Australians at War Film Archive

Michael von Berg - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:45 **Mick, thanks for giving us your time today. I'd like to start off before we begin the interview proper if you could give me just a brief summary of your service details.**

Joined in 1962.

01:00 Went to Kapooka. 1st Recruit Training Battalion. From there I was posted to corps training at Ingleburn, the infantry centre. After corps training I was posted as a rifleman to 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment at Holsworthy and from there I was selected to attend the officer cadet school at Portsea, which I attended from January to December 1965.

01:30 Graduated and was posted to my battalion, the 5th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment. Graduated in December and was in Vietnam in April of 1966. Served with that unit right throughout Vietnam until July. Came home on leave and then was posted to the Special Air Service regiment in Swanbourne and from the Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment in Swanbourne was posted to

02:00 2 Commando Company at Fort Gellibrand in Victoria as the adjutant/quartermaster. From there posted to headquarters southern command as a staff captain responsible for ministerials and ministerial inquiries. From there posted back to my original battalion, 5 Battalion, as an officer and as adjutant. Upon resignation of my commission I was then posted to 1 Commando Company in

02:30 Sydney and then I basically disappeared out of the army.

And so what year was it that you left the army?

1973.

What

Nearly twelve years in the service.

Okay and that's fantastic. Thank you. And what did you do after the army?

I got out and went into merchant banking

03:00 and I was in merchant banking for almost six nearly seven years and worked in Sydney originally and then in London and then from merchant banking by accident got into the wine industry and then worked in the wine industry until 1990. I came back here. I was group marketing director of the Hardy Wine Company for seven years. After that period of time I'd felt that I'd had enough of the in being institutionalised

03:30 and corporatised. So therefore I went independent and I've been an independent consultant since 1991.

In wine.

No, I specialise in agribusiness. Wine, wool, meat, crops, horticulture, citrus. The whole agricultural area and I basically got that experience through detachments with the United Nations when I was in the merchant bank.

And family along the way?

Yes, I was married.

04:00 I've been separated since 19 oh fifteen years I think. Fifteen years and I've been in a relationship with another lady for fifteen years. I have two children from my marriage. I have a grandson from that marriage and although originally a bit acrimonious now the relationships are very good.

Fantastic. That's really good. Can you just turn the camera off for a minute?

04:30 **Okay Mick just to ask you, where were you born?**

I was born in Germany in 1943. On the Danube. A place called Vilshofen, which is in Bavaria but I'm Prussian by blood but because of 1943 things in northern Germany were starting to fall apart. So we had a family estate in the south of Germany and that's where I was born. In fact I was born in the same bed in which my grandmother died, which is interesting. Not at the same time. Yeah

05:00 in a monastery, which is in a near a place called Passau, which is on the Danube.

And how did your family or yourself how did you come to Australia?

Yeah, my mother and father divorced when I was about two in 1945. Germany was in total disarray. My mother was a doctor and she remarried. She married a chap called Deak, hence my name at that time, and we were in Switzerland

05:30 and Austria for some years but it was an increasing struggle and the opportunity came up to emigrate to Australia and that we did in the end of 1949 and we arrived here in Melbourne January 1950. We left Germany at something like I think ten degrees, fifteen degrees below and we arrived in Melbourne and at a place called Bonegilla near Albury at forty centigrade. So it was a huge culture and

06:00 climatic shock for most of us actually.

So it was the your mother and yourself and

Stepfather. Mhm.

And how did you settle in?

Oh look as a kid, I was only seven. You know I mean as a kid, kids are very adaptable. I mean we came over on the Fairsea. I was a prince of Fairsea, which is sort of a celebration they have when you cross the equator. They pick somebody to be,

06:30 a little kid to be the prince of Fairsea and of course I got a sash for that and for me it was an adventure. It really was. It was just fun. I had no idea why we were doing it or where we were going. For me it was just a total adventure and I had nothing but fond memories of the trip and also even fond memories of being ostensibly entombed if you can call it that, at the migrant camp at Bonegilla. We were only there for about I'd say six to eight weeks and then

07:00 my mother, who did not speak English very well, her first job was washing dishes in a country hotel and yet she was a doctor. So it was hard for them to start. Very, very difficult for them but for a youngster like me, I mean it was all fun. It was all an adventure. Learning the language was interesting as a young person. I went to a Catholic primary school. The first love of my life was Sister Pauline. I fell in love with her. She was a novitiate nun

07:30 and she taught me English and Maths and you know I mean Maths I was pretty good at anyway but she taught me English and I just progressed from there. That was in a country town, Wagga, in New South Wales.

