so although I was a volunteer national serviceman. I think if I'd have landed, if I'd have gone on in Elders and become an auctioneer I'd probably still be at Elders as an auctioneer

25:30 but what sort of basically happened was that national service came along and you had to register as you know and of course I think everyone my age at the time sort of tooled themselves up in anticipation of being called up. It was a mozza, you were going to get called up, no question about it. I mean you never won a WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK at a WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK raffle so you're going to win this one.

26:00 I think everyone sort of thought, "Yeah, we'll get called up." To my absolute amazement I got that piece of paper back saying that your marble didn't come out so you weren't called up. I thought, "Christ," I'd sort of tooled my life around being called up.

26:30 I sort of thought, "One year training, one year Vietnam, get out, get on with it. Treat the whole thing as a holiday from this Elders GM, three thirty a.m. get ups in the morning and the likes, nothing could be as hard as that." So I thought, "Jesus, you can't do this to me, I've really worked this out." So I went in to the department

27:00 and said, "Well look, can you volunteer for this national service thing?" I worked on the principal that if there were any perks going for Nashos [National Service soldiers] down the track you're better off being a Nasho than a three-year regular army soldier. If you like it you can always sign on so there wasn't a problem. I thought you're better to go for the shorter period particularly when there's no penalties

27:30 or anything.

**Give yourself the option.**

Yeah. So they said, "Yeah, you can volunteer for national service but this intake's full so you'll have to wait for the next intake." So I had a bit of time to kill so I sort of decided to do a hitchhike trip. I went basically around Australia, Darwin.

28:00 I thought I'd go and have a quick look at Vietnam. So I went and had a look at Vietnam. I can't remember how long I was there, a week or something.

**Is this on your round Australia trip?**

Yeah.

**How did you get to Vietnam?**

Flew in. I can't remember now. It was probably Darwin to Singapore, Singapore to Vietnam. Something like that.

**So you were pretty curious.**

Yeah. I had a good look around.

28:30 **What did you see during your look around?**

Basically just a country at war I suppose. There was no, I didn't see any actual physical fighting or anything like that. All you were was conscious that this was a war zone.

**What was it like being a civilian in a war zone at that time?**

There were quite a few. I teamed up with a couple of American civilians that

29:00 worked for the Saigon Water Board. It was quite good. We went from Vietnam to Cambodia and probably one of the last lots to get a good look around Angkor Wat and all the temples and all the rest of it prior to that bad period for Cambodia. I still wonder to this day, that's one of my great mysteries in life

29:30 how, the Cambodian people were lovely people and they were really happy-go-lucky and all that sort of thing and you really wonder how it could all go to shit with that Pol Pot business. I just find it difficult coming to grips that that country. It was almost like, probably gilding the lily a bit here but a bit like Perth doing it. A Pol Pot coming out

30:00 of Perth because it really was, it was a pretty place. The temples were great, the people were friendly. It was a really good place. We went by bus to get in to Thailand, got bloody held up on the bus but I had a good chat to the blokes and he finished up showing me how his gun

30:30 worked and sent us on our way, didn't worry about us.

**Who was on the bus with you?**

Just locals. I was doing it on the serious cheap, the backpacking type thing.

**Why was the bus held up, was it because you were on board or?**

I don't know, I never quite got that.

**You thought you'd do a lesson in guns 101.**

Yeah, I sort of got talking to him and

31:00 that sort of thing. You know that old story they say, you read it occasionally that if you're taken prisoner get friendly with your captor because the more you get friendly the harder it is for them to knock you off.

**You're thinking well and truly ahead.**

Yeah. Anyway we finished up in Thailand.

31:30 What did we do then? We decided we'd go and have a look at the Vientiane in Laos. Don Martin, the Yank that I was with and myself decided, yep, we'll go up there. Hugh Krilly, the other fella said, "No, I've not going, I've had you guys, we'll get ourselves in to strife or something," and then right at the last moment he decided to

32:00 come with us. I said, "You haven't got a bloody visa," and he said, "We don't need a visa, we're American," that type of thing. Well Don Martin had a visa. So we crossed over the river and in to Laos. Drove along, got done at a road block. Sort of Hugh Krilly gets arrested for no visa

32:30 and all that sort of thing so we spend a bit of time in a major police station. I did all the negotiating. I hit a compromise with the police inspector that he looks after Hugh's passport 'til he leaves and it was an honest mistake and he thought that was a pretty reasonable idea so we're on the bike and we had a look around. It was a God awful place, it really was.

33:00 A sort of half finished copy of the Arc de Triomphe on the main street. Mud roads leading up to it. It was a bloody awful place. Finished up at some, I think it was called something, the third eye or something, some hippy bloody place where they were all, they were eating some sort of mulberry pies or something or other. I think it was something like mulberry pies, all as high as kites and all that sort of thing.

33:30 **These are westerners?**

Westerners. Anyway we finished up, out of there. I realised that I was the one that was in strife getting back in to Thailand because the Americans had automatic entry but Australians didn't, we had to have a visa. So I sort of worked out a system, bear in mind it's a border block as opposed to

34:00 a full blown airport scenario so they don't run in to these too often so I said to the Yanks "Well when you

go through you hand your passport over closed showing the American emblem and everything on the front and then the next one holds it open where there's a lot of American stuff in it, but open and then when I hand mine over I'll have it open on my photograph

34:30 and hopefully they'll just think I'm just number three American," and that's exactly what happened. They went clunk, automatic entry. I've still got the passport to prove it. I got automatic entry back in to Thailand. From there I went back down to Malaysia and the border was interesting, crossing. They weren't

35:00 too happy with me. I was a bit scruffy and that for the Malays but as soon as I said, "Well I'm going to stay with Dr. Hamzar," who's son was at Guildford with me, oh Christ, they phoned him up and he said, "Yeah," and it was almost they rolled the red carpet out after that. Because Hamzar being true Malays, position of authority and I think Hammy's sister married

35:30 the head of the defence force in Malaysia and that type of thing.

**You were in good company?**

Yeah I was in good company. Back down through Malaysia back to Singapore and back to Perth. Then I was ready for the Nashos.

**Just while you were in Vietnam what did you see of the war torn or ravaged countryside?**

Very little. There wasn't much you could

36:00 do. I think Australians were classed as third nationals or something like that so you couldn't even get any work. Well, you could but you'd get three and six a day. There was none of this big money sort of business.

**Was there much of a military presence?**

They were everywhere, absolutely everywhere because this was 1967, '68, somewhere around that sort of period because I

36:30 went in the Nashos in the second intake of '68 so it must have been late '67.

**So it was fully fledged war zone.**

Oh yeah. I had a good look around, street stalls and all that sort of thing. I was always a collector too, I've been a collector all my life since I was a little kid.

**Did you feel any**

37:00 **concern or any fear as regards to your safety?**

No, you know what it's like when you're young, you're bulletproof.

**Just made it all the more interesting?**

Yeah.

**So you came home and you decided you were going to go up there after joining the Nashos?**

Yep.

**So what happened when you were taken in to the Nashos course?**

Well we all sort of had to go down to Karrakatta. We got

37:30 flown to wherever the hell it was, in Victoria. West Australians went to Puckapunyal and from there we got bussed to Puckapunyal. I was in the second intake of 1968 in A Company.

**What was your first impression of Puckapunyal?**

38:00 Just an army camp. It wasn't one of these, it was nothing, just those old fashioned huts. Neatly laid out, very clean and regimental but parade ground, series of huts, parade ground, series of huts, this sort of thing.

**How were you greeted when you arrived?**

38:30 I don't have any real memory of it. I think you spent your early time there going and getting your kit. Your boots and your hat and all the rest of the stuff.

**You didn't have a drill sergeant breathing down your neck?**

Not really. I remember because I've always had short hair all my life because it was one of the things my main sport was swimming, I used to do a lot of swimming and a lot of swimming for Guildford. I've always had short hair and also in the Cottesloe and Yallingup board clubs,

39:00 surf board clubs. But I've always had short hair but it doesn't matter the fact I had short hair I still had



to have a haircut. It was one of those and you think ahead, you know, this is just one of their, "I'm in charge." There was no necessity for a hair cut but I had to have one.

**What about the reactions of some of the other guys?**

Most of them were

39:30 pretty philosophical. Even the ones that probably were horrified at the thought of being called up, I think most of them took it on the chin.

**What about having all their long hair shaved off?**

I think they just accepted that. They knew they weren't going to get away with it so when it eventually happened, there was no bleating or anything. They just got their hair cut and that was that.

**What happened, what sort of routine did you go in to?**

40:00 I suppose in terms of my overall military career as short as it was I don't have massive memories of Puckapunyal. All the normal bull dust that goes on with recruit training.

**Tell us about it.**

Just their room inspections and the extra punishment because they found a spot of dust and

40:30 all that sort of stuff. I'd been to boarding school, I'd seen all this crap before. It was nothing new to me. But it's not to say that I didn't enjoy it. The guys were great, we had a really good time after hours and stuff like that.

**What did you get up to?**

They had a boozier

41:00 on camp and I've forgotten, we had to wait a certain amount of time, so many weeks before you got access to the boozier but there wasn't really much chance to get up to anything really. I can remember the first leave we had and that was after so long where we all went down to Melbourne. Geez, I can remember I was as full as a state school hat rack for

41:30 the whole time I think. I remember carting my mate from Kalgoorlie in a fireman's lift up the stairs to put him to bed in the hotel room because he couldn't stand. No one had really touched the grog for so long so it was really letting your hair down. We had a great time in Melbourne. Everyone came back. No one shot through or anything. We had one little bloke of Burmese origin.

## Tape 2

00:35 **We were just talking about Puckapunyal.**

Yeah.

**What did it actually look like?**

I think I said that, I covered that but it was just like a basic military camp, nothing special at all just laid out very neatly. We kept pretty well in our training areas.

01:00 I don't have a lot of memories one way or another about Puckapunyal. Certain things, like I can remember our last big night there.

**You sound like you were a bit of a party animal.**

Well yeah, how the hell we never got ourselves in to serious strife over it I'll never know.

**Well what happened?**

01:30 We had Victorians there and West Australians and there's always a bit of how's your mother between them and I can remember I got on the table and auctioned Victoria off for not a lot of money if you know what I mean. Before you knew where you were there were glasses and jugs and God knows what else flying around the place and it became like one of those big

02:00 western brawls. The whole camp just absolutely erupted. By and large I think the boys damn near wrecked the place. I thought, "Christ we could be in to some serious strife here," but we were on the buses the next morning off to our various units and they never did a darn thing about it. I think they just wrote it down as

02:30 the boys letting off steam. It was one of those things if we'd still had two weeks to go there or something like that I wouldn't like to say what would happen but by gee she was a blue and a half but in good fun too.

### **A good fun biff.**

Yeah. But one of the things I do remember because I get a bit cranky, there's a lot of crap comes out about Vietnam and myths

03:00 and that about treatment of blokes and that and blokes saying they didn't want to go and all this sort of thing and I can remember that what happens at the end of your recruit training you get corps allocated. I was corps allocated to armoured corps and had to front the board if you like and I told them that my family would be very disappointed because

03:30 they were all infantry type people if I didn't get infantry so they sort of basically said, "All right you mug, you're in infantry." So I was corps allocated to infantry. I remember the OC [Officer Commanding] of A Company asking the company all those that wanted to go to the next battalion that was going to Vietnam and bypassing the corps training which wasn't really true because you did corps training with the battalion but nevertheless he said

04:00 bypassing the corps training phase, on parade. Well you couldn't move for blokes. He basically had to go down the line saying, well you were in the footy team, you're in the boxing team, you can go, you can go. You stuffed up all the time so you can go to corps training, that type of thing. So they had more volunteers than they knew what to do with from Puckapunyal. So that's

04:30 sort of an example of how myths, you know, I don't want to go, like hell. There were heaps of blokes, they were all out on parade.

### **Were there guys that didn't want to be there?**

Yeah, I think so.

### **How were they treated by you blokes?**

All right. I don't think any of us really worried about it but they weren't that vocal about it. We certainly

05:00 never had any sort of situation where blokes would be sitting down and not doing it. It's a bit like I've run the Legacy kid's camp for the last twenty years and up to a hundred kids in camp and we have a system, the SAS [Special Air Service] blokes help me and we have a system of push ups for kids that stuff up and in the twenty years that I've been doing it we might have had one kid

05:30 that's jacked up on doing push ups and eventually he's come around anyway and finished up doing it. It was a similar sort of thing.

### **You're saying there's a bit of brain washing involved?**

Yeah or it's the way you do it. I think that everyone just sort of realised, "Well this is it, I've got two years to do," and they just got on with it.

06:00 **What were the conditions like from the point of view of food and where you slept?**

They were pretty good. It was cubicle dormitories sort of thing. I think it was like a bed and a bed and a bit of a thing and a bed and a bed and a bit of a stud wall, that type of thing. They were fine. You never had a lot of kit with you so it wasn't that you had to decorate your house or anything.

06:30 You had the basics. So all that side was fine. The food was very good as you'd expect. So it wasn't bad.

### **Were you doing a lot of route marches?**

Yeah we did a lot of those sorts of things. That's where the Salvation Army wins all their hearts and minds at those things because at the end of the big route marches

07:00 you always find the Salvos there for a cup of tea and a bikkie. It's probably the best cup of tea and bikkie that you've ever had in your life after twenty k or whatever and you remember it for the rest of your life and it's probably the best investment the salvos have ever done in their life because I know I'm still paying for it every time I see the Salvo lady outside the Royal Show or wherever. You're always putting in.

07:30 **How much emphasis was there on fitness?**

A great deal but I think being young blokes it was more toning up. There were some big lads but by and large I think everyone was able to do it. There wasn't a major problem. Don't forget that all the medical problems

08:00 and all that sort of thing all got shipped out early in the piece, the ones that'd slipped through that didn't have medical exemptions from the word go. They don't necessarily get them all and I think a few of them actually probably when they got shipped out were disappointed at being shipped out.

### **Were they actually shipping people out that weren't passing the medical?**

Well they'd suddenly discover

08:30 that maybe they had flat feet or something like that but we're not talking vast numbers to my knowledge and of course it might change from intake to intake.

**So flat feet was still a problem?**

Oh yeah. I know this little Burmese fellow that we had, the blokes were a bit unkind to him because they used to make remarks like, "Because you look a bit like the Viet Cong you'll probably be a forward scout"

09:00 or something like that and I think that got to him after a while. Anyway I don't really know the reason but he went.

**Was that the thing that people were fearing the most, being a forward scout in Vietnam?**

No, I don't think they gave it a lot of thought.

**Do you think you were naïve?**

Yeah. As I say, you're twenty and bullet proof. So we left

09:30 by bus instead of doing the corps training I was allocated to the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 5RAR.

**How unusual was it to skip the corps training?**

It happened a bit. I don't know the actual number of times it occurred but it did happen a bit. What the battalions tend to do is, the 5th

10:00 Battalion had already done a tour of Vietnam so they were tooling up for a second tour and they were under strength with people going different directions on return and what had happened was they'd turned D company in to the corps training company. You've got the four rifle companies, A, B, C and D so delta company became the

10:30 corps training company and they did a sort of a crash course of corps training. You could arguably say the battalion trained you the way they wanted you trained. Their ideas as oppose to the school of infantry if you like which probably when it's all said and done wasn't much different but when corps training finished

11:00 I remained in delta company as a sort of a foundation member of the new delta company.

**So what sort of things did they train you to do?**

We did various courses and things there. I started my career as a machine gunner so I did the gun course and various other things.

**What sort of things would they teach you as part of the gun course?**

All the stripping the gun down, reassembling it

11:30 in five seconds flat or whatever the going was at the time and you could do it virtually blindfolded. Also range shoots and so on and so forth. It went by pretty quickly and I have no real recollection. It wasn't one of those things that you have great memories about because it was just a normal training type of scenario.

**Did you enjoy learning about that sort of stuff?**

Oh yes,

12:00 learning your skills and I think one thing I do remember and I think I can speak on behalf of most of the blokes is that it was of great joy when we qualified because when we went to the battalion, because we were still not fully fledged

12:30 infantry men we still wore the, when we left the recruit training we took the rising sun badge down and we got the crossed rifles badge for infantry but it's just a big crossed rifles.

**What was your kit and your uniform at the time?**

Just the basic stuff but the badges were the important thing.

13:00 So we got the infantry badge. All right, we were thrilled about that, we were now infantry, we're no longer recruits but when we finished corps training we then got the regimental badge of the Royal Australian Regiment which was still an infantry badge with crossed rifles but they call it the skippy because it's got a kangaroo on it. I remember that was a great day when you handed your old infantry, done nothing badge and

13:30 graduated to the skippy badge because that meant you were a full fledged member of the Royal Australian Regiment. There was a bit of pride in that. So we got the skippy badge. Then I went in to 11 Platoon D company.

**Whereabouts did you do the corps training?**

All around the Holsworthy area. That's where the 5th Battalion was stationed. It was over

14:00 before you knew it sort of thing.

**How did that compare to Puckapunyal, Holsworthy?**

A lot more laid back, not as regimented. I think had we gone, talking to guys that had gone to the school of infantry and not gone direct to a battalion I think you could arguably say that that would have been a lot more regimented but the battalion was just that little bit more laid back. Not fully,

14:30 they weren't slack but they were just a little bit easier.

**What were your superiors like at that time?**

We were in awe of a few of them because they had already done a tour of Vietnam and that sort of thing. So we thought, "Oh these guys are experienced and they're going to look after us overseas and they'll know all the ins and outs and all the rest of it."

15:00 **Would they tell you anything about Vietnam?**

Oh, a little bit.

**Like what?**

Just like for instance I always found it difficult to believe until I was there about your sixth sense, how your sixth sense develops, how you can walk through the bush and smell people and I thought, "Oh yeah." I'm not talking about cooking, obvious stuff, I'm talking about smelling people. Sure enough, you do, there's no question about it. Your senses

15:30 really tune in, you just know. Little things like that, they'd tell you odd stuff like that. By and large given that in those late sixties, seventies facilities for television and film and all that sort of thing had been around, I really think they didn't show us enough.

16:00 I think we could have maybe there's two schools of thought, maybe sometimes you can do too much, you can frighten the pants off people so better off just leaving it alone just feeding you just enough but I always felt that we never really saw, the only thing we ever saw on Vietnam really from memory was Dien Bien Phu

16:30 when the French...

**What's that?**

That's where the French got a caning. We're talking... they might as well have shown us the film Zulu. Well they did that of course too. They showed us that at Puckapunyal. It just didn't seem to be, given the amount of information that had come back down from Vietnam by way of experience and footage,

17:00 I don't think enough of that was passed on. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting I'm bitter and twisted or anything but I seem to think that all right after corps allocation we went in to our respective platoons.

**Just before you go there you mentioned before that audio visual was essentially opening up, was there anything on the news being broadcast about the Vietnam War?**

We didn't get to see any of it because

17:30 you really didn't have the time. Nowadays I think every digger's got a television in his room. That wasn't the go in our day. We never really saw anything.

**Apart from the rifle and machine gun training that you were getting, what other sorts of training were you doing at Holsworthy?**

Map reading. Not a lot of that, it's more of an NCO [Non Commissioned Officer] thing. I really can't remember much

18:00 because it was over before you knew. A lot of it was you were getting in your new platoon and settling down. As I said I went to 4 Section 11 Platoon.

**How was that selection process be done, would they actually match you up with people they thought you'd get along with?**

Lord knows how they did it. I think they probably just did the alphabetical

18:30 whatever. There might have been the odd NCO who picked a favourite or something like that and managed to get him in his platoon but you were just in a platoon and away you went sort of thing.

**Sort of out of a hat?**

I think so. So I finished up as I say in 11 Platoon and then came the training for Vietnam.

**Did you have any leave**

19:00 **during the time that you were doing all this training?**

You used to get things like stand downs and things like that but they weren't much good to a West Australian because you couldn't go anywhere, couldn't go home or anything.

**So what did you do?**

Not a lot really. You'd go in to Liverpool or whatever and get on the grog. They had a good canteen, the Maxwell Club at Holsworthy. West Australians didn't go, they might go out with a mate every now and again

19:30 to his place or whatever.

**Did you find that you were sticking together with other West Australians?**

No, once you've become part of a team you tend to knock around with your platoon. A bit of pride in your platoon.

**How do you actually train a group of people to be in a platoon?**

Well don't forget I was fairly low on the food chain when it comes to training

20:00 and stuff. I was a machine gunner.

**Whose up the food chain?**

You've got your section commander in charge of you and then above him he's got the platoon sergeant and then the platoon commander. Then of course your company commander who's in charge of three platoons. I felt that they never gave,

20:30 they can only do so much I suppose but they never gave us enough credit for having a brain I think. This is one of the things I sort of thought it at the time and I still think it today. I believe in the training prior to going to Vietnam that there was a tremendous amount of emphasis on map reading which was good, that was important particularly for the

21:00 platoon commander so that he never got his platoon lost. We did six months, we were bloody near bush tired before we went to Vietnam we'd spent that much time in the bush before we even went over there. Weeks after weeks of tromping through the bush and that sort of thing. Well number one you got fit or fitter, you shook out in your platoon, you'd sort of

21:30 pecking order sorted itself out a bit but it was sort of mindless stuff. A lot of it was necessary, don't get me wrong but I think what it was was just so that the hierarchy could move you around and make sure you all went to the right spots and that your platoon commanders would do all that but you were just one leg after another for

22:00 days and weeks, digging shell scrapes and all that sort of thing.

**Sorry, what's a shell scrape?**

Well you dig a trench or a hole to sleep in of a night time.

**So you're actually camping out in the bush?**

Oh yeah and I just sort of felt and then we went to Canungra. Well I've got a theory on Canungra, that's the jungle training centre. I think

22:30 Canungra's earned an enormous reputation over the years in Queensland.

**Did it have that reputation at the time?**

Yeah. My theory on Canungra was a place where if you got killed overseas and your mother wrote to the system saying how disappointed she was that her son was killed the system was able to write back and say, "Well we really can't understand it, he went through Canungra." It was their

23:00 due diligence or whatever the hell you want to call it. We now consider you ready to go to war, you've gone to Canungra. Well it might have been different for reinforcements who would have gone up as individuals and sort of been part of the set up they had there,

23:30 the local platoons with people coming and going and all that sort of thing but we went through as companies from the battalion so nothing changed. We went through Canungra as a rifle company. We didn't really have outside staff in the true sense of the word. The catering corps, doesn't matter who the hell you were,

24:00 truck drivers, the lot, they all went through Canungra and that gave you the tick in the box to say you were jungle trained. Well they would have got something out of it I'm sure but I'm not sure that we really did. We just went through as normal rifle companies and I mean I was disappointed with things

like you walk down a track or something and they'd have it set up with a booby trap or something

24:30 and they'd have instead of the mechanism actually hitting you on the track, they'd have it say set up so that it goes off to the side of the track. So the DS would say, "Well you just tripped the wire and you got yourself killed," all this sort of crap.

**You think it could have been done better?**

Oh yeah. They had these panji pits [booby traps with

25:00 sharpened bamboo stakes] and all this sort of thing. I think I only ever saw a couple of panji pits in Vietnam and they were around friendly South Vietnamese posts so it was the South Vietnamese that had them. We never really sort of walked in to panji pits and these things that swing down from trees with big spears and you know like you see in the movies. I'm not saying that there weren't cases of it maybe in

25:30 different provinces or something but they seemed to put a lot of emphasis on that and I think we took our biggest casualties in minefields and bunker systems.

**What were they teaching you about minefields?**

Nothing really. That's probably one of my whinges and really there was none of these sorts of situations where they'd have us where you could move along as a platoon

26:00 and then have the DS throw a banger and then walk up and go, "Right the sergeant's dead, the officer's dead and the two NCO's are wounded, what are you going to do?" There was none of that sort of training. I think we left Australia for Vietnam sort of feeling that

26:30 the role you were in was the role you were going to come home in and contacts were things that would always happen to someone else and would never happen to you sort of thing. Which obviously wasn't the case. But there wasn't enough of this sort of situation where you had to and I suppose again in fairness where do they draw the line but I think they could have just put a little bit more training

27:00 in to, "Right everyone's down, you're in charge, what are you going to do?" that type of thing. The other thing we received virtually no training on at all which was some of the worst, I think the worst fighting in Vietnam is the bunker systems where they're dug in and depending on how long they'd been there is how sophisticated the crawl trenches were interlocking the bunker systems.

**Were you told anything about bunker systems?**

27:30 No, not really. We did a cordon and search at Canungra but nothing about bunker systems at all.

**So you weren't even trained to deal with the bunker systems.**

No and they without doubt are the worst things, bunkers. So I was a little bit disappointed. The worst exercise we ever went on, the one that I'll always remember, God it was a mongrel

28:00 place, was Shoalwater Bay in Queensland. Struth, it must have been a hundred and fifty in the water bottle. I remember them having these big portable above-ground swimming pools that were full of ice water I think they were chucking in and they were putting their heat exhaustion cases in them. Blokes were dropping like flies and it was just such a

28:30 God awful place.

**Was it just the temperature?**

The temperature and the dust, it was just a stinking place. I can remember we spent a fair percentage of our time fighting bushfires, going non-tactical and fighting bushfires. There were fires going through the area. It was just a God awful place.

29:00 So that was that.

**Just on the subject of some of the training you did in Queensland, were you doing any jungle training actually in vegetation?**

Yeah at Canungra we were.

**What sort of vegetation did you have to deal with?**

That heavy jungle stuff. There was nothing wrong with any of that training it was just

29:30 that why leave out those sorts of things like mine incidents and bunker systems which were the two biggest killers.

**They would have known that by that time?**

I would have thought so, yeah, well and truly and we really didn't receive enough on that.

**It's just surprising that you said you've got fellas who already had done a tour of duty over**

**there that they didn't mention that even in casual.**

30:00 Well I think the types of stuff that happened in Vietnam, you've got to be a bit careful here because it sounds like you might be putting down some of the earlier tours but the place changed all the time. The first cabs off the ranks were full on into it with the 173rd Airborne Americans and then you've got

30:30 that phase where we established our own set up and there was an enormous amount of establishing Nui Dat as a main base, you don't do that overnight and nor do you get as much of a chance to move out of province or anything. Then again you can have big incidents like Long Tan occurring during that period of time. You can go in to the Tet Offensive and have that sort of period and then I think by the time we got there

31:00 I think they had a lot of our province pretty well under control and we tended to go out further and go in to different provinces and we were able to spend more time in Vietnam if you like looking for a fight because Nui Dat was already established and so on and so forth.

**Did you hear anything about the Tet Offensive?**

No, nothing really.

**Were you in Canungra at the time**

31:30 **of the Tet Offensive?**

I can't remember. I just don't remember anything, the Tet Offensive was just the Tet Offensive.

**I was just thinking you might have got briefed about it.**

No. We never got any of that sort of stuff. We're too far down for that. So then when all the training was over we got our pre-embarkation leave.

**So did you manage to get back to Western Australia?**

Yeah got back to Western Australia.

**So who did you go and visit?**

Stayed home

32:00 and all that. I was taking Marg out at the time.

**How did you meet Marg?**

Through my sister actually. Marg was a nurse, various friends and that sort of thing.

**Was Perth a social sort of a place in those days?**

Oh yeah. No different to anywhere I suppose.

**What sort of things were on the list of to do's socially?**

The Highway Hotel on the Stirling Highway, the Cottesloe Hotel, the

32:30 OBH was a big place for having a drink. Surfing and all that sort of thing, Cottesloe Beach.

**Did you do a spot of surfing?**

I used to be a board rider in my day, yeah. Foundation member of the Cottesloe Board Club and the Yallingup Board Club. I actually when I go down there now I look at the boards, I know they can put them in their cars now where in our days because they were longer and bigger they were on the roof

33:00 but I actually think there were days down there, I've spent a fair bit of time down south and I think board riding was actually bigger in the sixties than it is today.

**Really?**

Yep. The whole camping areas were just loaded with board riders. You'll see little groups of cars but we're talking huge, the amount of board riders that were down there in the sixties,

33:30 really huge. But as I say, more visual I suppose because of the boards being on the roof of the car.

**Was there a bit of a thing about being a surfer?**

Yeah, there was that other group that thought they were all, what do they call them, not bodgies and widgies, whatever it is. It was surfers and

34:00 bogans is a new one isn't it, whatever.

**You were a subculture within your own.**

Oh yeah.

**Was it a very cool thing to be in that?**

Oh yeah, I think so. You had your parkas and your club colours.

**Your club colours?**

Yeah, like the Cottesloe Board Club or the Yallingup Board Club or whatever.

**Was there any rivalry between clubs?**

Oh yeah, there was Scarborough and various board clubs around the place. They were good days.

**Would girls**

34:30 **be a part of the circle?**

Hangers on that's all but there weren't really that many girl surfers.

**This was a man's club.**

Man's club, yeah. In fact I don't think there were any girls in the board club. There was a couple of good female surfers but I don't think they were in any clubs.

**So if you were going down south for a bit of surfing action.**

All blokes.

**Girlfriends left at home?**

Oh yeah, it was a big thing surfing, very important.

35:00 **So what was the hot spot down south, was it still Yallingup?**

Yallingup and Margaret River.

**How often would you go and do that?**

One year I went down there I think literally every weekend of the year. Used to leave on a Friday night, come back on a Sunday night.

**So it was a pretty full on hobby that you've got?**

Oh yeah but I've always been that way, if I'm in to something I'm full on. So we

35:30 came back from our pre-embarkation leave, back to Sydney.

**How were they shipping you around the country, were they sticking you on a train?**

No, planes in those days.

**Was it commercial aircraft?**

Yeah.

**Would you be wearing your uniform?**

Uniform on the planes, yep.

**Was there any reaction that civilians would give you?**

No, they wouldn't have wanted to either.

36:00 Not from me, I'm that tight but no, never got a bad thing. I came home on R&R [Rest and Recreation] because I'd been through Asia and I didn't bother going to one of these Asian destinations, so I went home on R&R and I can remember teaming up with another corporal, I was a corporal then going back to Sydney to get the flight

36:30 back to Vietnam. We weren't on huge dough so if we can save a quid, we saved a quid. I don't think the army's too thrilled on you hitchhiking in uniform but nevertheless we decided to hitch hike in to Sydney in uniform. What are they going to do? Send you to Vietnam? So we did it. We got picked up by a Rolls Royce and these two guys

37:00 said, "Where are you blokes going?" and we said, "Well, we've got to go to this," whatever it was camp something or other they called it but it was an inner city thing where we stayed the night before going back and they said, "Is there any requirement for you to go there?" And we said, "No, really all we have to do is be at the airport tomorrow at such and such a time." Well these guys took us in, bought us a slap up feed

37:30 at one of the top restaurants and then they turned around and booked us a hotel at Kings Cross, paid for it all, wished us good luck. So that's the sort of experiences that I've had.

**That's a really positive.**



Yeah, I mean I never had any of this problems that some

38:00 blokes and don't get me wrong I'm sure they do but I think some people feed on other people's bad experiences. Someone not being, I became an RSL [Returned and Services League] member, no one turned around and said to me, "You weren't in a proper war," they wouldn't have bloody well wanted to. So I really didn't have any bad experiences. I had a very supportive family, friends, that sort of thing.

**Well what did your friends**

38:30 **think about you going to Vietnam?**

It was probably mixed emotions. I think there was probably a bit of jealousy even that they weren't themselves involved.

**How about Marg, what was her opinion?**

Well, again, you're very young and this young and bulletproof is very real.

39:00 I think the old man was worried because he'd been there and done it, he knows anything could happen in these situations. It was like me, I was worried when my young bloke went to East Timor, he was with the 4RAR battalion that went to Timor. I know how these things can, excuse my expression but go to shit. So you

39:30 can't help, you probably worry a little bit more than you would if you were a normal person.

**How old was your son when he went to Timor?**

Twenty I think. About the same age.

**Bulletproof.**

Bulletproof, yeah.

**So he probably wasn't worried and you were worried taking over your father's position.**

Yeah. So anyway we all had to form up on the parade ground at Holsworthy

40:00 in Sydney with our kit which wasn't a great deal.

**What did you have in your kit?**

Can't honestly remember. It was just a zipped swag. We had a trunk too but the trunks went separately. There wasn't really a lot of gear. I think the few, they put out a list and a few civilian clothes and that because you wore civvies [civilian clothes] when you went down on leave down to Vung Tau.

40:30 So there was a little bit of civvy gear but not a hell of a lot of stuff. Then we went down and boarded HMAS Sydney. On the boat we called in to Fremantle on the way so I saw the family there.

**What were the conditions like for you blokes being on board the ship?**

Weren't too bad.

41:00 **Would have been pretty crowded.**

Yeah but nothing over the top, it was okay. I don't remember. You do get used to sleeping in some weird situations when you're in the military. If you made your kids dig a whole in the wet and sleep in the thing overnight the child welfare would take them off you but the army does it. You get used to sleeping anywhere.

41:30 **Were you in hammocks on board?**

Yeah we had hammocks.

**Any seasickness on the way?**

I wasn't too bad on the way up it was when I came back from Vietnam I was crook as a dog coming back.

**Was seasickness knocking over a few?**

I don't know. Not really, no. A few of the guys that got sick, we used to get them to get their grog because we had this one can per man per day but they were those great big Fosters cans.

42:00 Anyone who was a bit off colour he still had to.

00:30 It was only from memory a few hours.

**How did you spend that time with your family?**

We came home and had a feed and then the family took me back.

**Was it an emotional farewell?**

I think so, yeah. But we were sort of on the way. I think we'd trained so damn hard we were ready to try ourselves out if you know what I mean.

01:00 **So you were pretty keen.**

Yeah. So we did PT and various things like that on the decks and practice shooting off the back of the Sydney. They used to put these balloons with a bit of water in them and with the helium and that and let them float out the back of the Sydney and then we'd shoot them. A bit of that sort of thing. Before you know where you were we landed,

01:30 we docked at Vung Tau.

**Just before we arrive at Vung Tau, what were the conditions like on board?**

I thought they were all right. There was nothing untoward except queuing, we seemed to do a lot of queuing for food or queuing for your grog ration. I just seem to remember that. It was all over pretty quickly. I can't remember what it was. About four days or something like that, so it wasn't

02:00 a major thing.

**What was the daily routine?**

Get up, I think you had to roll your hammock up. I think you had to pack that away. I can't really remember much about it. It was all over before it started.

**What was your attitude towards arriving in Vietnam? Had it changed at all since you'd left mainland Australia?**

02:30 I don't know. That was all shut out, that side of it. The thing that I remember most was we came ashore in these sort of landing craft things and we took over from the other battalion which we were replacing the 1st Battalion, 1RAR. The battalions all interchanged and the three

03:00 battalions that interchanged were in our changeover were 1 battalion, 5 battalion and 7 battalion. I remember coming ashore and normally when you get a couple of battalions side by side there's a fair bit of gobbing off and smart remarks and all that sort of thing and I remember how subdued the whole thing was. I think as we came ashore we were all green as grass

03:30 so we were looking at 1RAR blokes that had done their tour and they were all experienced veterans. So we were looking at them with a bit of awe and they in turn were sort of looking at us with a bit of, "You poor bastards, you've still got a full tour in front of you." So there was really no how's your mother between the two battalions. It was just a really subdued atmosphere.

04:00 **Was that when the reality of that started to sink in?**

No, not really, no. We got taken then to a sort of an airfield where we boarded the Chinook helicopters and got taken straight up to Nui Dat. So there was no stay in Vung Tau for a night or anything like that. It was straight up to the Dat.

04:30 Not every battalion had this system but our interchange did where one company and usually it was delta company, certainly that was the case in our case, delta company went on Nui Dat hill with the SAS. So the SAS and D Company were sort of side by side up on the hill. The rest of the battalion went down on to the wire. So we sort of

05:00 settled in, got our lines and that sort of thing.

**What was your first impression of the Dat?**

From memory it was very dry and hot and muggy. It wasn't sort of that green tropical jungle thing. It was a very dry, dusty sort of joint to start off with. I remember the SAS ammunition

05:30 bunker blew. Something went wrong and that blew up and started a lot of bush fires around the place. There was unexploded ordnance blowing all over the place. We were out again fighting fires and all that sort of thing.

**Was this shortly after you arrived?**

Yeah. Not that anyone worried, it was just one of those things.

06:00 Then we did a, I can't remember how long we'd been there but we did a sort of small acclimatisation operation where you could arguably say it was a relatively safe area, I don't think they were expecting a

great deal to happen just to get you used, shake out. In Australia for instance with your webbing

06:30 that you wore and every battalion had different ideas on how things should be worn but in Australia we had this had to be here and this had to be there and that had to be there and that had to be there. In Vietnam all that went out the window and you adjusted your webbing to suit your requirements. Of course different guys carry different types of weapons. Some company commanders would allow

07:00 their machine gunners to wear linked ammunition almost Mexican bandit style. Others would allow it to happen if they put it inside those black lilo covers, blow-up mattress type things where they cut them up and they'd slide the rounds, they'd fit perfectly down so that they were always covered. We had to carry ours in basic pouches. I'd bought World War II Bren

07:30 pouches before I went to Vietnam. They're a nice big pouch for putting your Bren ammunition in. I can remember just at a pinch you'd get a hundred and fifty rounds if you really wound them properly. So I had a hundred and fifty rounds there, a hundred and fifty rounds there and a hundred and fifty rounds in the middle of my back in the three pouches and fifty rounds on the gun so I carried five

08:00 hundred rounds. That's thirty five pound and the gun was twenty three pound. So between the gun and the ammunition you had fifty eight pound so it's a fair bit of weight. That's before your water and the rations and all the rest of it.

**What were you weighing fully loaded?**

I think we'd probably get up to seventy odd pound. Don't know what that is kilos.

**Nor do I but it sounds heavy.**

It's heavy. It was damn near the equivalent of a couple of boxes of apples I think.

08:30 So you were pretty damn well loaded. I can still remember the first smoko. Funny how you remember certain things. I can still remember the first smoko we had and although I was fit, really, really fit, struth I felt it, I tell you. I can remember lying down, lying on the edge

09:00 with the gun sticking out and lighting up my first fag, five minute smoko. My greens were totally drenched, they'd almost gone black through sweat and I thought to myself, "I've still got thirteen bloody months of this crap. I don't know that I'm going to handle this." But you do. And as time went by you acclimatise properly, you lost any excess weight

09:30 that you might have been carrying and you just got used to it.

**How many days was that initial operation?**

That I can't remember. Probably it'll be in the battalion book but it was just a shakeout thing.

**Just before we explore some more of your experiences on those operations, whereabouts did you settle in to the perimeter at the Dat?**

Up on the hill, SAS hill.

**Can you describe**

10:00 **the hill for me?**

It was low shrub with a bit of, a few trees and that up the top, monkeys in them. Pretty uninteresting sort of non-event sort of hill.

**Why did your company settle on SAS hill?**

It was probably the way they laid the perimeter out also. The area allocated to our battalion

10:30 and the change over battalions would have only taken up so much space so they were able to have, almost like a company in reserve I suppose on the high ground.

**So was that almost a strategic decision to have that?**

I would say it would have been a strategic decision as well. Although we were never tested in terms of human waves on the wire

11:00 or anything like that at the Dat.

**How secure was the Dat?**

I think pretty secure. They used to do tail patrols and early warning patrols all that. They patrolled forward of the Dat all the time so no one can come in. Long Tan is basically an example of that. They picked them up on their way to the Dat. I think it would have been pretty difficult for the enemy to get in too close.

**Was there any mortar fire though?**

Yeah there was the odd mortar fire and that but we

11:30 spent an incredible amount of time in the bush. Six to eight weeks at a time sort of thing. Then you're only back in camp for a week before you're off again. So we spent an enormous amount of time in the bush.

**Just before we get in to that time you spent in the bush how did you spend your time in the Dat?**

Whenever you came in from ops and you were at the Dat you'd always get a couple

12:00 of days down at Vung Tau on leave. You'd come in, you'd shower, you'd have a decent feed, you'd get on the grog. There wasn't anything that really happened back at the Dat. You weren't forced to do any training or anything like that. You'd sort out your kit if you needed new gear and all that style of thing.

12:30 You'd possibly try and get to the PX [Post Exchange - American canteen unit] and hopefully the bloody non-combatants hadn't cleaned out the PX and there was nothing there for you when you got there. That used to piss the boys off.

**How bad was the situation?**

Pretty bad. In fact it's probably the big unwritten history of Vietnam is the animosity that existed between combats and non-combats. It was actually childish in many respects, appalling in other respects but very real.

13:00 It really was real because we often used to feel that the blokes back at the Dat had no bloody idea what was going on or what the war was all about. If you took all the hangers on out of the equation the casualty rates for Vietnam would have looked on a percentage basis a hell of a lot worse. There were so many blokes up there. They've all got a job

13:30 to do and someone's got to do it. I think that probably wasn't really the reason, I think it was the liberties a lot of them used to take.

**Can you go in to some examples of those liberties?**

I can remember once we had a badly wounded bloke come back and he took me on the grog, he was our artillery observer, Iva Velooks, got me full and I said, "I've got to go, I really have to go Iva, I've got

14:00 to get to the PX to buy this watch." I can remember standing in the queue, they'd introduced this queuing at the PX and you're shuffling up the queue and finally I was the next guy to get in to the PX and they kicked everyone out. In the queue for a bloody hour.

14:30 I pushed the door open and I said, "Excuse me corporal, when are you going to start serving again?" and he said, "If you blokes don't watch yourselves we might never re-open." Of course, am I allowed to swear on this?

**Sure.**

I said, "Is that fucking right is it. Well see all these blokes out here, they're out in the bush earning you your fucking war service you asshole. It might be an idea to get off your bloody arse and serve us."

15:00 "You can't talk to my corporal like that," said the warrant officer so I told him to get fucked as well. I must have been an old classic half an inch off putting a burst through the speakers on the top all around the shop. The old, "I'll give you." He was ringing the MPs [Military Police] up. There was a bloke called Brian Bunker who was in transport that I'd gone to Harvey Ag [Agricultural] School

15:30 with, he tapped me on the shoulder, they used to call me Blue and he said, "Blue you've got to get out of here, they'll throw the key out." I was mild then, I went right off. Anyway, he threw me in his truck and he drove me back to the lines. They never knew who the hell it was. That was just one little incident.

**How long was it before you went back to the PX?**

Well, it wasn't even a case of

16:00 having to stay away, it was the fact that you're out bush anyway so I don't think they'd have recognised you two or three months later. Didn't bother me. I went back whenever the time was. The HMAS Jeparit used to bring all these goodies up. The big thing of the day was reel-to-reel tape recorders and all this sort of stuff. What often used to happen was they'd sell out while we were out in the bush. It was the same often with things like,

16:30 I saw one of those concerts that they hold and you can see all the, we used to call them, the word was pogo for non-combatants so we'd see all these pogos sitting round the stage with all the singers and all that sort of thing and the battalion would rock up and we'd be up the back. So many of these sorts of things used to happen while we were out in the bush

17:00 without a great deal of thought. You saw one little example of what I'm talking about I think in that film The Odd Angry Shot where Graham Kennedy I think it was that played the sergeant. I thought it was going to be appalling but actually he didn't do a bad job I must admit. I can remember they were down at Vung Tau and they were walking past the thing and they were making some snide remarks about air

conditioning,

- 17:30 blokes expiring because the air conditioning broke down. There was a terrific amount of this animosity that existed between combats and non-combats. Bloody blokes that thought they owned the Q stores and that. You'd come in with the arse out of your strides and you'd try to get a new pair of strides or something and they'd give you a bloody sewing kit to sew them up. That style of thing.

**Tight fisted.**

- 18:00 Yeah, I mean I just don't know that a lot of them really, I reckon for a lot of guys that served in Vietnam it was almost equivalent to being posted from Western Australia to Sydney, to an army base. Sure they would have been conscious of things like the artillery going off and wherever they go they carry a weapon and all this type of thing but in terms of anything ever happening to them or being in a situation,

- 18:30 it just wouldn't happen.

**Just a basic abuse of power.**

Yeah, that's what I think. But I suppose you get that everywhere. You've got to be a bit more mature about it and accept that some of these blokes have to do that sort of job.

**Why were they called pogos?**

I don't know where, I should know, being interested in history but I don't know where the expression ever came from but pogo is the word for non-combatant.

- 19:00 As I say there was a hell of a lot of animosity between them and interestingly enough again going forward to when you come back to Australia, you arrive in Australia and unlike World War II, World War I where your battalions are raised on a state basis, your battalions in Vietnam were raised on an Australian basis so when the battalions arrived they basically disintegrated on return
- 19:30 to Australia. The blokes went to the four corners of the country. You could arguably say that it would be possible for a guy to march on Anzac Day for ten years in a row and not actually march with a guy that he served with in the true sense of the word. There would be some other blokes that were ex his battalion but they might be different companies or the earlier tour
- 20:00 or whatever but actually in their platoon. So what I think happened with post Vietnam was there was this, I'm not getting involved because none of my mates are going to be there, this style of thing. Then over the time it became just as long as you went to Vietnam, that became the common denominator
- 20:30 so blokes started to accept, all right he might have been a bloody cook or bottle washer or a driver or whatever he might have been but he went to Vietnam so he's all right. There had to be that sort of re-establishing of these friendships not re-establishing, establishing of these new friendships with Vietnam being the common denominator.
- 21:00 It sort of became a little bit with national servicemen in particular I suppose those that went to Vietnam and those that didn't. You could see there was even a little bit of animosity and that amongst some of the Nashos that never got a run overseas. They felt a little bit like they'd trained for the football grand final and got sitting on the bench type of thing.
- 21:30 You imagine the dinner party or whatever and someone says, "You were called up for national service weren't you?" "Yes." The next question is inevitably, "Did you go to Vietnam?" and for some of these guys that were called up who constantly had to say, "No," and it was almost like drop any conversation with them, they're not interesting any longer. As I've said,
- 22:00 I'm interested in a lot of this stuff. It's like you had the Bank of New South Wales or something in post World War II you would have twenty male tellers there. Nineteen of them would have served in World War II so they all get on, share common experiences and all the rest of it. One bloke would be the odd one out. I've met guys that were
- 22:30 manpowered and various things in World War II and they always carry that, they never did their bit sort of problem.

**There's like a stigma attached.**

Yeah. Of course with Vietnam it's the other way around. You've got twenty male tellers there, only one of them will have been a Vietnam veteran. He's got nothing to relate. So he has a problem settling in, in that post war environment.

**Sure,**

- 23:00 **we'll probably talk a bit more about that a bit later on in the interview John. Just while we're on the subject of combatants and non combatants were there any good relationships between them at the Dat?**

Oh yeah, there were some crackers, really good ones.

### **What about yourself?**

I went bush all the time so I wasn't a pogo but I had a mate of mine that was in the Q store, a good mate of mine. Mind you I wouldn't call him a pogo in the true sense

- 23:30 of the word because he went bush on a number of occasions but to give you an idea he was, they introduced very late in the tour a system of making a fresh bun and sending a can of cool drink which we called goffas [Royal Navy slang for any non-alcoholic drink] up there which is a naval expression for cool drink. I think they must have picked it up off traveling on the HMAS Sydney or something but everyone called cool drink goffas. They used to send a bun and a goffa out
- 24:00 with the re supply and of course they were prized, absolutely prized these buns and goffas. I can remember Harry had said to one of the pogos back in the camp, "Come and give us a hand getting the buns and goffas ready for the blokes in the bush," and this guy said, "Oh fuck the blokes in the bush." Harry went over and ironed him out. He was a hard nut, Harry.
- 24:30 Anyway, the guy insisted on Harry being charged. Eventually when the operation was over and the OC was back in camp it was almost, "March the guilty bastard in." Our OC, Major Blake who finished up a general, he heard the story and as soon as he basically heard the, "fuck the blokes in the bush,"
- 25:00 "Right, case dismissed," and threw it out. This bloke was livid, he wanted blood so he went for a redress. They cleverly sorted it out. They looked at when he was going home, he was only something like a month off going home this particular bloke and they cleverly worked it out that they couldn't have the redress for some four months down the track or something because of various
- 25:30 commitments therefore he'd have to stay in-country for his redress. I think the penny finally dropped so he said he paid it off and went home.

### **Just moving on to the bush then John, what was the rotation system between the companies in your battalion between being at the Dat and being out on patrol?**

It wasn't so much rotation. When the battalion went to war, it went to war as

- 26:00 a battalion. So they'd go and set up a fire support base wherever the hell it was and the whole lot would go. Then each of the rifle companies would be given their area of responsibility and away you'd go and do your thing.

### **So the rotation would have been between battalions?**

Yeah. Bush phases between battalions, yeah.

### **I'm sort of switching a swapping here**

- 26:30 **but while we're at the Dat, what was it like being on the hill with the SAS, did you interact with them very much?**

A little bit because I knew a lot of my mates were in it. Being a Claremont bloke I used to drink at the Ocean Beach Hotel with few of them and the Highway Hotel so I knew them. So it was a bit old home week. Even for them, same as us, we didn't get to see each other very often because you're bush virtually the whole time. They were just

- 27:00 separate enough not to be neighbours in the true sense of the word.

### **Did you exchange your experiences of being in the bush when you were at the Dat?**

No, not really. They had their role to play, ours was a totally different role. Ours was basically once you found them, you get rid of them sort of thing rather than report back

- 27:30 and that type of thing.

### **Perhaps we should move on to some of those experiences that you had in the bush, the patrols that you went on.**

Yeah.

### **You probably know best where to start.**

Well as I said I think to begin with I thought that contacts were things that would happen to everyone else and would never happen to you. I think

- 28:00 strange as it might seem and I'm not saying everyone was the same but I think you were sort of chafing at the bit for a bit of a blue. I think if my memory serves me right we were the first platoon to have a contact in the battalion and that sort of set the pace. It was like that for the rest of the blinking tour.

### **How do you mean?**

We just

- 28:30 constantly found ourselves in strife at some stage. Not so much in strife but in contact. I could still remember the first night. We had a second tour corporal, Bicky Sayer with us and I can remember him, my old backside was going, the old two bob thrippence business
- 29:00 and I thought, "Jesus Christ," and he bugged off. He came back and I said, "Where you been Bikky?" and he said, "I've just been straightening the bodies out," the enemy bodies you see. I said, "What do you mean?" and he said, "Well it makes it easier to bury them," so you haven't got arms out, I gather he means when the rigor mortis sets in or whatever. I thought, "Jesus
- 29:30 Christ I've got a cool customer here," because I wasn't feeling that cool. Anyway that sort of jolted us in to, "Hey, this is real."

**What contact had you had that day?**

It was night time actually and we were in ambush. The platoon commander had set himself up in the kill group. He was a pretty gung-ho sort of bloke and

- 30:00 he'd thrown a hand grenade in and he got some of his own shrapnel back in the knee. So that sort of stuffed his knee and it stuffed him for the rest of the tour. We had to get a new platoon commander as a result of it.

**How did that affect your platoon?**

You're never that close to your platoon commander. He was just another bloody officer

- 30:30 so it didn't bother us that much. That's no reflection on Harry. He wasn't a bad bloke. There was no dramas with Harry but it was just that he was a bit of a slave driver. There were two of them in the company that were sword of honour or book of honour from the school and they were
- 31:00 competing against each other all the time. So it sort of took that, we often felt, "These two are going to get us all bloody killed," with this competition between them. So that took Harry out of the loop for that anyway. He was a good soldier and brave.

**Offered you guys a bit of relief?**

Yeah.

- 31:30 We just went on and had various incidents and that.

**Just coming back to that contact that you began to describe, what had happened in that incident?**

Basically we had sort of all tracks coming in from all directions and we'd set ourselves up right at a cross roads and there was a creek line coming in as well, a dry creek. These blokes had come down the dry creek and we got them,

- 32:00 there were three of them and then another lot came down the hill with an RPG [Rocket Propelled Grenade] and the gunner got them, the lead bloke and of course as he hit him he spun round and pulled the trigger on his RPG which was stoked up on his shoulder which sent the rocket off and that set all the bush on fire sort of added to the spook of it all.

- 32:30 So that was the contact really.

**So they didn't have any reinforcements coming after that?**

No. I think by and large my experience with the Vietnamese or the Viet Cong, NVA [North Vietnamese Army] is that they liked to pick the time and place for their blue. When they bumped us it's cut and run really. Hold your ground and then do a runner.

- 33:00 We haven't selected this place. You know what I mean? They never went out that day to have a blue, they weren't like us. We were patrolling to have a blue. Their modus operandi was to sort of, I suppose the South Vietnamese would put a battalion at a particular place and after three months they'd say, "Oh well, not much happening here," so they'd bring it down to company strength

- 33:30 or something and then another x number of months go by they'd go down to platoon strength. Then the Viet Cong and NVA possibly, this is just one scenario would say, "Right we'll go and do a number on that particular." They liked to pick their, that's the style of guerilla warfare and bumping us isn't high on their list of priorities. We scrub bashed.

- 34:00 We never walked on tracks. We got pretty good as we went through. You picked the sign. You could tell. Like I said earlier, you get that sixth sense. All of a sudden your forward scout would be sniffing and your section commander sniffing and you'd be sniffing. Everyone'd know and you'd go to ground.

- 34:30 There'd be enemy within the area. It was quite incredible the way you did develop that sixth sense.

**Can you tell me the kind of approach to operating on patrol that you took, scrub bashing?**

Yeah. Although all through your training and again it depends what company or what battalion you're with all through your training you really do two scouts up

35:00 and then a section commander and then your machine gunner but I think it would be pretty safe to say that virtually in ninety five per cent of cases we operated on one scout up only. One of the other big problems was reinforcements and people on your posted strength. You could have blokes on R&R, you could have blokes, wounded,

35:30 killed and so on. You never seemed to get the reinforcements. The average platoon strength is supposed to be about thirty four, well I would suggest that if we operated on twenty five down to twenty that would be pretty normal. Not that it bothered you that much, it's not that you felt inadequate or anything. I think what it did

36:00 was it added extra pressure of a night time, that was probably the biggest thing, on the gun pickets. You do always two people on the gun picket and when you harbour up for a night time you've got your guns out, you're on the gun picket.

**Can you describe how you'd harbour up at night time?**

Usually they'd work on the clock ray method. Off you go, that big tree's twelve o'clock and I want something at three o'clock

36:30 and something at nine o'clock and the platoon headquarters would be in the centre somewhere. It just depends on what you were doing. If you were just doing a straight harbour up, usually in a sort of clock type method and those guns, those machine guns and you've got three in an infantry platoon would all have to be manned of a night time. Well if you haven't got the full complement instead

37:00 of doing an hour on the gun you're doing two or three hours on the gun and that's the problem. It makes everyone bloody tired. That was pretty par for the course. Talking to a lot of the blokes in the other battalions and that they all tell the same story. Never, ever ran your platoons to full strength.

**What sort of experience**

37:30 **would you have of sitting there for hours on end at your machine gun in the middle of the night while everyone else is asleep?**

Well again you get, I don't know what gives you the right to deem an area safe or not safe, but you did. You knew there would be types of country and it would be black as Hades sort of thing and you'd know no one would walk through that area

38:00 that night. There'd be sharp bamboo or whatever the hell and you'd know, you'd hear them coming from a million miles if they tried to move. They're no damn different to us. I think we were just as good in the bush as they were. In fact we were better because we didn't use tracks and that. They didn't have the same discipline and I think a lot of that was due to the fact that, in fairness to them, they weren't there for a tour of duty, they were there for a life.

38:30 So after a while they think, "I'm not going to bloody scrub bash through that bloody stuff to get to point Y. There's a track down there, I'll speed up the operation." Well that was their downfall because we'd belt them on the tracks.

**Just before we talk about those ambushes coming back to being on gun picket in the middle of the night, what thoughts would cross your mind and how would you manage them?**

It was nothing spooky or anything, it was just

39:00 as I say, it depends where the hell you were. Half the time it depends, in the wet season you'd be bloody cold and wet and God knows what else. In one really hairy situation where I was on gun that night where you couldn't get up and leave the gun, not in this situation I can remember being absolutely soaked to the skin and piddling my pants.

39:30 It was great because you got some body warmth just lying there even though it was only a short period of time because it goes cold again very quickly. No one wore underpants in Vietnam. You've probably been told that anyway, no one wore underpants in Vietnam. They'd get too dirty too quickly. I don't mean dirty.

**Probably go mouldy wouldn't they?**

Yeah, you don't want anything clinging to your skin

40:00 or anything.

**Just generally when you're on the gun you're usually of the conviction that you wouldn't have an encounter?**

Not every case, it just depends where you were. I started my career as a machine gunner but then they made me up to a full corporal immediately so I became a section commander.



- 40:30 We had a major contact early in the piece and I think we had a shake out. The shake out the platoon needs to have I think. We had a lot of reinforcements come in and we lost a lot of blokes. I think although under normal circumstances they're just bloody reos [reinforcements].
- 41:00 I can remember my new platoon commander rocking up with his unwashed giggle hat. More fat on a butchers pencil with this bloody giggle hat, he looked like a damn roofing nail. By the time he arrived I was that sort of hardened, old school, knew it all type of gobby bloke.

**What's a giggle hat?**

- 41:30 A bush hat. Just the normal soft bush hat that we wore.

**Did you blokes still wear yours?**

Yeah but they were always washed and given that, you know it's like some blokes can wear a beret and some can't, you get some of them, a nice beret looks good and some, well giggle hats are no damn different.

- 42:00 Johnny Russell was our new platoon commander.

## Tape 4

- 00:31 **Just talking about your platoon leader.**

Yep.

**And what a good bloke he was. What made him such a great bloke?**

John was a national serviceman as well and I think he respected the fact that although he was the boss, there were some people that had a bit of experience and were capable of having some input in to what should be done or the course we could take.

- 01:00 Although he was always the final word and he certainly wasn't a wimp in that area he would still let you have your two bobs worth and if he thought what you were saying, because what they'd have is what they call an O group which was an orders group and the three section commanders, corporals which I'd been made up by then would come in and he'd give the plot for the next phase and he'd

- 01:30 certainly let you have your two bobs worth. There were many times when he'd take your advice on board and other times he'd go, "No, that's not happening, this is the way it's going to go." He was terrific. He was fearless and he was a brilliant map reader, he never lost us once in Vietnam. Of course, that's a big thing, knowing exactly where you are at any given time. That is particularly important when you're

- 02:00 calling in for all sorts of support. Whether it be artillery or helicopter gun ships or whatever, you've got to know where you are.

**Would there be cases of people getting lost?**

Oh yeah, definitely. Hopelessly lost. Seasonal changes can do things to creeks and things and people can be looking for creek lines and sort of say to themselves

- 02:30 there's supposed to be a creek here and there isn't and keep moving and then find one and then assume that that's the creek and that they'd got it wrong and so on and so forth. Mind you, I don't think anyone was so hopelessly lost that it was out of control if you know what I mean. Usually all you'd need to do was throw a smoke and get pinpointed by a helicopter or something

- 03:00 if something went really drastically wrong.

**So it'd be common to get confused?**

You had to be very careful because the lay of the land and the maps you're working on although very good, don't get me wrong, they were very good maps, things change. You just had to be conscious of it.

**Where would the maps be generated from?**

Our survey corps provided them. Lord knows where they came from.

- 03:30 I suppose as the years went by the maps got better and better and better. Our maps that we carried at section commander level were all big coloured maps, laminated and that sort of thing. You folded them up. It became a bit of a problem. That's why I liked, used to wear American pants because they have the big concertina pocket on the side where you could shove the map down your leg. The Australian trousers didn't have those sort of concertina pockets on them.

- 04:00 **Could you actually choose what sort of a uniform you'd wear?**

Pretty much. As I said I used to have Achilles tendon problems with the Australian leather boots so I was able to wear American boots. I personally preferred the American combat boots because when it got wet it had the canvas on the side and the breather holes, your feet, it dried out a lot quicker whereas the leather up for your ankle

04:30 although you wouldn't get wet in puddles, when you did get wet they took forever to dry out.

**So advantages and disadvantages.**

Yeah. I just preferred the American boots.

**Would they hold together fairly well?**

Oh yeah, no problems at all, the boots were fine. The Americans liked our boots, not for the bush, they liked them for walking around boots back at base and that

05:00 because the ones, their black leather ankle boots that they wore had almost like shoe soles on them as opposed to boot soles. So they liked our boots with the boot soles on them. They often used to try and get your boots off you.

**So you'd actually have to swap?**

Yeah.

**Was there a trade in any other sort of ware?**

05:30 Not really, no. So much of the stuff that we used was American anyway so there wasn't much point. There was only being wised out before you went on things like taking World War II Bren pouches over. You'd pick them up at the surplus stores. They were a nice big pouch that you could get plenty of kit in. Even when I'd surrendered my machine gun to become a section commander I didn't reconfigure

06:00 my webbing, I left it the way it was but instead of carrying the allocated number of M16 rounds I carried obviously because I'd been so used to carrying tons of weight in the machine gun I just used to fill magazines for the M16 Armalite rifle and just fill my pouches up. I probably carried three times the set amount which I can't

06:30 even remember what that was. They might have said two hundred rounds or something was the perfect scenario. I'd have carried three times that just because I had my webbing set up in that way and I was used to the weight.

**You mentioned before that you got promoted to be a corporal.**

That's right, yeah.

**Why did the promotion come along?**

Well we'd been involved in a fairly heavy contact in a bunker system

07:00 where we had a couple killed and eleven wounded.

**Maybe you could actually describe that whole contact situation in detail?**

It was in 1969 on the fourth of the fourth. When did we come in to country? February I think, February, March. So we hadn't been in country that long and we were operating

07:30 in the Long Khanh Province which was not, it was outside our normal Phuoc Tuy Province responsibility. Why we were doing it, I don't now. We were operating up there and we'd sort of been scrub bashing and we'd come across a bunker.

**What does it look like, a bunker?**

08:00 The forward scout picked it up, he saw it, saw the low cover and all the rest of it and they weren't expecting anything so we really caught them with their pants down. He ran forward and hand grenaded it. There were enemy in it. All the bunker systems are usually set up in such a way that if you hit that bunker, there's a supporting bunker

08:30 which is capable of giving covering fire to that bunker. Anyway he got whacked by one of the supporting bunkers. He went down and then all hell let loose. They quickly came round. It started about seven thirty in the morning and I think we were

09:00 in pretty serious strife. They were shooting us from cover, we were sort of more out in the open. Anyway various blokes got wounded and my mate Jimmy White on the right of me, he was killed. He was from Collie in WA. As I say, all hell let loose. I was on the machine gun at the time

09:30 and I suppose it was a bit like you see it in the movies. I learned what it's like to be on the other side. You always hear that expression, it's in every movie, they say, "Knock out that machine gun," well I was the machine gun so the Nogs [Viet Cong] were probably all going, "Knock out that machine gun." So they were pouring stuff in. They were firing all these RPG rockets and that in and they were basically

hitting everyone but me.

10:00 I got a bit of shrapnel in the arm and bleeding from the ears and that type of thing.

**Because of the noise?**

I think I busted my ear drums, this ear in particular. So they were going off. The contact lasted, it petered out a bit but you still had to be on your metal. It lasted for over four hours. It's a fairly long time.

10:30 You're basically having a crack at a bloke who I think the closest was about twenty, thirty metres. It would be on a two way range at say thirty metres is close. What had happened was that we had to get helicopters because we had wounded all over the place.

**Would it be about half of you that were wounded?**

11:00 And dead, yeah. So what we had to do was we had to get the helicopter gunships in and of course I had to throw all the smoke for the choppers so they knew where we were. Every time you threw smoke the enemy would open up on you because you've got this coloured smoke coming up. So you're sort of trying to chuck it in such a way where you don't get it all back on you, that type of thing. The other thing

11:30 you've got to be very careful of is drift, smoke drift. So you don't throw a smoke grenade marking your position say forward of your position but by the time it breaks the jungle canopy it's actually come up behind you. That means that you're then forward of where the smoke is breaking canopy which means that any supporting things that come in. I mean people reckon I'm exaggerating

12:00 but I swear to God that this is true, I'll never forget them. The helicopter gun ships came in and if I was lying here facing this way, that entire wall would disappear from the gattling guns. It was probably I reckon still one of the most frightening things that I've ever experienced. Just watching basically the tracer and everything coming in from these helicopter

12:30 gun ships that just came in and literally poured it across our front. Whether it was arse, class or I'd like to think it was good flying and these guys are right on their metal but the spent casings were coming out of the helicopters and falling on us and that was frightening because to begin with you sort of think, "Christ, they're shooting us up," but it's not, it's the spent casings from the helicopters that are coming.

13:00 They just poured the fire in. It's hard to imagine, the width of this room and you've got literally thousands of rounds coming down from these mini guns. And the noise, really. They really churned the joint up. The enemy kept fighting

13:30 and pouring stuff back and then eventually they shot through. We found out afterwards even though it's a bunker system, you usually find they will still try for an escape route at some stage, even though they're in a good situation. They're dug in, so on and so forth, they'll still bugger off because they know eventually they're going to lose.

14:00 **Well, when you're up against gun ships like that.**

Yeah. See artillery's no bloody good to you in those situations because it's too close, you'd finish up wearing your own shrapnel so you can only really use gun ships. Anyway, we found out afterwards why they stayed so long. It was known as the enemy we were up against was

14:30 North Vietnamese regulars, I think they were regulars, main region seven headquarters was the thing. Apparently what was going on there was this big planning conference. They had various high ranking officers in the bunker system planning this attack on the Bien Hoa air base, big American air base. We'd come in the back door literally. I think they fought like mad

15:00 to get their top brass away. We had various American blocking forces who picked some of them up and that's how they found out. They got them as they bugged out in different directions.

**So they actually got the top brass?**

No, they got some of their intelligence section or something. That's how we found out. It's written up in the unit history as MR7 base camp.

15:30 I lost my section commander went back to Australia through wounds. My lance corporal went back through wounds and various others. We had this big shake out in the platoon as a result of it with new reinforcements coming in and that.

**What's the plan with actually getting the wounded out of there, how do you do that?**

Basically once you secure the area

16:00 you'd call in your dust-off choppers and depending on whether they can land or not they will land obviously and take them straight in through the side door if they can or if it's too thick they'll send the jungle penetrator down which is one of these things you fold down and you sit on and they winch you back up if you're a walking wounded or a Stoke's litter type thing which

16:30 they'll take the basket cases up in through the canopy. We eventually got all our wounded and killed out of the area. It was right at the end of the operation so we were basically all back to the Dat. I had to get a couple of little bits of shrapnel dug out of me and that sort of thing but it was only minor.

**What sort of facilities did they have for doing that like getting out the shrapnel?**

We had a fabulous hospital

17:00 down there at Vung Tau. We had a lot of surgeons that would come up and do their time. I think it was a two way street. They wanted to obviously do their bit or whatever but also I think they got to experience wounds and things that they wouldn't normally experience in a normal surgical situation. I remember listening to a report

17:30 years ago about, I know it sounds a bit weird, how marvelous the Vietnam War was for the medical blokes in America doing medical research. They'd never normally been given the opportunity to examine if you like hundreds and hundreds of fit twenty year olds'

18:00 bodies. I think that's when they started discovering that arthritis I think starts earlier than a lot of people used to think because they found it in these fit young blokes at a much higher rate. I think it was arthritis, it was something like that. You don't normally get an opportunity to, as a medical examiner I suppose, to look at hundreds of dead twenty year olds. So I think

18:30 the medicos performed brilliantly down there. We had top surgeons and there's no doubt in the world that our advantage over the World War II blokes was that most cases within an hour of a guy getting whacked he was on the operating theatre. The poor old World War II blokes had to cart these blokes around on stretchers and that and of course

19:00 eventually they'd die. I had a really good mate of mine who was a machine gunner over there, Tex Aitken and Tex took a direct hit with an RPG and I was watching him because I'd just talked to him. We started to converge so I was going to tell him to piss off, to get away and we were sweeping down this hill. As I was talking to him I saw him and he took a direct hit with an

19:30 RPG, bang and it blew the whole of the inside of his leg out. It broke this main vein, femur, the big one anyway and they say the shock alone would actually kill you. At the risk of again gilding the lily and it was almost like the only thing and this is what saved his life, there's no doubt about it, the only thing

20:00 holding the leg together was that it never severed the artery. He would have been "good night the fox" if his artery had gone but no, the artery was still intact. The whole lot was gone. Anyway we got the bloke that did it incidentally, we nailed him.

**It must be just frightening to see though, happening in front of you?**

Yeah, well I saw him lift in the air in the explosion and he came back

20:30 on his back. After it was all over, anyway we nailed the guy that did it and I was over there talking to him I had to check his tackle, he was worried about his tackle, he thought he might have lost that but he hadn't so he was okay. Within an hour's time I can still remember him going up in the Stoke's litter up in the helicopter and he was waving to us because he was high as a kite

21:00 on morphine and anyway he was down on the operating theatre and they saved him. He walked with a bit of a gimpy leg, they had to do a bone graft or something or other but Tex was fine. But if that had been a World War II situation he would have gone unless of course it happened on a beach or something and he was picked up straight away and taken out

21:30 to a ship where the surgeon got you or something like that but not out in the scrub. A lot of horrendous wounds in Vietnam. One of my forward scouts Aspro was shot three times in the guts. He's got gaping great big bloody holes in him now. He survived. Again because of how quick it was to get them to the operating theatre.

**What sort of.**

22:00 There's another interesting little story.

**Go for it.**

The SAS loved 9 Squadron, the air force helicopters, they love them. In fairness to 9 Squadron I think they bent over backwards for the SAS. They would pull them out of a hot extraction or put them in or whatever and they did wonderful thing with them but for some reason they wouldn't got the extra

22:30 yard for your bog infantry and we used to pray when we called in for a dust off helicopter that it was an American that came in to pick us up and not the Australian because the Australian helicopter blokes were too cautious. They wanted an extra tree dropped before they'd land or a this or a that or whatever.

23:00 They wouldn't go that extra yard. That's my experience but talking to a lot of other grunts, infantry, they said exactly the same thing. I've got a mate of mine in 7RAR who just won't have a bar of 9 Squadron helicopter, reckon they're bloody useless. Exactly the same as me, always used to pray on American

dust offs. I actually plucked up enough courage to have a go at a helicopter pilot one day,

23:30 this was after Vietnam and he did raise a very good point in fairness. He said, "Well you've got to appreciate that a downed helicopter isn't much good to your wounded guy," and I let that one go through to the keeper but I think the point is they still wouldn't go that extra yard, not with the infantry. I think they also, their attitude is there's enough of you there or whatever. I don't know. But we

24:00 didn't like 9 Squadron much at all.

**Was there a rivalry between you and the SAS blokes?**

No, none whatsoever. As I said, you very rarely touched base with each other anyway so no, I don't think so. They had their role to play, we had our role to play and by and large I think the operative thing was as long as you went bush you were all right. They were all right and we were all right.

**Because essentially you were doing the same thing really.**

Yeah.

24:30 I'm quite convinced that it was just a marvelous system and this is what brought the casualty rates down, just being able to put these blokes on. I had a good mate of mine, big Sandy McKinnon who got shot and they all tell the story of Sandy.

25:00 He got shot through the chest. Sandy, he was a heavyweight champion at Puckapunyal heavy weight boxing when I'd gone through and he was a good mate. He'd just missed his heart and he was choppered out and they had this down at Vung Tau at this station the other bloke's telling the story,

25:30 "Gunshot wound to the chest," so they're all there with all their bottles and stretchers and Christ knows what else expecting this guy to be lying flat on his back and he got off the chopper and walked off. Of course they made him get on and all the rest of it. He was fine. I was talking to him years later, I said, "You're a legend. You walked off with this gunshot wound to the chest."

26:00 He said, "Blue I was too shit frightened to lie down. I thought if I lay down and started to get all, I thought I'd cark it so I thought the best thing to do was sit up." So that's what he did. But again, another example of straight in to the hospital and they fixed him. It was terrific. And it was good to have that knowledge too. They had head wounds went to the Americans because they had

26:30 the American specialists for head wounds.

**What sort of medical equipment would you take with you out on patrol?**

We always had a platoon medic and although you trained with a spare barrel, carting a spare barrel for your machine gun, no one ever did. I think you were in more bloody strife if you start needing the spare barrel in the middle of the bush, quite frankly you wouldn't carry enough gun rounds to melt a barrel anyway but they used to have this

27:00 valise for carrying the spare barrel and the medics often used to use the valise to put all their medical equipment. It was just a comfortable way, a sort of banana shape and they'd fill it up with all their gear. You'd carry a shell dressing taped to your rifle butt for use but you never carried anything apart from the shell dressing which was pretty much World War II type shell dressings. You never really carried anything, it was down

27:30 to the platoon medic and he carried pretty well what was required. They were specialists. They'd done the training. Mind you none of them, I think our bloke used to like to think he could do open heart surgery. I can remember one particular time we were in this position and we'd been warned that they were really going to come through this area in big numbers and I'd put all my gun down and sighted all the positions

28:00 and all the rest of it in readiness for this and I walked back and old Jimmy Ward had dug this bloody pit like you'd never seen. Most blokes dig a bit of a shell scrape and then when the shit hits the fan they wish they'd dug it ten times deeper but I suppose they get so sort of bored with constantly digging in. Well this thing was huge, this was massive. I went,

28:30 "Christ Jim, I haven't seen anything like this." He said, "Blue, this is going to be a bad one. I can feel it. I need room to operate." I'll never forget Jim saying that. As it turned out, not it didn't happen. So we got a couple of blokes that came in and one of the other gunners knocked them off but we didn't get the human waves

29:00 that we were supposed to be getting.

**How would you get warning of something like that?**

Lord knows where they get it from, the intelligence and that. We were at Dat Do once on a pacification operation and.

**What is a pacification operation?**

Well it was a "hearts and minds" [winning over the local population] thing. We didn't really do many. In fact it was really the only one we did.

29:30 What had happened was that Dat Do was a sort of a hot spot town and they'd had the engineers working and they'd sort of ringed the whole town with wire and defences and properly built bunker systems and all this sort of thing and they had a sort of north, south, east and west entry, exit point. So all traffic had to move through these and they felt they could keep control on it.

30:00 Where were we going?

**We were just talking about, I don't know, I was just following you. We were talking about waves and pacification you had to go in and do the hearts and minds thing.**

Yeah, on this particular but I've forgotten the relevance from the previous point, why I got on to it.

**So have I, don't worry about it.**

30:30 Anyway, we did this pacification. It was the only pacification op that we did and when we arrived. Oh, information I know where it's coming to. When we arrived we had to go and harbour up in this particular spot and there was two platoons, 11 Platoon and 12 platoon and 12 platoon filled in first. They did nine o'clock, six o'clock,

31:00 three o'clock. My platoon moved through them and filled in the top of the clock. Anyway we'd only been there for literally a few minutes and in fact hardly taken our big packs off when the sergeant from 12 platoon trod on an M16 mine. We had three killed and twenty three wounded in that.

**From one mine?**

From the one mine, yeah. Funnily enough

31:30 not one bloke in 11 Platoon even though we were with them. No question about it, being with them but not one bloke in 11 Platoon was hit by anything and every one of them was a 12 platoon casualty. They had something like four guys left. The press ran an article on it and they said all that was left of them or something was four guys left in the platoon. Basically wiped the entire platoon out. That night we did

32:00 an ambush and we killed six of them and then.

**Were they in the town?**

In the town yeah, they'd come in. They were fully armed and everything, they killed one of ours. Then we knocked off another bloke a little while later and I got some papers off him or I got the translations done, sent back to me. In fact I finished up giving them to the family

32:30 because again I suppose I agonised, it was one of those things, do you, don't you. A bloke called Tony Wearing, a West Australian was killed and Tony was killed where we got the six and he was killed. Then when we knocked this other bloke off we got this paper work they'd written up how devastating it was that they'd lost this six.

33:00 They had their after action report in this situation and the historian I suppose in me said, "That's interesting." You wouldn't get many after action reports at that small level where they go on about how devastating it was that they've lost these six. As it turned out I gave it to the family not that it's any great shakes but at least they saw that

33:30 the enemy were not thrilled about the contact that their son was killed in. They were picking up information all the time. They had this Chiu Hoi program which is open arms and these ex-Viet Cong and NVA would come over to our side and anyone who goes on the Chiu Hoi program was a Hoi Chan. So we had these Hoi Chan with us.

34:00 I had to have one of them was our guide or whatever the hell. I never trusted the bastard because he was a turncoat anyway. There's nothing to say he wasn't going to go back the other way or whatever.

**What would they train them to do?**

They would take us around and show us things and do various things. I used to call him Ninety Nine. I think we'd had

34:30 ninety eight kills in the company to that time. So we all called him Ninety Nine. He never knew why he was Ninety Nine. I used to say to Eric Minton, "If this bastard leads us in to anything the first bloke you'd blast is," Eric Minton was my forward scout. I said, "The first bloke you shoot is him," if we walk in to anything, just do it.

35:00 As it turned out he didn't but on one particular time we were in this pacification op and I remember the South Vietnamese all sitting on this bunker system watching us. It was probably like Saturday afternoon at the football sort of business and we're doing this patrol around and all of a sudden old Ninety Nine tripped a trip flare so I got everyone to freeze.

- 35:30 Then we slowly backed out of the place. What we worked out afterwards which I suspected was that it was a minefield that had been laid around supporting the bunkers that what they called RF and PF forces. They were South Vietnamese forces, popular force and regional force, PF and RF. These are blokes that are like normal family guys that have been at it for years and years and years.
- 36:00 Their attitudes were different. I often said to some of the blokes that would sling off at them, "How good would you be if you had to tow your family to war and be at it for eight years or ten years," so I said, "Give them a little bit of leeway." But it was a different mentality, had it been role reversed and Australians were all sitting there, we'd all be going
- 36:30 "Don't walk through there you silly bastards, there's a minefield," but for them, it wasn't really animosity because they hated us or anything we were just going to be their Saturday afternoon entertainment if we trod on one. It's just their attitude. The whole thing, even though probably people think that you did what you like in Vietnam, if you felt like
- 37:00 shooting someone, you'd shoot someone or something like that whereas now you've got a TV camera down your throat and you can't really get away with it, that's not really the case. I can remember a time when I was allocated on this pacification operation to take a section of blokes with these two intelligence officers down to, I think it was a place called Swan Mok or
- 37:30 something like that.

**Sounds like you don't have a lot of respect for the intelligence officers.**

Oh Jesus.

**What was wrong with them?**

Well this is a classic example. "Right Corporal Burrridge, you take your section down there and you'll round up all known Viet Cong suspects in this thing," and I thought, "Oh this is going to be interesting." So we went round door knocking, literally. "Excuse me, is Hong Phong Wong home?" "No, he's not home." "Okay, see you later."

- 38:00 This sort of thing. We finished up with this old lady. Again it sounds like I'm gilding the lily but we had this old lady must have been eighty or something on the back of a truck and I'm starting to get really uncomfortable about this because all the section are armed to the teeth and all of a sudden you're sort of feeling like the SS [Schutzstaffel], picking up some old Jewish lady
- 38:30 in a ghetto somewhere or something. I sort of really didn't feel that was soldiering if you know what I mean. So I got a bit cranky and I said to the intelligence officer, "So where are all these bloody Viet Cong that we're supposed to be picking up?" "Oh," he says, "I've just found out. They're all down at the local hall getting instructions on how to grow better rice crops or something
- 39:00 from the South Vietnamese Government." So I said, "Right, we'll go down, we'll knock the hall over," you know get them all in one hit, bang. "Oh no, no, can't do that," because this is a South Vietnamese operation, we can't interfere with it. I said, "Well what the fucking hell are we doing here." When I say here I don't mean Vietnam I mean in that scenario.
- 39:30 Anyway, that was our thing and he said something about, "Oh you know they've probably also been warned off. They've probably have some system of the Australians are in town so they put a pot plant in the window," and I said, "Or hang the washing on the line." "Yes, yes, good point." Bloody dickheads they were. Let us go
- 40:00 back out in to the bush, I'm a bit more comfortable in there. We did a lot of house searching too where we had South Vietnamese with us and we'd knock on the door and we'd turn the house over. I was never really that comfortable with that type of thing. My old 2IC [Second in Command], he got on the grog with the South Vietnamese,
- 40:30 finished up absolutely as full as on this rice wine and I had to put an ambush in that particular night and even though he's my great mate it was the closest thing that happened for me to charge a bloke even though I wasn't in to that sort of thing. Anyway I made him stay behind at the headquarters there, I wasn't taking him out in to ambush.

**Well if he was pissed.**

Yeah.

**Could be deadly.**

I didn't like the whole thing. We had

- 41:00 pretty well carte blanche. I can remember one old bloke again you felt like the bloody SS. Curfew was at whatever, six o'clock at night in this town and I can remember we were moving at night and it must have been about nine o'clock, well after curfew and we had this old bloke come down on the bike. Fortunate for him he didn't carry a weapon. If he had carried a weapon he was gone
- 41:30 but he had nothing on him. You could have shot him and he was probably going out to warn the Viet

Cong and all that sort of thing but he was groveling and sniveling. I kicked him up the arse and sent him home. That style of thing, I didn't like. Not that you did much of it anyway that was the only pacification

42:00 operation that we did. The rest of the time as I say we were in the bush.

## Tape 5

- 00:31 I remember one of the things that I've often, again I suppose just being interested in history really wondering whether we were as good as say our forebears, the ANZACs [Australia and New Zealand Army Corps] at Gallipoli and that type of thing. You watch a movie like Gallipoli and you sort of think to yourself, "Would we have all clicked bayonets and got out of the trench and run forward? No way."
- 01:00 Then you think back to your own situations and realise that you'd done the same sort of thing in a slightly different way. One particular time I remember when the whole platoon lined out in front of a bunker system and we were just doing a full frontal attack on a bunker system. We all knew we were fully exposed, they had fire lanes cut that they could see us
- 01:30 and we can't see them properly. They're all dug in in bunkers and that and yet you lined out to attack the bunker system. So in some respects it's no damn different than almost World War I trench stuff. I can remember we were all nervous, it's going to happen. We were expecting some friendlies to come up
- 02:00 on the right flank so we had to keep an eye out for them in case we shot them up. We could hear a little bit of noise and I remember the platoon commander going, "Find out if that noise on the right flank is friendly or not," and it went all the way down the line, the typical, "Find out if they're friendlies," all the way down and like
- 02:30 we're just about to launch in to this attack, I mean it's life and death stuff sort of thing. We had this big bloke Collie Laseeki, a polish guy, big bloke he was. All of a sudden at the top of his voice, Collie Laseeki yells out, "Excuse me, are you lot friendly?" and the whole assault line just
- 03:00 totally broke up with laughter. It was just so damn funny. Sort of five, what seemed to be five seconds later my 2IC Kev Mooney got blown up and very serious, he survived but they gave him his last rites and that. It sort of shows how you can go from this sort of moment of light heartedness to this sort of serious stuff. You think today
- 03:30 with the wisdom of age whether you could go through the same thing again and you think, "No bloody way." You really do have to be twenty years old, bulletproof and brainless I think to go through all that sort of thing.

### **Why had you made the decision to assault the bunker like that?**

Well there's not much else you can really do with those bunker systems. You either sit back and blow hell out of them with artillery and that sort of thing or ambush

- 04:00 the entry and exit places but if they just want to hole up in there they hole up and sooner or later you've got to winkle them out.

### **What was the outcome of attacking that bunker?**

Well we got no results out of that one. Which is often the case with bunker systems, you don't get a lot of results unless you get them in an ambush situation on their bug-out route or something. I often used to think that we were always,

- 04:30 the system sort of wanted you to keep moving and I often felt that we perhaps there was too much pressure to keep moving all the time. If we'd have hung back and just done it a little bit more cautiously we might have been able to sneak in back doors or ambush. We just seemed to be this thing, when you found a bunker system you had to dispose it then and there sort of business. It's there, that's the reason you take it out.

- 05:00 I often felt we could have slowly, slowly catch the monkey sort of thing but it wasn't the way the system operated.

### **How were those bunker systems laid out?**

As I say they always used to support each other. Most of the ones we had anything to do with hadn't been established for a long, long time. You could tell that just by the, you'd get in to certain country and you'd start seeing saplings

- 05:30 that had been cut that were about that big and they used those sorts of logs for their overhead cover and that. They used to put big sods of earth with a bit of grass growing out the top of it so that they wouldn't be showing this fresh cut timber from overhead helicopters or whatever. Usually sited near water, always in fairly heavy country and with their
- 06:00 various escape routes worked out. Depending on how long they'd been there they obviously had their



list of priorities on what had to be built first. The bunkers were usually the ones done first then things like interconnecting crawl trenches, communal kitchen set up, big cookhouses. We went in to one like that was really quite sophisticated with

06:30 almost ovens and things made out of the clay. Some with the interconnecting crawl, good sized trenches very neatly cut but most of them didn't get to that sophistication, they hadn't been there long enough.

**So you explored one of these bunker systems?**

Oh yeah.

**Can you tell me about that experience?**

One we were in

07:00 they had a well there. I can remember the blokes lowering me on a rope in case they'd cached stuff down the well. It was a pretty simple system. When I kicked that meant I'd run out of air and they pulled me up. So I was sort of going down the well head first gently feeling as I went down for anything. Then run out of air,

07:30 kick, kick, and they'd heave me back up and I'd get a few and they'd lower me back down again. Needless to say there was nothing down the well. We finished up digging up a couple of graves not for any other nasty business but just purely to see if they really were graves. I can remember they were fairly fresh and we put the shovels

08:00 through the blokes guts sort of thing when they were digging and God, you know what it's like the dead smell, you can't get rid of it. In fact the smell was so bad they had to finish up, the grave digging party had to get new gear choppered in, they had to burn their clothes, the stink was unbelievable. Bodies go off pretty quickly in the tropics.

08:30 They blow up in no time.

**Would it be uncommon to encounter dead bodies in the jungle?**

Pretty well, yeah. We buried theirs. They didn't get much of a chance to, we lost a few blokes, disappeared sort of thing but whatever happened to them I don't know. I don't mean my particular group but Australia. We always buried them. I sometimes

09:00 I've had reservations about it thinking about things like MIAs [Missing in Action] and all that sort of thing that it probably wouldn't be a bad thing just to leave them out in the open. I mean do something, cover them with a tarp or leave them in a straight line or whatever the hell but at least I think it gives closure for families and stuff like that, they know what happened. I remember

09:30 we knocked off one bloke in the middle of the bush once. It was a really strange situation. This bloke was sort of walking through and we had a brand new machine gunner who suddenly opened up, he was a reinforcement. "What's going on?" sort of thing. He said, "I'm not sure, it could have been an animal or something." I took the section

10:00 out and lined them all out and we swept through the area and there was this guy in the middle of nowhere all crumpled over. He was wearing khaki. We had another reinforcement from Kingaroy in Queensland and he said, "Oh there's a bloke in front of me." I said, "Shoot the bastard," so boom boom and then he said,

10:30 "I think he's one of ours." Nearly shitting myself I race through the bush. I remember the guy crumpled over and he had an SKS rifle across him and I was thinking out loud, the sheer relief. "It's all right, it's an SKS," and I remember Ashley, the machine gunner afterwards saying to me, "I had no idea what an SKS was but just the sound of your voice saying

11:00 'It's all right, it's an SKS', knew that it wasn't one of ours." We buried him in the middle of the bush. He disappeared off the planet. His family will never, ever know what happened to him. I sometimes wonder whether you shouldn't leave them.

**You think that might be an explanation for some of our MIAs?**

What that they were buried, yeah they were probably buried and then it's very hard to take someone back

11:30 to that spot. It is in the short term.

**What other unusual experiences did you have in the bush?**

Saw one deer while I was over there and that was right at the beginning. I damn near dropped dead of shock. I think it was lying off in the tall grass and we were moving through single file sort of thing behind each other with a reasonable gap between and then all of a sudden

12:00 this thing got startled and it sort of jumped the way it was facing, woke up and jumped and sort of leapt straight between me and the guy in front. A reasonable sort of distance but by the same token, God, my heart just about came up through my mouth. What the hell was this? Snakes, bugger all snakes. We had

a tracker dog with us once who came across a massive python.

12:30 The dog went ballistic. The dog handler shot the snake. I don't know whether it was venomous or not. Most of those pythons aren't but it was huge. I killed a bamboo crate snake, a small one. I can't say there was really any wildlife there in the true sense of the word. The worst things are those chomper ant things.

13:00 They used to pull the leaves together and make the nests and you'd see your forward scout and you can be in the most serious of situations but if you brush those or knock them and they fall on you they bite the living daylights out of you and everyone that gets hit by these things just goes totally non tactical. Your rifle will go in one area, your big pack in another

13:30 and you'll jump and carry on and it wouldn't matter if the whole enemy army was out there. These bloody chomper ants really got stuck in to you.

**Were they a common threat?**

There was quite a few of them round, yeah.

**Any other nasties like those?**

No, not really. There was some funny big red type scorpions that were on one of the fire stone trails. One of those blokes got bitten by one of those and his arm

14:00 swelled up quite a bit but really the wildlife wasn't worth talking about. I think if you were a bird watcher or something like that you'd go stir crazy in between seeing birds. There really wasn't much. Water buffalo.

**What about diseases in the jungle?**

No, just the normal crotch rots and foot rots or tinea and that sort of thing. That's the stuff you were

14:30 trying to sort of because you don't shower so you're out there for weeks especially in the hot season where you're preserving your water and all that. Although you try to keep yourself as clean as you possibly could it doesn't matter, the end of six weeks you are on the nose.

**What kind of personal hygiene measures did you take?**

Just as I say,

15:00 whatever you could, you were conscious of it but apart from giving yourself a doby whenever you could find a creek of whatever, that's it really.

**What about having to do ablutions and stuff?**

That was just dig a hole. That was sort of always outside the perimeter sort of business

15:30 in front of your machine gun and make sure that you went back in to the perimeter the same way you went out so you didn't get shot by your blokes. Even going to the loo was a bit of a drama. There's been incidents of blokes being shot by their own blokes because they get disoriented outside their own perimeter and suddenly, where the hell am I.

**Did you ever have any of those incidents**

16:00 **occur near to you?**

No, I had a good mate of mine who got left behind once. He was a reinforcement to one of the platoons and he went out on a listening post and thought, "It's awfully bloody quiet back there," and decided he'd better go back in and found they'd all packed up and taken off, he was the only bloke there. So he had to follow up in the general area that he though they'd gone

16:30 and finally luckily came upon the tail end Charlie of the platoon. In some respects he's lucky he wasn't shot there. He actually got himself in to a bit of strife because he went up and butt stroked the sergeant with his rifle for leaving him behind and threatened to kill him and finished up doing a bit of time in the can down at Vung Tau over that.

**Were there many incidents of guys being put in the can?**

No.

17:00 It's like drugs. You know how today everyone knows, they talk about mull and all this sort of stuff. I don't even know what it was called. I can't say, we unquestionably called it such and such, I just don't know. None of the blokes in my platoon were on anything, nothing at all. In fact, as a section commander

17:30 and I was a pretty easy going person but as a section commander I just wouldn't have tolerated it. It's my safety, it's my life, I'm not having some hop head or whatever the hell you want to call it going around the bush. I think any drug taking is probably it might be a bit unfair again but I'd say you'd find it more combined to the pogos, the more sedate types of jobs, not much happening,

18:00 the sheer boredom of whatever it is they're doing. They might do a bit of experimentation. I've spoken to numerous guys, infantry blokes in the bush and they said they had no incidents of it at all.

**So you just enjoyed your beer.**

Yeah, beer was our sort of thing.

**You mentioned smell in the bush before, was it safe to light up the smoke?**

Well you could say no.

18:30 Ostensibly you'd say no but I think it was such an accepted thing that you did it. I think of all the contacts in fact without doubt all the contacts that we had in Vietnam I think it's safe to say we initiated every one of them so I don't think we were caught with our pants down, like they

19:00 sprung us because of our sloppiness, I'm talking about my platoon anyway. So yeah, probably interesting too one of the things I always remember and I say to young blokes, I haven't got much to contribute because wars change and that but the one thing I'll always point out is that when you're training in Australia and you come in to a

19:30 situation and platoon commander decides this is where we'll put an ambush in. Well the way everyone goes about it in training sometimes would suggest that you've got all day to get that ambush set up. I don't like this position, I'll shift to this spot and all this. The reality of it is that it doesn't happen like that in real time. I think that

20:00 I added it up once. There was at least close to a dozen times that within literally minutes of us finding fresh sign, whether that be footprints on a track or whatever it might be but within minutes of finding fresh sign we were in contact which meant that you just literally don't have all day. If you find fresh sign

20:30 you've got to accept that within seconds some times you're going to be shooting at someone.

**What kind of signs did you look for?**

Well the obvious ones are the footprints on the track. I can remember once where we were very, very light on in the platoon. I think the platoon commander was missing, the sergeant was missing and it was me. I think

21:00 they sort of thought, "Oh Christ we can't have Nasho Corporal Burridge pushing the platoon around," so they brought in the battalion 2IC to run it, Captain Britten his name was. Terrific bloke but he wasn't a combat soldier in the true sense of the word because it wasn't his job, wasn't his role but he became the platoon commander for that particular time.

21:30 They loaded the platoon up, tried to give it a few extra blokes. They gave us the tracker dog and his handler and also a visual tracker. Well you're looking at the last of the cynics, I thought, "Visual bloody tracker." My forward scout's nose was way over here because I had a brilliant forward scout and all of a sudden we're using this visual tracker. Oh yeah.

22:00 I remember we came down this bit of a hill once and we came across this track and visual tracker pulled us up. I came up, "What's going on?" and he said, "I reckon two blokes walked past here less than two minutes ago." I'm going, "Oh yeah," and he said, "Trust me." So I pulled the platoon up.

22:30 Anyway he took off following the track and I was covering him. He was head down arse up and I was sort of behind him sort of following him. We've got the platoon strung down the hill coming down and I didn't like the way the track bent and started to come up the side on the flank of the platoon. I thought, "If we're not bloody careful," it wouldn't have been so bad if it had continued away from the platoon but to come up on their flank,

23:00 "We're going to get some trigger-happy bloke in our own platoon that's going to open up on us." I just pulled him up and said back out and all of a sudden I suppose about fifty metres in front there's and the gun opened up and there was a bit of yelling and screaming. Next minute there was two very heavy blood trails and we decided we had the tracker dog with us so we followed up

23:30 one particular blood trail and anyway we got him. The dog was unbelievable. The dog followed it and then finished up, "he's there, he's around the other side of the rock," he was really quite a good dog. We got him but that sort of changed my opinion a little bit on some of the abilities of these trackers. I found out later that he'd tracked some

24:00 little kid I think across some golf course or something in Queensland and found him. It was one of those little kid missing stories. So I sort of had to back off a bit over the visual tracking thing. But you do get to read signs, you really don't have to be specialty trained and that. The longer you've been in the bush the more you get to read signs. You

24:30 spot things like their animal traps that they make for trapping animals, little animals in the bush. As I've mentioned the cutting off of things and all those sorts of obvious sorts of things. The smells, the type of country you move through, there's a million different. Your sixth sense really works quite well, you pick up on much, much more. Of course you get

- 25:00 street wise and you become quite good by the end of the tour then it's sort of all over. We had one particular incident very close to the end of the tour where we come across this little staging camp. There was a couple of bunches of bananas on the side of the ground. I thought,
- 25:30 "I'll have a bloody banana," but I knelt down first and just checked around it. What they'd done was they'd tied the hand grenade to the bottom bunch of the bananas, straightened the pin on it and attached the pin to the top bunch. So when you lifted up the thing you actually pulled the pin out of the hand grenade. Because I hadn't disrupted them properly or anything I yelled out grenade and flat and nothing happened but nevertheless spotted the booby trap before it, you know.
- 26:00 They used to do it with their sacks and that too. We never experienced that, we were told about it. They would sew the pin of a hand grenade to the inside of a sack, straighten the pin and all the rest of it so when you tipped the contents of the sack out you actually tipped the hand grenade out leaving the pin behind. It's a similar sort of principle. Had I been
- 26:30 day one in the tour I might have fallen for it but I was just that much more cautious by the end of the tour. Same as I think it was the last contact we had in Vietnam we knocked two blokes off, my section and we'd sort of deployed the section and went up to disarm the bodies and
- 27:00 my platoon commander had walked down by then and when he pulled his AK47 rifle off he had the sling through his arm like that and the blokes arm went out and a hand grenade rolled out. I know Johnny Russell and I just looked at it and yelled grenade and threw ourselves and boom, up she went. I got a backload of very small shrapnel and
- 27:30 John I think got a couple of little bits and that but the body had taken most of the blast. Again if that had been day one of the tour you probably would have been standing there going, "Oh, there's a grenade." End of the tour you're too bloody smart for that sort of thing. You get much more street wise.

#### **Were the trails booby trapped in the jungle?**

Well they may have been but we never really ran in to them. Don't forget it's a double-edged sword

- 28:00 too a lot of this booby trapping. I know an experience happened and one can only assume it was booby trapping backfiring, a good mate of mine Duncan Warren who was with the Governor General's company in Vietnam, with 8RAR, Michael Jeffery's company and Duncan was one of the platoon commanders and he tells me the story that they were sitting there in harbour and they heard this explosion.
- 28:30 He thought, "Christ, that's a bit close for mortars coming in." So he rang up and said, "Check fire, you're a bit close," and they said, "We'll look in to it," and then came back and said "No one's firing," and then boom up it went again. He rang back and said, "Well someone's bloody firing, check fire." They said, "Definitely no," and then all of a sudden his machine gun opened up and
- 29:00 knocked a couple of blokes off and what had happened was that they'd walked through their own booby traps and the explosions were their own booby traps. They'd regrouped but where they regrouped was right in front of Duncan's machine gun so they paid the penalty for that. You can set booby traps up around but you've always got to remember that you're likely to have to come through the same area or friendly forces might have to come through the same area too.
- 29:30 I don't think it was quite as indiscriminate as people would have you believe.

#### **So nothing like the in the move The Green Berets as you pointed out earlier?**

I can't remember much about the booby traps in the The Green Berets.

#### **Of the description you gave earlier.**

With those bloody arrows flying and big things with sharp, no we never ran in to any of that sort of stuff. Again, different countries, different provinces

- 30:00 and that might have experienced that but I can't say we ever did.

#### **Were there any decisions that you made that developed into maybe mistakes that you would have done differently while you were in the bush?**

You often think of things and say if you had it all over again would you have gone that way. I can remember this scout and I were walking through, I was looking over his shoulder

- 30:30 and we'd just hit this bit of sort of tall grass stuff and I could see them walking towards us on the same axis as us. He saw them, I say them and we all bobbed down and then we all sort of lined up. I said, "What we'll do is we'll give these blokes a candid camera from about a few metres, let them get right on top of us." You could hear them coming, looked up a bit, yeah.
- 31:00 So you know, everyone's rearing to go as these blokes are coming towards you and then all of a sudden they turned off. As it turned out they were walking on a track, we didn't know, it just happened to be on the axis that they were moving and the track turned off. So by the time we let fly it was all over red

rover, they were gone. Had we sort of decided not to do that close-quarters stuff and get stuck in to them from a distance

- 31:30 we probably would have had a result. So it was sort of a case of almost good soldiering gone bad sort of thing. We didn't get a result. There's odd things like that.

**Were there any mistakes or accidents that made you angry at all?**

No, not really. It was all pretty good. All in all I was pretty pleased

- 32:00 with the battalion that I went with. I reckon it was a great battalion. Genghis Khan was our CO and he was a brilliant commanding officer. I like my company commander Murray Blake.

**What can you tell me about Genghis Khan?**

He was just one of those guys that had a presence about him. He had a reputation because he was a

- 32:30 Korean War veteran, platoon commander in the Korean War so he was a sharp-end soldier. He lost a lung in Korea but despite that he went on to be something like the heavyweight boxing champion in the army. He went to America and topped some jungle marine something or other and all this with one lung. He was hard but fair and a great speaker.

- 33:00 He was one of those blokes that could really hold everyone's attention. Every now and again he still speaks now at various things. He's just got that presence about him. I went to a battalion reunion at Randwick Racecourse I think it was about five years after we got back from Vietnam and I can remember when Genghis came in,

- 33:30 the boys gave him a huge roar. I was just sort of sitting back watching and watching the attitude towards and it reminded me a little bit of that scene in the Odessa File where the SS general came in and all the former SS blokes were all there going ra-ra-ra and all this sort of business. It was a similar sort of thing. I just sort of sensed without being corny

- 34:00 that had Genghis sort of said, "Well boys as you know, it's all gone to shit in Canberra and I've taken the liberty of organising the trucks and there's full kit on it and all that and I'd really appreciate it if you could all join me but we've got to go down and actually take Canberra out." There would have been the odd bloke who said, "Oh Christ, we can't do that, I'm married," or something. I think almost to a man

- 34:30 they would have got on the trucks and gone down. He was that sort of leader. He was fantastic, absolutely brilliant. When you've got that sort of a bloke as your CO I think you're halfway there.

**So these men are pretty rare?**

They are yeah. We'd have a contact and when it's all over and that he'd invariably try and chopper himself in on one of those little Bell helicopters and land and come in and have a brew with you and have a chat

- 35:00 about the contact and all that sort of thing. He took serious interest in what was going on and he really made you feel you're in a top battalion.

**What about some of the other commanding officers?**

Well he was it for me. He was my battalion commander so I never had to change or anything like that. I don't think I've ever heard

- 35:30 any of my mates who are in any other battalions speak with the same sort of endearment towards their COs. I'm not saying they dislike them but I don't think they'd put them on the same pedestal. I think he was just outstanding. We had a very good company commander in Murray Blake. He finished up a general and

- 36:00 I suppose, you've got to be a bit careful because everyone's got a job and that but there's always a couple of companies that seemed to do better than other companies. That's pretty true of everything in life.

**Was there much rivalry?**

There was rivalry between the companies. The two probably best companies in 5RAR were A Company and D Company. There was always rivalry between those two.

**How was the rivalry shown?**

- 36:30 More or less it was I suppose it sounds terrible to put it this way but they were always chasing the kill tallies and the contacts and the rest of it. We performed better than you, we got more on this op than you did and all this sort of thing.

**Would that come down to one on one's between the company members?**

No, there was never any blues or anything. The occasional rugby match or something that might be played

- 37:00 and it might be played a bit tough or something but it never went to that extreme. What you usually find is that your battalion commander wants your battalion to look good so he picks his best companies for the hairiest situations and that filters down all the way through. So you find that the company commander wants the company to do well so he usually throws the best platoon he's got in to the worst scenario
- 37:30 and then that gets down to the best section they've got. So it's not surprising that some particular groups perhaps saw a fair bit more than others because of the situations that they were put in.
- So you'd say it was a healthy rivalry?**
- Healthy rivalry, yeah.
- What's it like trying to make the transition from being in the bush to coming back to the perimeter of Nui Dat?**
- 38:00 It was great. It wasn't any big deal. Suddenly to be able to get in there in that shower was the brilliant thing. A lot of blokes would probably say it was the grog but for me it was the shower. Just to be able to get under the blinking shower and get yourself clean.
- Followed by a grog?**
- Followed by a grog, yeah. So you get stuck in to it at the boozier. Then probably you'd
- 38:30 depending on obviously the whole battalion wouldn't go at once they'd sort of rotate the companies two at a time but eventually you'd finish up down at Vung Tau and you'd go and stay at the Peter Badcoe club down there.
- What was that like?**
- Pretty sterile, boring sort of thing. Very few people spent much time at the actual Badcoe Club. They'd rather be down at the bars
- 39:00 and that down town.
- What was down town like?**
- Downtown was absolute sleaze as you can probably imagine. Everyone would just finish up getting full and stuff like that. Occasionally though you'd use the beach there. They did have some surf boards and stuff there not that there was much to surf on but you could have a paddle around and the salt water was quite good for cleaning you up
- 39:30 a bit too. Salt water's good for all your crotch rashes and things like that.
- So was the beach at Vung Tau a good substitute for Cottesloe?**
- No, no. I'd rather be back at Cottesloe.
- Was there much strife happening down town in Vung Tau?**
- No. They used to say, I don't know what truth there is in it, they used to say the Viet Cong would go down there on R&C [Rest in Country]
- 40:00 as well so there was a bit of live and let live carry on there. We never even carried a weapon around. We just wore our civvies. Which really when you think about it. We were in a bloody war zone and here you are walking around in civvies without any weapon but it was just sort of a bit of a
- 40:30 unwritten rule. Sort of a no go. There were loads of American military police and the odd Australian military police that went around keeping you in check. The blokes would play up occasionally and get themselves in to strife. I remember one particular time when we chucked CS gas [tear gas] in one of the bars, gassed the whole bloody bar out.
- 41:00 We thought it was brilliant fun. We all finished up, the company back in bed and then all of a sudden we got kicked out. I don't know what time it was, midnight or two o'clock in the morning or something. We all got kicked out of bed by the Australian MPs that were trying to get to the bottom of this. They had the whole company on parade and eventually someone got the OC up, Major Blake
- 41:30 and he came down and in front of the whole company he really reefed it up these MPs. The whole company, "Yeah, good on ya sir, give it to him," this sort of business. "How dare you get my company out of bed," and all this sort of business. "Call me sir corporal," or sergeant or whatever. All this sort of stuff. We thought it was terrific. Sent him packing,
- 42:00 tail between the legs.

00:33 **We were just going to ask you what you thought of the Americans.**

Well I've got mixed feelings about the Americans from the point of view that I think they've often been badly maligned. I think their best are as good as anyone. They're professional, very good at it. Like I said,

01:00 we'd prefer to have American dust-off pilots come in than our own Australian dust-off pilots so that says something. Probably a pretty obvious statement but I always feel that their big thing is quantity not quality. They just seem to pour the man power through. We had a couple of incidents I suppose where I think one particular time we'd come in and we were

01:30 taking over from some Americans. I don't know where the devil we were but we'd come in and their platoon was still in situation and they'd just been re supplied literally that morning despite the fact that they were being lifted out at lunchtime. So they had excess of everything. Of course we went through them like bower birds and pinched everything but we had a strict policy

02:00 on anything that we didn't use or wouldn't carry and that's the old bash and burn thing. Leave nothing behind where the enemy can make use of it. Their lines were appalling. When I say lines I'm talking about where they were in the bush. Walk over there and there's a tin of this and a tin of that. They just, it's like they opened the box and went, "No, I don't want that." You could

02:30 damn near feed a battalion on what they'd just chucked, we had to finish up cleaning the area up. There was another time that we arrived and it was the American mob with the horses head, the Cavalry mob and we arrived at this particular spot and they said, "Oh 11 Platoon could

03:00 you slip up and give these Yanks a hand, they've got themselves in the shit." So we said yes so we'd all jumped on these carriers and went screaming up past what seemed to be a never ending line of armoured personnel carriers in the bush. One after another after another. They were in some form of blocking force and we got up near that area and I don't want to tell a story a little bit like the

03:30 old standard transistor radio in your ear story that everyone tells but this was a case when we arrived I was amazed that these guys here they were on an operational situation, they had deck chairs up on the tops of their APCs [Armoured Personnel Carriers], they had umbrellas up, the whole lot. We arrived there and when the bloke found out that we didn't have a platoon commander with us then, the sergeant was running,

04:00 there almost seemed to be like, "Oh Christ, only a sergeant," sort of thing, "Where's the officer?" So, "Where's your foot patrol that's in strife?" "Oh somewhere out there, man." In that general sort of direction, very laid back. These carriers were such that they'd pulled up and so many blokes jumped off each carrier and then they formed the squad and they did the foot patrol. We went off looking for them and we eventually found them.

04:30 They just weren't properly attired for the bush. We always had sleeves buttoned up so you don't get scratched and mosquitoes and you don't show bare arm either for camouflage type reasons. These guys were out there in singlets, the whole thing was a rock show. We found out that the enemy had been

05:00 sort of been harassing them so we asked them to look after our big packs. They weren't too thrilled about that but we all dumped our big packs and we went and hunted the enemy off. We didn't get a result or anything but they had those little American, but then the contradiction is the guts of the little American helicopter pilots that used to fly those little Coyote helicopters, like tadpoles. He'd go along

05:30 and almost purposely set himself up as a target until the enemy couldn't resist so he'd have to take a shot and as soon as the helicopter pilot sensed that he was being shot at he'd dump smoke. Circling way to blazes up the top would be the forerunners of these Apaches, the Cobras, which were like sharks, long sleek things which were just gun platforms

06:00 which would just go in and just annihilate the area. That was what was going on. So you've got that sort of gutsy professionalism at that level and then you've got this squad of no hopers that were looking after our big packs. I wasn't too impressed with that sort of situation and someone needed to clean their act up a bit. The other time

06:30 we went on a land clearing protection thing. They were land clearing in Vietnam in two ways One was the Agent Orange [herbicide used as a defoliant] and the other one was with the bulldozers. They just flattened big patchwork quilts of jungle. It renders it almost innocuous, you can't walk through it, you've almost got to climb over everything to get through it. So these bulldozers were just going out and pushing it.

07:00 It was a really foul place. It was mud everywhere, absolutely everywhere. I remember we couldn't dig in properly because it was too wet. They had to bring these half hoop galvanised iron, we had to put all the sand bags over the top. I can remember where I was sleeping I had a creek running through it. It was the most revolting place I think I've ever slept in I mean it's almost,

07:30 I got photos of it and you could almost get workers compensation for being forced to sleep in this stuff. It was shocking. I can remember what would happen would be that under the old system and one of the senior Americans was telling me he thought the Australians were wonderful. He told me, "Since you've

been here we haven't

- 08:00 had any casualties or anything," and I said, "Well you'd hope you wouldn't," and this sort of thing. What happened was they'd send a protection party out forward of the bulldozers and they would hutchie up and watch for bad guys while the bulldozers did their thing but by lunchtime the bulldozers would have passed the protection party but it wouldn't dawn on them that they'd better move out a bit further if you know
- 08:30 what I mean. They became too static in their deployment. The bulldozers would go and then all of a sudden old Neville Nog would step out of the bush with an RPG and go whoomper and hit one of the bulldozers and blow it up and then bugger off. We, when we were there, patrolled the whole time forward and we ambushed out the front and we got ourselves involved in various things and we always kept
- 09:00 well ahead of bulldozers and everything and they never took any casualties during that particular time. I thought really Blind Freddy would know that the way they were operating was not the way to go. I'll always remember, we used to do what's known as clearing patrols on last lights, we'd go out and search the place or we'd put ambushes out or whatever the hell we'd do. Their idea of making a perimeter safe
- 09:30 and you could almost set your clock on it. I think it was five o'clock or something every night and the first time it happened to me because I'd never experienced it, I just about fell over in the mud sort of thing with sheer shock was the whole perimeter opened up and that's what they do, they have a yippee shoot. At five o'clock on the dot they open up on everything that is outside the perimeter. God help it if you were a
- 10:00 patrol they'd forgotten about. Mind you if you were switched on you'd say, "Right everyone goes to ground at five o'clock." It seemed a very sloppy type of a way to operate and I suppose The Big Red One [American 1st Infantry Division] took over from us in the hartsik [?] area.
- 10:30 That was the other time we ran in to them. They were very much the old, love, peace, smokes in the band round the helmet. Very non-professional, cowboys really I think.

**Do you think it was an education thing, were they the lowest**

11:00 **common denominator?**

I don't know because in fairness we never really got to, they were always as friendly as hell towards us. The naivety was unbelievable. I came home on R&R, I was one of only two Australians on the plane, all the rest were Americans and they had the Riot Act read to them in terms of behaving themselves in Australia for the image thing. They did a thorough search on them for drugs and all sorts of things, from hand

- 11:30 luggage to complete pat downs, they patted them down. Make sure they weren't bringing anything in to Australia that was going to bring their country in to disrepute. But we had to stay at Camp Alpha I think it's called at Ton San Nhut Airport and we stayed, an American sort of set up and they're as friendly as hell. They're all good blokes but the naivety,
- 12:00 like I reckon seventy five, eighty per cent of them had no idea what nationality I was, just totally mystified. I was wearing a slouch hat. The other bloke that came home with me, Dick Klusinak on R&R was wearing a sandy beret because he was SAS. That probably didn't mean a great deal to them because they wear berets and that amongst that so they probably just thought he but it was the slouch hat, they didn't know what it was
- 12:30 so they didn't know what country or anything. I spent my whole life telling them that I was Australian and Australia did have an involvement in Vietnam. They just hadn't run in to us at all. I suppose it depends what province you come from. They were fairly naïve. Other things, I was talking to them and they were telling me about the way they operate and they were telling me, I don't know how it ever came up but I'll always remember it and I'm not saying that
- 13:00 every unit was the same but the particular unit that this bloke was in and it was an infantry unit was they used to come in from wherever it was and they'd hand their weapon in. There was no guarantee they got the same weapon back when they drew their weapons out. So if you're a lazy cleaner of weapons or something, a real slug or something when it comes to cleaning a weapon, I might get your weapon and I'm fastidious and you'll get mine. Not to mention that the weapons aren't even
- 13:30 zeroed in for your eye or my eye too. So I found that a little bit of a strange one. Just talking to them I found that they weren't cross trained much either. Like for instance if you were trained on a particular type of weapon you were expected to live by it and die by it and if all of a sudden you were suddenly
- 14:00 thrust in to a situation where you might have to be on the machine gun, I just sensed that there's a fair old chance you mightn't know how to operate that machine gun, you hadn't progressed to that level if you know what I mean. But I'm generalising here and I'm sure a couple of Americans listening to the conversation would say that's absolute crap but it's what I personally experienced talking to some of them and I was a bit amazed. That's why I think there was this



14:30 quantity, not quality attitude about the whole, everything to do with the Americans. They just threw everything in. They could have got the job done with half the number of people just as long as they'd put a bit more effort in to the types of guys they'd send.

**Do you think that they suffered casualties for the simple reason that they weren't trained as well?**

I think so, yeah and I think there was also, my understanding is that

15:00 we cycled our units through, 5th Battalion would go over and 5th Battalion would come back and sure we'd get reinforcement and sometimes reinforcements with not enough time in Vietnam would have to actually stay behind when the battalion came home and actually go and reinforce one of the other battalions. That would have been really hard for those guys because they'd sort of, even though it might have only been four months but they still get a bit of a bonding

15:30 with you and then all of a sudden to sort of say, "Well see you later boys," as you go back to Australia and they then have to go to another battalion but my understanding with the Americans is that the units didn't come home, the units stayed there. So you had this constant flow of people through the units all the time. I don't know that they necessarily got the same opportunity to bond.

16:00 It's just, "Here's another bloody bunch of recruits coming in. By the end of the month half of them will be dead anyway," that sort of attitude. Whereas if they'd trained up together, gone as a unit. You're always going to get reos, that's unavoidable but not quite the way the American system of reinforcements went

16:30 by just leaving the unit in Vietnam.

**Did they have a black market running at all?**

We didn't run in to that. I think that was a pogo thing. They're the ones that had all the perks and the larks and the rest. Again, it was because they had the opportunity.

**Time on their hands?**

Yeah, time on their hands. And they were the ones that did the doby wash, they used to send

17:00 all the clothes off to Baria I think it was where they were all washed by the civilians down there. They'd wash thousands of sets of greens and that sort of thing. Someone had to take the stuff down there and there'd be all sorts of deals and stuff that's going on. The Nogs were particularly keen on Salem cigarettes, that's a menthol type cigarette like an Alpine cigarette. That was gold

17:30 in Vietnam. You get a carton of Salem, you could really do some bargaining with that. But there really wasn't much. There might have been the odd thing that was purchased at the PX because some local wanted it but no, we never really had much experience. It wasn't like, I reckon that I'd have been the worst bastard in the world if I'd have been

18:00 in Europe at the end of World War II. To be able to, I shouldn't put it this way but to be able to loot some of those rich grand old places that those diggers, not diggers but GIs [US General Infantry soldiers] and that would have been going through in Europe, you can imagine. Bombed out grand places with all sorts of amazing bits and pieces. Even the enemy,

18:30 the German uniforms and the dress daggers and their swords and stuff like that was suburb quality. I know, I've dealt the stuff all my life.

**You just wish you could have got your hands on it back then.**

Yeah, well of course, what did I bring back from Vietnam. I was probably the only bloke in the platoon who brought back two NVA pith helmets which are the most boring bloody things you've ever seen. I bought back a couple of Viet Cong

19:00 belt buckles with stars on them, a couple of the little bunker bottles that they had, like a little glass bottle with a bullet and a wick going through it, were their oil lamps for when they were underground. Webbing for the AK47 rifle. I got an AK47 back that had to be rendered innocuous.

19:30 It was nothing because they had nothing. There's nothing salubrious about a pair of black pyjamas. Although that was a bit of a myth, you didn't catch too many in black pyjamas. Most blokes we fought had more normal green type attire. Green shirts and stuff like that. We got a few in black pyjamas. There was nothing glamorous

20:00 like the old German uniforms, World War II. There wasn't even a German tin helmet that you could bring home. It was a pretty boring place to loot if you want to use that word, or souvenir.

**You can certainly say the Germans knew how to dress.**

Yeah.

**Very ominous.**

There really wasn't much in Vietnam. I didn't really even see any,

- 20:30 like if you were in Turkey you might bring back a Turkish rug or a meerscham pipe or something but I didn't really see anything that I'd say, "Hey this is their traditional something or other." Cloisonne vases or something, "I've got to bring some of those home." I really didn't see anything that really grabbed me.

**You mentioned before that you'd go off and make a muck**

- 21:00 **of Vung Tau, what was the prostitution like, was that fairly rife?**

Yeah, it was heavy. It was everywhere. It was in every bar. That was life.

**What were you told about VD [venereal disease]?**

We got lectures on it all the time.

**All the time?**

Well, when I say all the time, that's probably not quite true but we got lectures

- 21:30 on it, yeah. They told us and I'm quite sure it was a ploy, they told us just before we were due to come home or whatever it was and they said, "Oh well, don't worry, there'll be one more R&C down to Vung Tau before you go back," and of course everyone thought they'd be going down on R&C on this particular day, well it never

- 22:00 happened and I've got a sneaking feeling that was done on purpose to make sure that everyone that got on that boat was a clean skin if you know what I mean. I think they did it on purpose.

**Bringing it back home?**

Yeah, not that I, well there was all sorts of myths about these various diseases and things. There was even one that was always rife that they sent the really bad cases to this island

- 22:30 somewhere never to be allowed off the island, all this sort of stuff. I think it was just standard sort of VD. Technically I don't know if it was as bad as what everyone sort of made it out. You could arguably say that all the clients were clean so I don't know where they'd get it unless it was from their own locals and then pass it on.

- 23:00 I don't think there was a case of VD, oh yeah, I think there was one in the platoon. Might have been one but I don't think it was quite as rife as what people would have you believe.

**That's pretty low.**

Yeah, but understandable if every soldier is clean so where did the girls get it from? I don't know. Unless they're picking it up from their local people. You could arguably say

- 23:30 that just about every soldier that ever went in the country would have been clean. So that was that.

**When you weren't on R&C and had free time what would you do inside the camp?**

Wash, a bit of washing perhaps. Really nothing. We really didn't have much free time, that's the truth of the matter. It was a sort of

- 24:00 getting yourself ready for the next push out the bush again bar the couple of days down at Vungers [Vung Tau]. Maybe a range shoot outside the wire, you'd go outside the wire and zero your weapon or try something new out or whatever that they might have, fire the M72 rockets, could be anything

- 24:30 but there wasn't a lot of time for much. At night time they'd have the old movies, they had the outdoor movie theatres up there and they were all over the place. We had one on the hill, watched the movies. Every battalion had the movies. They were reasonable films that used to come through all the time.

**Were they reasonably up to date?**

Yeah, I think so from memory. So they had

- 25:00 those sorts of movies. There was a bit of Super 8 stuff that was shot around the place. I took a bit of Super 8. Slides were the go, everyone was colour slides as opposed to prints. Reel to reel and what's his name, the song Galveston,

- 25:30 Glen Campbell. He was sort of one of the main musos [musicians] around that sort of era.

**Did everybody have their own music making machine?**

Yeah. I've never seen so many reel to reels. The thing about reel to reels you'd swear to God you were in some sort of huge production area or somewhere because wherever you went there were these bloody reel to reels. Because the machines are so big

- 26:00 and the lights and all that sort of thing it's sort of big reels going around. Today you get better quality

out of a thing that by that. Sony and Akai were the big, Akai was probably the big one.

**Would that be how you did letters back home, on the reel to reel?**

No, most people wrote letters.

26:30 I think the hardest thing is to get letters that were kept by blokes up there. Mum always thinks you'll get killed so she'll save every letter that you've ever written so I think your average household is chockablock full of letters back from Vietnam but most of the guys up there would read the letters or re read the letters and once they read them they'd burn them. Particularly because we used to get them delivered out in the bush too.

**How would they be delivered?**

When they bought rations out and that they'd bring the mail. The sergeant would get the kid and

27:00 go round and throw all the letters out. You'd read it so many times and burn it. It's getting letters that were sent in to Vietnam as opposed to sent out that's the hard one if you're a collector.

**You've just mentioned rations, what sort of rations were you on?**

They varied a little bit but usually it was a combination of American and Australian. Half Australian, half American.

27:30 I can't really say which one I preferred, they both had their good points. I suppose when it all boils down that my favourite tucker out of the ration packs would have been things like tropical fruit salad which was American and pound cake which was American, in a little tin but we never got that in our rations. Probably

28:00 it varied. We got dehydrated rations occasionally where we added water and some of those were quite good, the fish and butter was quite good. You got them in like an Alfoil satchet and you just tear the top and put water in it and just cook it over your hexi stove [hexamine solid fuel stove]. It would bulk out. I know it sounds off but it wasn't bad tucker.

28:30 **So you had powdered butter?**

Well it was in with the fish.

**Just add water to your fish?**

Yeah, dehydrated.

**Sounds terrible.**

No, it wasn't bad. They were the light weight, I think some people call them lurp packs [lurp = LRP, long-range patrols] or something, long-range packs for the sneaky boys sort of thing.

29:00 **Was getting mail important to you?**

Mail was very, very important.

**Why's that?**

It just made you feel part of it. The other thing that was interesting was it was the same time Perth as it was in Vietnam so I found that every now and then I'd be on the gun picket or something like that and I'd think, "Oh Jesus, all my mates are on the grog, pulling all the birds down at the

29:30 Highway Hotel or something on a Saturday night, same time, right now," this sort of thing. Not that you lost copious quantities of sleep over it but every now and again if you're have a bit of an off day. You'd have off days. It was a funny sort of thing. Some times you'd be absolutely busting to have a blue and you'd set up an ambush, "Come on, come on"

30:00 and other days you just wouldn't want to know about it for whatever reason, having an off day.

**Would that happen within your platoon or would it just happen as?**

Individuals I think more than anything. But would I have missed it? No, not for quids. I've got some of the best friendships that you could ever, ever make and they come from all walks of life and it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter where I go in Australia

30:30 I've got a bed and vice versa. They've got one in WA.

**The commonality of experience.**

Yeah. It floats above everything else, whatever else it is that you've been through.

**Was it difficult to get back out on patrol after you've had a really big bust up, like your mate had got shot through the leg and after seeing something like that?**

No, you just did it. You just became a machine really.

- 31:00 You just did it. We had a long tour. Most tours were twelve months, ours was thirteen. I've got to be very careful with what I say with this one and again if they were all sitting around they'd say, "Too bloody right you've got to be," but you can only tell it as you find it. But as a general rule the
- 31:30 second tour people that we had weren't much chop. It was as though they'd done their tour of Vietnam, they trained us through in Australia prior to going back for a second tour and then they got over there and it was almost like, perhaps the penny had dropped and they'd sort of said, "What the bloody hell am I doing back here, I've already been through this."
- 32:00 That's why I sort of perhaps alluded to it earlier when I said we had a shake out that we really had to have and we got all the new reos in and it was then that the platoon really started to click together and people found their niche and away we went. Don't get me wrong, we had some absolutely cracking second tour blokes, very good blokes. In fact we had three of them
- 32:30 killed too, second tour blokes, Georgie Gilbert, Kennedy and Smith, Bernie Smith. They were all superb soldiers. People say they only speak well of the dead but I'm not doing that, these guys were really, really good and I think had they survived and they'd have gone right through the tour
- 33:00 we wouldn't have had a problem with those but with other second tour people it was just a case of, "No, what am I doing here, especially with this bunch. The real bunch was the bunch I went with before." I don't know how I would have gone on a second tour with a whole heap of new people. Having to sort of break them all in and settle down with them,
- 33:30 whether you wouldn't have sat there going, "God, what am I bloody doing here?"

**Did you ever talk to the second tour guys about that at all, that they might be a bit more tolerant?**

I do a bit now, yeah. They acknowledged it. They basically told me that "Yeah, we'd had it. We had to actually go back and then go bush to suddenly realise hey we shouldn't really be here, we've had it." It was almost like

- 34:00 they'd never left the place. So they got tired much more quickly. A lot of them finished up in non combatant roles where they were required to pull the pin after a while. I don't know how much longer, I take my hat off to some of these guys that have experienced war for year in, year out. The only thing is that I don't know that it was necessarily
- 34:30 as intense. I've read a lot of things that implied that our stuff was pretty intense. Even in World War II you had situations where you get huge breaks. Although the war was going on somewhere but you have these huge breaks between conflicts before you're at it again. Even going back to the Napoleonic Wars, where they have like Waterloo and so on, there's months and months
- 35:00 of just foot slogging and all that before you have this massive pitched battle but that's it for the day.

**It sounds like you were pretty full on the whole time you were there?**

The time you were there you were on the ball. The whole damn time.

**How does that affect your stress levels?**

Well everyone gets issued with the bottle of courage. I think some people just drink theirs a little bit

- 35:30 quicker than others. I was lucky, I got through to the bitter end. I think I realised too that if you were reasonable in the bush, within reason, you could get away with a fair bit too, get yourself in to strife that back in Australia they'd hang you for it because they need you, you're part of
- 36:00 the team. There's a big difference between being a war time soldier and back in Australia. Some of the things that I perhaps got away with overseas they wouldn't have tolerated back in Australia. I toyed with the idea of staying in and I just sort of thought about it and I thought, "No, I'd stay in if we were in a World War II
- 36:30 situation," I'd keep soldiering but I don't know that, because I was always a big gobby, if I didn't think anything, if I didn't like what was going on I'd have my two bobs worth. I can remember when we were coming home they made the announcement that the battalion would be sailing to Sydney first and getting off then there'd be a big
- 37:00 battalion barbecue and all the rest of it and then everyone would go home and the West Australians and that would be put on the train. As soon as they said train I lost the plot. I thought, "This is bullshit. The train?" Plane, fine, wherever you land you've got to accept that it's not going to be your home but to put us on the train for four or five days. Apart from
- 37:30 anything else, it would have been ridiculous. Everyone would have drunk themselves stupid, they probably would have wrecked the train, all that sort of thing. No, if they'd have said plane. So I wrote a letter to the Minister for the Army at the time which was considered a no no when you're serving but what are they going to do? Send you to Vietnam? So I wrote

- 38:00 and I basically said that during all my training and all the rest of it as a West Australian, all your stand-down leaves and all the rest of it weren't much chop to you while the Sydneysiders and that all went home but we copped it sweet and I've got no real complaints but to turn around and bring the HMAS Sydney in to Sydney first, dump all the eastern-staters off and have us
- 38:30 sit on the train as opposed to the plane, I said, I think the final line was something like it means, "being a West Australian makes you a born loser," or something like that. Blow me down, I don't know whether they thought about it or whatever but they actually bought the HMAS Sydney via Perth on the way back
- 39:00 and the West Australians got off first. We missed out on the barbecue, battalion piss up which would have been fantastic but nevertheless at least we didn't have to cross the Nullabor Plain on the train.

**Well it seems illogical really.**

It's the train more than anything. To put us on the train for four days.

**It's kind of inhumane and I think inconsiderate considering the fact you've just risked your life**

- 39:30 **for a very long time, the least they can do is put you on a bird.**

Yeah. Anyway we came home via West Australia.

**Did you have any idea what was going on in Australia as far as what Australians thought of the Vietnam War?**

A little bit of it. Excuse my expression but

- 40:00 the attitude was really just, "Fucking uni students." I think it was all uni students. They never really looked at it past that really. I can remember going to a moratorium march when I got back as an anti moratorium person, whacked a bloke in St Georges Terrace for carrying a Viet Cong flag. I tore the thing up.
- 40:30 I remember him saying to the copper that came past, "You saw that officer?" and the copper said, "No, I didn't see anything." We went down and razzed the moratorium speakers. There was about half a dozen blokes that just sort of found each other. I didn't really care that people were against the war, the thing that got up my nose was when they took sides, actually flew Viet Cong flags.
- 41:00 It's a bit like if you wanted to use the analogy today, it doesn't matter so much if you're anti the war in Iraq but if you're going to start walking around holding up placards for Saddam Hussein then to my mind that's a whole different ball game. That's going the extra thing. That was the thing with the moratorium marches and all that with me the thing that got up my nose was not so much
- 41:30 anti war as it was like they took the Viet Cong's side.

**So it was more anti-Australian.**

Yeah.

## Tape 7

- 00:33 **I think you were in the middle of describing that protest march John.**

Oh yeah, I can just remember just the feeling I had was these people, not so much anti war it's almost that they're pro Viet Cong. It's difficult to come to grips with that today you're there and

- 01:00 tomorrow you're here. That sort of thing. If you saw one of those flags yesterday you're open up on it and now you're seeing one back here it's a bit hard without being too over the top. I didn't lose copious amounts of sleep over it and again I suppose it depends what sort of environment your soldier goes back in to too, what sort of family support he's got and that sort of thing.
- 01:30 I certainly didn't have any parents, brothers, sisters or anything like that that said, "You shouldn't have gone there," uncles, aunts, family friends, the whole lot. In fact I had a pretty dream run. I sometimes sit in amazement at some of the stories I hear about the "baby killer" type stories, that sort of thing. I almost
- 02:00 think I must have been in a different country or I was asleep when that was on because I certainly didn't experience any of that.

**How were you received by your family when you came back?**

Wonderful. They were proud I suppose and all that sort of thing. I managed to pull through okay and got a clean record.

**What was it like returning to civilian street?**

That was I reckon probably the hardest time in my life I think. I reckon

02:30 for anything up to three years afterwards I was really unsettled.

**What difficulties did you have?**

I think it was just it might sound corny but the lack of adrenalin surges and mates, I missed the mates badly. All the boys that you got really used to living with

03:00 and sharing these almost life and death type of experiences with and they're not with you any more. They're all over the place. They almost became more important than your family, as odd as that might seem.

**Did you keep in contact with any of them?**

Yeah, and we still do. But as I say, the tyranny of distance, you don't see them that often. I got a letter only yesterday from my old platoon

03:30 commander who's sailing off Tonga at the present moment. I missed the boys. Although you were still immature in many respects I thought I was wonderful. I thought I'd been there, done that, again, twenty foot

04:00 tall and bullet proof. Trying to decide what to do with myself for a career too was difficult. I felt nothing short of being the manager of something was about my level.

**Because you'd had some authority in the army.**

Yeah. I thought about staying in the army but the problem there, I think I would have done all right but the problem

04:30 there was I was always fairly outspoken and I knew in my heart of hearts that I wouldn't get away with what I'd got away with in a peace time situation.

**What do you think you were able to get away with in Vietnam that you wouldn't have been able to in ordinary circumstances?**

Just being outspoken on odd occasions and perhaps some of the strife you might have got in to. I think the system really, they had problems sometimes. One can only

05:00 go back to the amount of blokes you went bush with, you're supposed to be thirty four strength. Any infantry bloke would tell you they'd be lucky if you ever had twenty five. You virtually had anything up to a third of your platoon missing at any one stage in your platoon. If you had a reasonable track record and you'd been in enough blues and managed to get everyone out of it all right then there was a fair chance that they'd pretty well do anything for you. But that wasn't going

05:30 to happen back in Australia.

**Would you say that your discipline was unconventional?**

No, just I think Nashos too, I think they wouldn't take shit. They knew they weren't going to put up against, it wasn't the German army, World War II, put up against the wall and hung as an example or something or shot I should say.

06:00 I got pulled out of bed once by the CSM [Company Sergeant Major] in Vietnam and dressed down for having a drink in the lines late at night. The OC had sprung us with a couple of corporals and that. It was about two o'clock in the morning or something and when he pulled me out to dress me down he'd only come from the mess himself so he was full.

06:30 I'm going, "Hello, you're pissed and you're having a go at me for having a drink." I said, "Fuck off. Go to bed and think about where you've gone wrong. Talk to me in the morning but don't you dare pull me out of bed at two o'clock in the morning for this sort of bullshit." Top of my voice I might add and I've got a loud one when I get going. I just stormed off. You'd never get to square one

07:00 in Australia. You wouldn't say that to a CSM, no way in the world. It was the same thing when we had a reinforcement that came up, gutless bastard he was. He was always trying to get out of the bush. The final straw was when he started to put on a bullshit cough in an ambush and compromise our situation. My 2IC said, "One more cough out of you and you've got a bullet in the head"

07:30 and he was dinkum. Anyway, we shipped him out of the bush, we got rid of this bastard. He came back to camp and while we were all out in the bush he looted the camp, pinched everyone's gear. When we came back there was a bloke, Disbry, from New South Wales who beat the living daylights out him. I said, "Right, that's enough, I'll get rid of him," and picked him up and carted him down and threw him in the sergeant's tent and said,

08:00 "Get rid of this bastard before the blokes lynch him." You don't steal off your mates. You don't steal full stop. There was an advance party warrant officer there from 7RAR and he said, "You don't treat soldiers like that," and I said, "Fuck off. You've got nothing to do with this. This is internal." My sergeant said,

"You can't speak to him, he's got a DSM [Distinguished Service Medal]," or something. I said,

08:30 "I don't give a fuck if he's got a VC [Victoria Cross], it's got nothing to do with him." I said, "Get rid of this prick." I can remember the next day the warrant officer came up to me and he said, "I found out the circumstances and I understand," and he said, "but really, you should never speak to warrant officers the way you did to me that night." That was me, I was always a bit that way. I knew you'd never get away with that

09:00 back in Australia, never. The other thing was that I really didn't fancy spending the rest of my life scrub bashing round the back blocks of Holsworthy playing pretend soldiers, digging shell scrapes and all that sort of thing. Not once you'd experienced the proper thing. I thought, projecting myself in the future, I thought it was a the thing I could see myself getting pretty disillusioned with.

09:30 So I went through a bad period after Vietnam not sure what I was going to do with myself. I buggarised around the old man's business, got a bit self conscious of that, the boss's son, we'll find a posy for him. I didn't like that much. I didn't really want to go back to Elders because I knew it would be more long hours and all the rest of it on three bob a week because they weren't the best payers in the world those livestock companies.

10:00 In the end I withdrew in to my hobby because I'd been a military collector all my life and although people probably think there's some sort of association there for the reason that I volunteered and all that there really wasn't, it was just that as a young boy I inherited a whole heap of stuff off a great uncle of mine who was a fanatical collector, he was in the 2/44th Battalion and I believe it too, they were involved

10:30 in the bringing down of the Red Baron. Ground fire brought the Red Baron down, not that Canadian pilot, I think it's pretty well proved too. Anyway, I inherited his collection and I just found it a lot more interesting than stamps and coins and things. I threw myself in to it a bit.

#### **What kind of things did the collection consist of?**

It was mainly badges and head dress and stuff like that. A few medals, not a lot

11:00 but a few medals. A fairly big collection, everything but firearms really. Likewise I've never really been involved in firearms either. I'm not that interested in them, I've got plenty of mates that are but I wasn't that interested in collecting them. So I sort of started off, I was working for

11:30 Doug Shave, the former minister that got himself in the shit over the mortgage brokerage scandal. He was a mate of mine, had the Railway Hotel north Fremantle. We started the jazz session off down there, I was doing part-time bar work for him, at the same time starting a mail order military antique business up. Basically

12:00 I got involved in that because I thought, there was a place called The Armoury in South Australia that was two partners that were both married with families that were both running the Armoury in South Australia and I thought, "Christ if Adelaide can run a military antique business there's an opening for one in Western Australia." So I took that on and we eventually got the licence for the Fremantle Markets

12:30 Bar. You know the pub in the corner of the Fremantle Markets Bar there, it had to run off licence from a hotel. It's now stand alone, you can get licence in its own right but in those days it had to be an off licence from a pub.

#### **A kind of annex of the railway?**

Yeah. We used to bring the kegs over from there and that sort of thing. I was there and my mate Clive Brands who had an antique business and had a stall down there, a very good antique dealer Clive.

#### **What kind of antiques?**

13:00 General antiques. He said to me, "Well are you going to ponce around in a pub the rest of your life or are you going to bite the bullet and get in to the game properly." So I said, "Yeah, point taken, it's time I made the move." So I got a stall opposite him at the Fremantle markets and I was there for about four years and then I realised that I couldn't sell Victoria Crosses and that

13:30 from a Fremantle market stall so it's time I hung the shingle out properly. So I was traveling down the Stirling Highway and one of my antique mates had the old churches on the Stirling Highway and he was talking to a bloke on the side of the road so I pulled in to have a chat to him. John said to this bloke, he was a real estate agent, he said, "John Burridge here is looking for a property in which to operate a military antique business out of,"

14:00 and the guy said, "Well yeah, I'm listing one on Friday up in Swanbourne, twenty two grand, freehold." I went, "Christ, what the bloody hell," even in this was 1981, "what the bloody hell do you buy in bloody Swanbourne for twenty grand?" So I went up,

14:30 I couldn't believe it. Anyway, I bought the place. So for the last twenty years I've been operating out of Shenton Road in Swanbourne with a military antique business. I've been going backwards and forwards to the UK on a regular basis and I'm agent for probably the top medal house in London.

**Which is?**

It's

- 15:00 Dicks Noonan Webb. They were number one Bond Street, London. Their catalogues and stuff are just out of this world and the gear they have through them. So I'm the Australasian agent for them.

**These are all originals?**

All original stuff, yeah. And also we do all the medal mounting, like new ribbons on medals, cleaning medals, stringing them up and all

- 15:30 that sort of thing. My daughter does that and she was in England for the mandatory two years that everyone your age does and she finished up worked for Spinks which is part of Christie's Antiques. She was even doing some of the royal families medals. She's medal mounted around the world. The longer
- 16:00 you're at it, the more you become known and then I got involved in book reprinting.

**Just before we move on to the books John, how did these medals come on to the market?**

Everyone asks that question. I think a lot of them are horrified because they're usually good people that ask the question from the point of view they think, "Christ, we'd never part with our family medals," but what you've got to accept is that families die out,

- 16:30 surnames disappear. You ask the average young bloke the maiden name of both his grandmothers, in fact I'll ask you. Do you know the maiden names of both your grandmothers?

**Yeah, I think so, Nagel and Shaw.**

It's a rarity. Most of them don't. Might get one. So medals come down through that line and all of a sudden they go,

- 17:00 "Shaw, name doesn't mean anything to us." Particularly if they go down girls lines of the families and they re-marry or marry or whatever. Then you get veterans themselves that don't care. Whilst I'm a huge supporter of the Canberra War Memorial, I do quite a lot of valuations under the tax incentive for the arts for them, whilst I'm a big supporter,
- 17:30 I believe they can't do it all themselves. The military collectors, they fill the void in my opinion. They collect the items, they write the histories and they do the researchs. You see the books that I've got on the shelf up there, a lot of this is, the rules apply to the English, Poms collectors themselves and you've got books out on casualty rolls for the Crimean War,
- 18:00 including wounded. Casualty roles for the Zulu Wars, everyone who served at Waterloo, everyone with a military general, I've got books so I can look them up. I can look up family names, all that sort of thing. Virtually roles for every damn medal going. These are done by dedicated researchers and done because hobbyists are out there with the opportunity to possess
- 18:30 these things. If they couldn't possess them, if there was a law came out tomorrow that said no one is allowed to collect anyone else's medals or something like that, everything would finish up in the Canberra War Memorial in a vault. They're not going to hang everyone's medal out, you've seen on you've seen them all. Medal collectors use the expression, "We collect the man behind the medal not the medals themselves," the more they can find out about the guy, the better it is.

**The more value it gives to the medal?**

Yeah.

- 19:00 and the more it builds on the story. I collect West Australians in the Boer War. I collect infantry, Australian, I'm pretty well all Australian in my own collecting for medals but I've got a few British, like Crimea medals and that, the enrolled pensioner guards that came out here and guarded the convicts, although we didn't have troops in the Crimea I still will collect them because they still served in Western Australia, things like that.
- 19:30 Then I weaken and I've got Crimea medal for the dog Boxer who was the regimental mascot of the 11th Hussars that charged in the Crimean, he just decided he'd run out beside the farrier sergeant looked after him and rode down the valley of death so they gave him a medal. I finished up with that. I'll break the line because I like certain things every now and again.

**There's a few you just can't go past.**

Can't go past, yeah, I'm

- 20:00 trying to negotiate on the CO's horse at the present moment. He got a medal too. I thought if I can get the horse and the dog it'll make a nice pair. I got pretty full on in to the business and I think the only thing is in recent years is that I've probably had that one too many phone calls, I've been on the front counter for too long. If I'd worked in the bank you'd be



20:30 on the front counter for so many years but by the time you reach my age you'd probably be on the fifth floor protected by two hot and cold running secretaries. I'm still on the front bloody counter and I still get day in, day out the phone calls, "I had a grandfather in the First World War, what can you tell me about him?" "I was in the army for fifteen years, am I entitled to any medals?" "I've got some medals here mate, which way round does the ribbons go?"

21:00 "I was burgled last night, I lost a sword. What's it worth, I've got to tell the insurance company." I get them all day, every day, same old same old. So in the end I thought, "Oh Christ, I've got to go back to my grass roots for a while," and that's why I started to play around with cattle again and get involved in cattle just to give me a bit of escapism.

**You need to start charging for these calls.**

You can't do it though.

21:30 What do you say? You hang your shingle out, you've got to wear it and some of them are nice little old ladies who, so you finish up and the time goes by and all of a sudden.

**How many collectors do you deal with?**

Hundreds of them, all over the world. There's millions and millions of collectors out there.

**Are there categories you could put them in to like big collectors, I'm not sure what categories you might deal with.**

22:00 Yeah, huge collectors. Blokes who collect really serious multi gallantry stuff and that which is huge money now. I was buying VCs they were all round the nine to fifteen grand mark. Now you won't buy a VC under two hundred grand plus. A lot of the Australian stuff is just going through the roof

22:30 at the present moment. You find it hard to keep track of it all.

**Why do you think it's appreciating so much?**

I really don't know. I think the supply's not there. That's the main thing and the other thing is that we don't get touched, as collectors, we don't get touched by the investor much, they're serious collectors. Beware any hobby where the motive is money, you'll come unstuck. Classic examples would be

23:00 those kids baseball cards. They were ripping open packets to look for the gold card that was supposedly worth fifty bucks. They weren't ripping the packet open because they loved those cards, it was a form of one armed banditry. Phone cards and that, you remember the old phone cards you stuck in the telephone phone when you made a phone call, people, that went through the roof, that collecting. It was never about I want a lovely collection of phone cards, it was

23:30 I'm going to make a million bucks out of this.

**Shallow interest.**

Yeah, it's all shallow stuff. It all goes in to a hole. We don't have that in our industry. Basically you've got serious collectors. They really do love the stuff. In many cases they preserve the stuff better than the families would. When it all boils down somewhere along the line you've got to face up facts that you're only curating the stuff for the term

24:00 of your natural anyway. There's no pockets in shrouds and there's no trailers on a hearse so we'll all go the same way and the stuff just moves on to someone else which you hope will love it as much as you do.

**Which is why it's a good idea to invest in something you're passionate in.**

Yeah. I really enjoy it and as I say the books that come from it, I do a lot of publishing nowadays. Not writing so much as tidying things up, making sure the right gear's in the books

24:30 when I redo a unit history. More regimental and unit histories, First World War and Second World War. Tidy them all up and publish them and send them all around. It's sort of a niche market sort of thing. Regimental histories are probably becoming one of the fastest growing hobbies in this country. Whether these blokes read all these books or whether they just want 1 battalion, 2 battalion, 3 battalion 4 on the bookshelf

25:00 sort of business I don't know but it certainly becoming, the inquiry on regimental histories.

**Why do you think the timing is now for that?**

I think a lot of people are starting to realise that Australia's got it's own history. Not for any particular thing it's just suddenly they've woken up, "Hey we've got a history," and we're so far away from

25:30 everything else. It's been very slow in taking off because I've often said and again I'm just generalising here but I would say in Europe I reckon ninety per cent of wealthy people would have twenty five per cent at least of their money in collectables.

26:00 Every bit I'd say. In this country you'd be lucky if ninety per cent of blokes with money you'd be lucky if half a per cent had anything like twenty five per cent in collectables. Because we're not border threatened in the true sense. Sitting in Paris you're not worrying about Germans crunching through your lounge room like

26:30 they've had so they want to be in a position to be able to do a runner with a valuable little, you know what I mean? Our lot don't have to think like that, our youth and it's a good thing.

**We don't think about possessions as much.**

No, you go surfing or you go play footy or something like that, whatever the hell they do these days but certainly they don't get involved in collecting to the same degree

27:00 but it's been changing in the last little while. Internet's opened it up a lot too and that eBay, there's a lot of wheeling and dealing that goes on that.

**You mentioned earlier books, you were going to move on from the medals.**

Yeah a number of years ago I got involved, I had a hell of a job getting a copy of the Australian contingents in the war in South Africa.

27:30 I'd been looking for it for years and years and it was basically the official record a bit like the official historian C.E.W. Bean's twelve volume set for World War I except it was the Boer War one. Well you couldn't get one for love nor money. I suddenly found one and I got it reprinted and it was from that time on that I then started to get other books reprinted, stuff that was scarce,

28:00 battalion histories and things like that.

**You mentioned Bean's twelve volumes on World War I, are they pretty rare?**

Not so much rare as getting good clean copies, good sets of them that's the difficulty, good matching maroon. You know the books do you?

**Yeah, I've got a set.**

They're not a fortune but they're probably

28:30 anywhere from, depending on the quality, fifty to ninety dollars a volume, that sort of price range.

**Should probably be having this conversation after the interview. You mentioned earlier coming home that you had quite a difficult patch for a few years, how difficult did it get, did you hit the grog or any of those sort of things?**

29:00 I hit the grog a fair bit yeah but never like suicide sort of stuff, none of that sort of nonsense.

**Which is quite common amongst a lot of Vietnam veterans.**

Yeah. I think it was, the system had worked you in to being a good team player, relying on your mates, all the rest of the stuff and then all of a sudden they're not there.

29:30 There was a bloke in, I think he was Charlie company who trod on a mine in Vietnam and he went back to a country town in a wheelchair. Of course once the town folks were all finished slapping him on the back and all that sort of thing he was relegated to a life of pushing himself round the dusty streets of Beverly if you like. The whole novelty all soon wore off and he finished up topped himself

30:00 because none of his mates were around or anything like that. I got a mate of mine who tells me, he's a collector, whose old man served with my old man in World War II and he was saying how when his Dad got quite ill the squadron got together and they went out to his place and they put wheelchair ramps in it and grab rails in the loos and the bathrooms and all that

30:30 style of thing. Well our battalion couldn't rally that sort of a work force because there'd only be a few blokes in town type of thing. We didn't have that sort of support of battalions leaving, almost the old British pals battalion type situation where they're all raised, 16th Battalion in Western Australia,

31:00 11th Battalion, City of Perth, 28th Battalion, 10th Light Horse - they're all West Australian - they all come home here, 2/16th Battalion. They've even got networks through the First to the Second World War in the battalions but we didn't have any of that. We had a totally different numbering system that had no bearing on the states

31:30 where they came from. I got very involved with Legacy. I had an uncle that served in the 2/2nd Commandos with the old man. Archie Campbell and he had had his whole section murdered by the Japs in Timor and

32:00 he was crook at the time with malaria and always carried a sort of a bit of a guilt complex about losing his section although it had nothing to do with him, it was totally unavoidable but be that as it may he wanted to put in and when he got back he got very involved in Legacy. So when I got back from Vietnam he turned around and he said, "Well I'd like you to join Legacy when you're ready," and I said, "Oh yeah, I'll join Legacy," thinking it was

32:30 just fund raising, chocolate wheel type stuff. He said, "No, when I think you're ready, that's when I'll ask." I said, "Fine," and one day he did ask and along with Duncan Warren who as I said was one of Michael Jeffery platoon commanders, Duncan and I were the first Vietnam blokes they inducted in to Perth Legacy. We were the sort of experimental thing.

33:00 I did sense with some of them that they didn't think that we were, although it's a bit contradictory to what I said earlier, I hadn't really experienced that until I joined Legacy because it was very much a military club type thing and I did sense just that little bit with some of the World War II blokes that we weren't in a proper war.

**What gave you that impression?**

They basically openly said it, there wasn't much that

33:30 you couldn't do but I'm a great one for doing research and I'll throw it back at them. So I'll find out what unit they were in or something and I'll find out they were actually in the 132nd Water Bottle Repair Company and I'll actually say, "That's rich coming from you, in the bloody 132nd Water Bottle Repair Company. You did fuck all in World War II," or something like that. It shuts them up a little bit.

34:00 **What about initially when they had a go at you, were you taken aback a little bit?**

Yeah, a little bit surprised because I thought that some of them were a slightly better quality bloke.

**What did it make you think of them?**

I nearly lost the plot a couple of times, especially a couple of prominents that tried to put it on. I just think it was ignorance too you know. I think again they look at the casualty thing. They forget

34:30 this whole business of eight people behind the lines to put one on the front end. I've forgotten what it was, we went bush in Vietnam it was something like, probably not much more than about seventy guys went bush, it's all a play on statistics but nevertheless our casualty rate if you wanted to look at it that way was a hundred per cent. If you traveled with my company you had to be killed or wounded. We had something like

35:00 I think it was sixty or seventy wounded. They put an asterix next to your name in the back of the unit history so you only have to count them up and we had ten killed so that's basically a hundred per cent of the guys but of course you've got reos coming through. I was one of only six originals that came home with the battalion from my platoon and I think the situation was identical in the other two platoons. It's not very many when you consider

35:30 the amount of people that have gone through your platoon. That's just your casualties as opposed to your medical type ones. Anyway I recovered and I've been president of Perth Legacy and I've been actively involved in the kids camps and that since the year dot. We took over and we ran the first

36:00 co-ed camps down at Busselton. In fact this January will be my twentieth, Marg and I, twenty years straight, haven't missed a Legacy camp for that but I think Duncan said the other night we've been in Legacy for thirty four years.

**So how does Legacy operate?**

Basically we're about advice and guidance primarily, that's the major thing. We just

36:30 go out there when you get a newly bereaved widow, go out there, run the pencil over her and just make sure that she's got good family support or whatever, just make sure everything's okay. It doesn't cost her or anything, enroll her in Legacy and she can go to Busselton camps free of charge and stuff like that.

**She can go where sorry?**

Busselton camps and she can

37:00 go in for pensions advice or get assistance to get a pension through war widows pension or whatever it might be. Our pensions people help her. So there's all that sort of thing.

**How often do you find yourself in those circumstances where you go counsel?**

You do it all the time. That's part of being a legatee. Maybe out of the blue once every couple of months. You get a brown envelope

37:30 and it gives the details of the widow, could you go round and see her. Western Australia we get approximately and bear in mind they're primarily World War II but we get approximately fifteen newly bereaved widows a week. People don't believe it, when you put it that way. We basically have a Black Hawk incident per week. Fifteen of them killed, die per week. They all

38:00 get checked. Legatees, volunteers go round there.

**Must be a fairly demanding responsibility.**

Well it is and it's sort of heart breaking too when you see how some families don't give a shit about their dear old Mum. I've had some funny incidents. One of the SAS warrant officers once got so pissed off with the state of the widow's house and the lawns

38:30 and the gardens and that, he rang up the three sons that were all in their about thirty five to forty and he ordered them to go round to her place and clean it up and told them they were an absolute bloody disgrace. Which was probably going a step too far but he couldn't take it. Sure enough they all went round and they cleaned up their mother's house.

39:00 **They probably needed waking up.**

Yeah well I've often been tempted on numerous occasions to have sort of a flier done with, "Australian widows, what to do with your money in the event your family show no interest in you a) leave it to the dog's home, b) the cat's home, c) salvos," or something like that.

**D all of the above.**

And just leave it lying around for that one visit a year that the kids go round and give Mum a hand.

**I think it's a good idea.**

39:30 Yeah.

**How does Legacy raise money?**

All sorts of things. Rattle a can day, puddings, raffles, auctions. I run auctions twice a year, military stuff for collectors and we take a percentage. Anzac Day, the trust fund gets a percentage of all racing revenue on that day

40:00 and we get a kick back on that. By and large it's not government funded as such. We're out for any hand out we can get like any organisation I think but we don't rely on government funding or staffing. We basically have to find our own money.

**So the chocolate wheel still gets a spin.**

Yeah.

**How does Legacy run in comparison to say, well the DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] is government but is there any.**

40:30 Yeah but we have a very good relationship with them and they give us assistance where possible and they also advise us of widows that might need our type of assistance. They're a pretty good organisation, Veterans Affairs. My experience with Commonwealth countries is that we've got the best in the whole Commonwealth.

41:00 Some of the Brits and that, their system's bloody shocking. I think they do a damn good job, Veterans Affairs.

**So you think the Veterans Affairs are in a better state here than in the UK?**

Oh, no question about it. We'll always whinge, it's part of the nature I think but really I think they're top shelf. Really, really good.

## Tape 8

00:31 **So you've taken on Bronwyn Bishop, how did this happen?**

Basically being in the medal game all my life a situation arose once where I'd been given a mention in dispatches in Vietnam. The paperwork all said that I'd been approved for a Military Medal so something cropped up at the shop one day, a collector's thing and they wanted to know

01:00 how the quota worked on honours and awards. I said, "I really don't know," because of all the medal things that you get involved in there's no sort of real book that you open up and there it all is. Because someone said, "Well can we have a look at your paperwork?" and I showed them the paperwork and they said, "You've been approved for a Military Medal so why haven't you got it?" I said, "Well I assume

01:30 that twenty blokes got put in for a Military Medal for that year and they gave the best five theirs and the next best five got a MID [Mentioned in Despatches] and the other ten went in the rubbish bin. If you feel a bit down about not getting your Military Medal spare a thought for the ten that went in the rubbish bin," that style of thing. No one was really satisfied with that as an answer, they sort of thought there should be something a little bit more, what the hell happened here. So sort of

02:00 away it went from there. I got stuck in to the research and I was pretty well appalled with what I found. I suppose the thing that I found most difficult was again back to this pogo combat business is that whilst most people acknowledged that there's been a quota system for a million years, what they don't know is

that

- 02:30 there's no quota on any individual award. The quota applies to the total number of awards in a six monthly period of review irrespective of what they are. That means non combat and combat awards. Whilst I will never have a problem with a guy getting a meritorious service award for doing a great job, someone's got to do it and some people do a damn good job, what I
- 03:00 do have a problem with is meritorious service awards taking the place of combat soldiers because I think apart from even just good old public expectation, what do you get a medal for when you go to war, it's usually a combat expectation but even from the more practical point of view, the window of opportunity only exists for combat people on the operational list whereas meritorious
- 03:30 service can be resubmitted or submitted in the New Years' honours and the Queens birthday honours lists so they've got three bites of the cherry. If I put you up for blanket counting in Vietnam and you miss out I can resubmit you in the New Years honours and the Queens Birthday list by putting down the bottom of the basic citation, "And since her return from Vietnam she has continued to count blankets in an exemplary manner
- 04:00 and on one occasion found four hundred that were thought lost to the system." Bang and sooner or later someone's going to whack you with an OBE [Officer of the Order of the British Empire] or an MBE [Member of the Order of the British Empire] or something but you can't really put down, "Since his return from Vietnam this machine gunner has continued to clean up Northbridge on a Saturday night." Anyway I did a lot of checking and I found out that Britain was horrified. The honours and awards blokes
- 04:30 because I go to the top. I just ring the man at the top and I had a long conversations with them and they said in post war Britain there would be no meritorious service on an operational list at the expense of combat people and no combat person signed off at the highest level, that's a generals level, would miss out on their award.
- 05:00 I was pretty horrified by that sort of thing. Anyway I did more research and more research and started to do comparisons between the First World War and Second World War and Korean War because I didn't want anything to be seen as some sort of special favour for Vietnam. It didn't need to be, the percentages weren't there. We were the lowest decorated army ever to go to war.
- 05:30 We were the only Australian Army that ever stopped awarding declarations whilst still having troops deployed, albeit only a handful but nevertheless awards for previous wars had gone on years after. The Poms gave more awards for the Falklands War than we did in the whole of Vietnam. They gave more awards for the first Gulf War than we did in the ten years of Vietnam.
- 06:00 On and on it goes. The air force and the navy I think it was something like one point eight per cent of army were decorated in Vietnam, the navy got two point eight per cent or something and the air force got six point something per cent. I really did my sums and Korea had what was known as
- 06:30 a ceasefire list. They'd also had a special list for after the Battle of Maryang San and all that sort of thing. Vietnam had never had this thing. Still the thing that pissed me off the most and it was quite obvious and where they can't camouflage it or hide it is honours and awards are all put in the Government Gazette so when you've got these medal collecting nuts that have got all this stuff already recorded and it's not difficult to get the
- 07:00 statistics you find that all through the Vietnam War the average pogo type meritorious award is coming through at about four a year and all of a sudden in 1969 there's thirty three of them and in 1971 there's twenty four or something. I put it to you, guess what two years they threw combat blokes off the operational list,
- 07:30 1969 and 1971. I was just appalled. I'd always put the British honours and award system which we used on something of a pedestal but it really and I'm not suggesting that just by solving this particular problem that this was going to iron out all the problems of honours and awards. There's millions of guys that go through wars
- 08:00 without being recognised properly for whatever it is that they've done but that's no excuse for some shiny arse bureaucrat back in Canberra to turn around and say, "I'm going to give the blanket counter his MBE and bugger national serviceman for his MM [Military Medal]," you know what I mean? So that's what drove me a little bit. I thought, "You're not going to stuff with me on this one," and the bullshit they kept sending out to me was
- 08:30 crap. It was from people who just didn't know. I suppose to have a bloke that was in my situation on what was known as the Vietnam end of war list who was in the industry was probably the almost Lotto odds scenario. They couldn't put it over me. The new blokes that run the system didn't even know that meritorious service was in the same
- 09:00 quota as combat. They tried to imply that there was no meritorious service given on the operational list in Vietnam, they wrote it to me and I wrote back and said, "Well this will come as bloody news to those that received it and you'll have to rewrite the official history." All this sort of thing whereas the average guy would have copped it on the chin and whilst I'm not pretending to know everything I at least knew

all the people that did have the answers for various things.

- 09:30 So I really did my stuff. Then I sort of had to take Bronwyn Bishop on and that was a bloody experience because she's such a bolshy cow. I could remember one particular case I was in the newspaper and I said, "da da da and to the dragon lady Bronwyn Bishop," so they printed that in the West Australian so then when I rang her up over something, her minder said,
- 10:00 "She's furious with you over this dragon lady thing but you were probably misquoted," and I said, "No I wasn't, that's what I said, now I want to talk to her." "Well she won't talk to you." It was really quite funny. But to begin with I was a bit forgiving with her because I realised she was getting some awful advice from some of those advisors and that's something I've learned,
- 10:30 the quality of advisors are just appalling and Canberra is full of them. They just get shunted off to this job and they're all of a sudden the bloody instant expert on this. These guys wouldn't know shit from clay when it came to honours and awards. Really didn't have a clue. But Bronwyn Bishop I'm afraid just was not smart enough to say, "Hey, I'm dealing
- 11:00 with a bloke here who knows his subject and perhaps I should sit down with someone." We had one big meeting over here and it was a waste of time. She just came in with this massive entourage. It wasn't, I'd like to have sat down like the way we're sitting down here. She could have raised any point she liked but she got it in her head that the MC [Military Cross]
- 11:30 was higher than the Military Medal and therefore she was going to give the officers the new Australian equivalent of the Military Cross but the Military Medal blokes were not going to get what the officers got. It was a bit complicated but basically you've got four levels under the old imperial system. You've got the four levels of officers' award,
- 12:00 VC, DSO [Distinguished Service Order], MC, MID. Diggers you've got VC, DCM [Distinguished Conduct Medal], MM, MID and under the new Australian award system you've got VC, Star of Gallantry, Medal of Gallantry and commendation. So if you'd have had five levels in the new Australian system you would have had a problem but because it was four, four, four it was just a case of ruling the line
- 12:30 through. They conned her in to saying that we couldn't get imperial awards any more because that's all finished. Blind Freddy knows that all you had to do was say to the Queen, "Hey we're doing a retrospective." It's dead easy if that's the biggest problem we've got in the world today we're in serious strife. These can't do people, they really are a pain in the arse. Anyway they probably thought that she'd say,
- 13:00 "Oh well if we can't give the imperial awards we'll have to drop the whole idea" but in fairness to her she said, "No, if we can't give the imperial awards, we'll give the new Australian awards." That's where she went, instead of ruling a line right through the officer's Military Cross to the digger's Military Medal to the Medal of Gallantry she turned around and she said the Military Cross can have the Medal of Gallantry but the Military Medal has to have a commendation.
- 13:30 So we all got these letters from the Governor General and they all said, "Dear Digger, During the Vietnam War you were approved for a Military Medal, unfortunately we can't give it to you so we're going to give you a commendation." There was only six of us involved so we all wrote back to the Governor General, in a nutshell, "Stick your commendation in your arse." It was probably the biggest mass refusal

- 14:00 of honours awards. This was only a few years back, four years ago or something.

### **That's a great story.**

Yeah. Christ they had to do something about that. Anyway Graham Edwards went to bat for us in parliament and it got all a bit untidy in there and then they finally did an investigation in to, is the Military Cross the same level

- 14:30 as the Military Medal. This is just thousands of dollars was spent on this. The Poms wrote and they said, "We don't want to buy in to an Australian problem here but we can categorically state that the Military Cross and the Military Medal is the same level, the only difference is the constituents themselves, crosses to officers, medals to other ranks and we can provide honours and confidence papers which have been seen and approved at the highest level." So not only
- 15:00 have they got that stuff but you've also got common usage. Nothing to do with the Vietnam War, if you'd have said to me, "During the First World War my grandfather got a Military Medal, six weeks later he was commissioned as an officer. Had he got the Military Medal as an officer, what would he have got?" I and every other so-called medal expert in the country would say, "Well he would have got a Military Cross." It was common knowledge.
- 15:30 I've got this bloody woman, Bronwyn Bishop standing there basically, me holding my Rottweiler, saying, "That's the best Dalmatian I've ever seen." I'm going, "Excuse me minister it's a Rottweiler." "I'm telling you it's a bloody Dalmatian," that's how basic this whole thing was. Then the other thing she got confused about was the thing called the order of precedence which nowadays is called the order of wearing which is just a need to wear medals in a line. In the 1920s they realised

- 16:00 you just can't stick medals all over we'd better have some sort of an order so they said all the knighthoods, all the orders of chivalry in order of seniority of the order. That doesn't mean a Knight of Bath is more important than a Knight of St. Michael and St. George, it's just a seniority thing. Then all the lesser orders and the officer's stuff next then right at the tail end you've got the digger's stuff in line.
- 16:30 So you get something like the very prestigious DCM and it's way down the food chain even though it's a level two award purely because that's where it is on the order of wearing but it's not an order of merit. To go one step further, if you were a digger in the First World War and you did some near miss VC thing you'd get a DCM, so you'd wear your DCM. You then get promoted because you're a good digger, to an officer and
- 17:00 you do a reasonable job so you've got a level two DCM. You do a reasonable job and you get something like a Military Cross. Because it's a level three it's technically lower than your level two DCM but it's worn in front because it's higher on the order of wearing as an officer's thing. Then we'll take it to extreme and you get back to Australia and you put in
- 17:30 twenty years to your lawn bowls club and you get an MBE for lawn bowls. That's even higher on the order of wearing than your Military Cross so in terms of merit you've got lawn bowls first, a reasonable job as an officer second and a shit hot job as a digger last on the order of wearing.
- 18:00 She was all confused with merit. I said, "Well you've got to remember minister that if we become a republic they will pluck all the orders of Australia that are intermingled all through the order of wearing at the present moment, they'll pluck them all out and they'll dump them right at the top because Australian awards would have to come in front of British awards. So the order of wearing is a constantly changing decoration but the merit factor, where you come
- 18:30 within your own little thing never changes. They'll never wake up one morning and say the DCM is higher than VC. That will remain constant. The only thing people are interested in is where they come within their own, like the Order of Australia, are you an AC or an AO or an OAM or where you come within the Order of Australia. Nor should you compare a nice little old lady that's worked at the dog's home for fifty years or something gets an MBE
- 19:00 or something like that, why should you try and compare that service with some other service. So to go down the line of merit, you're only opening for all sorts of problems. If you want a war you've got one. But she couldn't accept that. Anyway Graham Edwards got in and the Minister for Veterans Affairs went back to Graham Edwards which got a bit untidy and
- 19:30 the Prime Minister chipped in. Next minute they had this flying squad made up of ex-generals and the likes trying to work out whether the Military Cross and the Military Medal are the same level. In the end they all came to the conclusion that it was, God knows what that cost the tax payer and so finally we all got another piece of paper from the governor general saying, "We now offer you the medal of gallantry the same as the officers.
- 20:00 Will you accept it?" So we all went, "Okay, then," and that was it. So we had a win in the end.

**That's amazing.**

But it was a hell of a fight. It was an interesting fight. What it made you realise as you go through life you've got people on pedestals and that. One by one as you cruise through life these pedestals soon get kicked out from under him. I mean, we've got some pretty ordinary people running this bloody country.

**I agree with you completely.**

And when

- 20:30 you get some of these clowns that are supposed to be advisors.

**Situation gets even worse.**

Jesus, you begin to wonder.

**What actually did you get the mention in dispatches for?**

Basically back in that early machine gunning situation, holding the ground, just being in the wrong place at the right time sort of thing, wrong place at the wrong time.

**Do you think that there's some sort of prejudice in the whole medal thing**

- 21:00 **in the fact that Vietnam veterans are less decorated than other people from different wars?**

No, I don't think so. I think it just depended on the shiny arses that were running the system. I think they came from Malaya, the Malayan Emergency campaign when I suppose a lot of hard work was done over there, a tremendous amount of patrolling and hard work but a successful ambush was a rarity. They all

- 21:30 of a sudden went from that sort of scenario where they probably never had quota pressures on them to

a Vietnam situation. There were three distinct periods in this Vietnam thing, there was 1969 and 1971 where they wiped combat blokes out with their pogos getting the awards but the other area was 1RAR's first tour of Vietnam. The problem was there, see they give

- 22:00 one gong out for every two hundred and fifty blokes and of course 1RAR went over there with the artillery and armoured and that but all their support and everything was the 173rd Airborne and it didn't dawn on these idiots that they really should make an allowance for the fact that we haven't got Australians providing all the normal support thing that Australia would do so let's forget the fact that they're American nationality, they're still Australian support and therefore
- 22:30 that should be taken in to account with the quota if that makes any sort of sense. And there should be a degree of flexibility too with these sorts of things. When I learned so much about it, I won't bore you to death with all the ins and outs but boy I learned some interesting things. Nothing's sacred, Canberra leaked like a sieve. I had blokes shoving me stuff, struth, I could almost start my own counter intelligence agency I think
- 23:00 with the amount of stuff that I was being shoveled out of it. I had blokes working for me. Old Dean Colston drew a fantastic cartoon for me. He's got Bronwyn Bishop there with the hair do and all the rest of it looking really bolshy and Johnny Howard sort of holding a newspaper says, "Diggers only to get commendations," and he says to Bronwyn Bishop, "How come there are no medals for the diggers," and Bronwyn Bishop says,
- 23:30 "Because I like drinking in the officers' mess." So we shoved that in every politician's letterbox in Canberra and all over the place. She used to hate me. She sent me one, "and there was another dreadful letter in the paper up in Darwin the other day." It just would have gone on. I'm glad in the end it finished. It was getting a bit silly to the end, almost
- 24:00 back to back, we'd face each other sort of thing, Bronwyn Bishop and I were at each other hammer and tongs.

**Makes life interesting though.**

Yeah it was an interesting time but it really made me realise how bloody ordinary so many of these operators are.

**What do you think about the contentious issue of Agent Orange?**

It's difficult to know. Charlie Company 5RAR

- 24:30 is one of the acknowledged companies that got some spray on them. I never know what to say about that. I've got three healthy normal kids and I'd probably be screaming bloody blue murder if they were deformed or whatever. It's not something that's touched me thank God so therefore I feel that I'm not really in a position to make
- 25:00 much of a comment about it. It's a hard one, that one.

**I'm sure you're in a position to make a comment about Anzac Day, how important is it to you?**

A tremendous day. Very, very important. It brings the blokes back together again too. It gives them a purpose for coming out. The remembrance is important but so is to sort of touch base with all the guys.

- 25:30 If you sort of just said, "On Friday the 13th we'll all meet up under a tree in Kings Park," you might get a few people on the first and second year and then it would dwindle out and yet by having this national day it really reinforces what it's all about and it brings the guys out on to the streets. It's a great day.

**What do you usually**

- 26:00 **think about?**

I do at the dawn service, I think about the blokes that were killed and I mentally do my nominal roll for the ten blokes in our company. Then from then on it's reunion time sort of thing. I do dawn service followed by the march followed by on the grog

- 26:30 until I can't cope with it any more. Home I come.

**What did you think about the march that was done for Vietnam veterans in the eighties?**

The welcome home parade, that caught me by surprise a little bit. I thought it was a bit Wally World.

**Wally World?**

I sort of thought, "Welcome home parade, geez."

- 27:00 **You've been home for a while.**

Yeah. Then I thought, "Oh well, these blokes have got their heart in it, they're trying to put it together so I got a bit involved," and the long and the short of it was I went over there and we had a ball. It was just fantastic. Again it gets back to the fact that the blokes actually turned up. I think we had



27:30 thirty five or six or something ex-members of the platoon. That's a hell of a roll up really at a reunion. I was pretty pleased with how many guys turned up from the platoon.

**Did it turn in to an emotional event?**

Yeah, I think it did because a lot of those guys we hadn't seen since Vietnam, they'd all gone to cover for one reason or another or just gone back to their far flung place. They made the effort to come

28:00 and that was great and then after that I got a bit involved because they carried all those flags so I got involved in having a big flag presentation ceremony here in Western Australia where we handed the flag to the next of kin that was carried and got them their medals because I found out that something like half of them hadn't received their deceased son's medals which I thought was pretty poor form.

28:30 So I invented a form and got them all to sign it and sent it off and we got all the medals back and we mounted them all up and presented them. Then we got involved in shifting the pavilion out of the Karrakatta Cemetery up in to Kings Park where we put the marble walls in the back with the names and all the rest of the Kings Park memorial. So that sort of kept me busy for a while.

**That's a big job.**

It was, yeah.

29:00 So all in all, that's it.

**Do you think that your service in Vietnam inspired your son to join the army?**

That's a hard one. Possibly but he's been very much like me, he's also been a collector all his life although as I said it wasn't the collecting that made me go in but I'm not sure that that wasn't the same with him.

29:30 I know he gets on very well with his grandfather and his grandfather was chuffed, that's where grandpa served in World War II, in Timor, that's where grandson and my young bloke, it's only in a name really but my old man was true forerunner of the SAS if you like with the Double Reds of Timor. The young bloke was in 4RAR which is the commando company now.

30:00 So it was sort of commando World War II, commando current day, I think that gave the old man a bit of a buzz. It's a small world. I went to see his farewell parade, I flew over to have a look at the battalion's farewell parade. My young bloke though he was 4RAR was 5. He was 11 Platoon, D Company which is the same platoon and company as me doing his

30:30 farewell parade on the same parade ground that I did my farewell parade on prior to going to Vietnam. So that was a bit spooky.

**For sure.**

And Elizabeth Hogg came and saw me, she happened to be in Perth. I went to school with her son. She was involved in the Fremantle Prison guiding and all that sort

31:00 of thing since it's been closed down, terrific woman. She was over there, she decided she'd come and support me and see my farewell thing and it was quite eerie. I hadn't spoken to her for years and years and I was at my mate's shop getting ready to go out and see my son and who should ring me but Elizabeth Hogg, on that same day.

**Very spooky.**

It is spooky and as I say to be on the same parade ground and the whole lot. So you sort of look around and think, some things never change. Will we ever grow up?

31:30 No. Old men start wars, young blokes fight them and we all say, "I'm doing this because in the event we can stop the next one." Oh bullshit. You'll never stop the next one. There'll always be another one. The day you stop wars will be the day you can say that all these young blokes when they go down and get a skinful down at the pub won't throw a punch at each other. It's the same thing. It just goes on and on, we never learn

32:00 our lesson. We just fight each other periodically and then the ridiculous part is I'll probably be in Vietnam tomorrow and be meeting some ex Viet Cong blokes and slapping each other on the back and thirty odd years ago we're trying to kill each other. It's ridiculous.

**Would you ever consider going back?**

Yeah, I'll go back one day. It's not high on my list of priorities. I've been to Gallipoli a couple of times. I had a brother in law

32:30 in Foreign Affairs and he was in the Turkish embassy so I really made hay while the sun shone and went over and had a really good look around, walked the ground. I've got to do that for France and I want to see some of the World War II battle sites too. Been all through the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium and that sort of thing.

**Does that come from your collector's interest or?**

Collectors interest too

33:00 and I'd like to have a look at some of the Russian battlefields too. Sebastopol, from the early Crimean Wars. So that's it, yeah.

**Do you think that Vietnam veterans stick together, you know what I mean, they somehow are the same.**

They do a bit.

**Do you think that's because of the political repercussions of the Vietnam War?**

33:30 No.

**Was it a mateship thing?**

I think it's a mateship thing. As I said some of these blokes that we're all pals with, fellow Vietnam veterans and I know that it's probably a terrible thing to say but we probably would have called them pogo bastards overseas but when we got back and we were no longer the happy battalion together and all that sort of thing and you didn't have that many of

34:00 your coppers around. So you start to turn towards and you get introduced to Bill Bloggs and the bloke says, "Of course, Blue, he was in Vietnam as well." "Oh yeah, who were you with?" "Oh yeah." I know what you did, sweet fuck all. Not quite, I'm sorry.

**So you think there is a bit of a division still?**

Yeah. Of course what happened was

34:30 it took a while but in the end you sort of forgive him and adopt an attitude of at least he was in Vietnam so that's acceptable.

**At least he was there.**

Yeah, he was there. So that became the common denominator, just the fact that you went to Vietnam and who really does care. As I say you mature a bit too although it sounds like I never have but

35:00 you're supposed to mature a bit and your attitude is supposed to be one of greater understanding and I say understanding in as much as you should accept the fact that some of these people have to do these sorts of jobs it's just a same that they have to do it in such bloody luxury compared to what you copped.

**I can see that you're a very passionate person and I just wanted to thank you so much for talking to us today, you've been wonderful.**

Okay, thanks.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**