And did you remain fluent in German?

Yes, I speak fluent German still today. I mean it was our mother tongue at home. My mother insisted upon it. I hated it at the time because she even used to speak German to me when we were out shopping, which

08:00 post war was a bit of a worry at times because I mean let's face it we were the enemy and you know sort of speaking German quite loudly in a public place was a bit sort of daunting and a bit embarrassing. But now in retrospect I'm very glad that she kept it up because it's helped me enormously in my travels in Europe and working in Germany and Austria and Switzerland.

And how did that, as you say the a slight stigma being German

Mm.

In

08:30 **Australia not long after World War II? So did that manifest in any way from locals or**

Yes, I think because I was I went to a Catholic school and most of the Catholic schools in those days were full of Irish kids. I mean they were first, second third generation Irish Catholics and you know I was in a punch up every day at school. Every day I was in a punch up and I used to come home with a split lip and a

09:00 broken nose and a cut above my head and one day Brother Barfield, who was our head master, I think it was Brother Barfield I can't remember, anyway he came and asked my mother as to whether he could teach me how to box. And of course my mother was horrified because she was a pacifist and she was totally against anything like that and of course I'd never been taught to be aggressive but she agreed because she could see that I wasn't unhappy at school but she could see that I was being

09:30 bullied basically. So he taught me how to box. Every afternoon you know and I must say I mean it was Christian Brothers and not one brother put a hand on me inappropriately. I mean they were just

fantastic and taught me to box and then I went into the gymkhana. We used to have boxing gymkhanas in those days and boxing was an acceptable form of Catholic upbringing in schools .And I'll never forget, there was a particular individual who was one of the bullies and

10:00 Brother Barfield matched me against this bully in the school tournament and I beat him and from that moment on my life changed. In terms of confidence, in terms of self esteem, in terms of not being frightened of anything or anyone. In terms of certainly in at primary and senior school, it just basically turned my life around because I was who I was. I couldn't change that but certainly

10:30 nobody was gonna put any rubbish on me. Interesting period in my life. That was from the age of about seven to nine roughly.

So you stopped getting so many split lips.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I ended up being one of the kids. One of the gangs and also one of the trouble makers because once you got in with the crowd you had to run with the crowd and you became one of the characters in the school who

11:00 you know often got the strap and often be stood in the corner and but again, I thought that was fun. That was all part of growing up.

And what would you get the strap for?

Oh not paying attention. I mean in those days with Christian Brothers, who were pretty hard men, you didn't have to do much wrong to get the strap. You didn't have to do much at all. They found an excuse and it was all part of upbringing and I don't think it's done any harm to be perfectly honest.

11:30 **And what about your mother? How did she fare? Did she**

Yeah.

Turn

Yeah she struggled. I mean got divorced again and remarried. She's been married three times and I guess initially she struggled, because she wasn't going to requalify. She just found that too daunting at the time. It was

12:00 tough times for migrants but it she found that if you're honest and you were prepared to work and put in the hours you did very, very well and she did extremely well where basically she retired in 1965 after owning a couple a hotels and a couple a restaurants. I mean she never went back to medicine. She just didn't bother. She was a physician and she just never bothered to go back to it. She found the opportunities in Australia at that time in terms of commercial opportunities,

12:30 far outweighed being a small country town GP or anything like that.

And how did you get on with your stepfather?

Oh I didn't get on with any of them really. You know it's typical. Being an only son at that time you're very protective of your mother and you find it all a bit strange. You know I never really knew my father. I got to know my father later in life, that's my birth father, but with stepfathers

13:00 and uncles and my mother was a very attractive woman. Very, very attractive woman and she had a lot of friends and I struggled a bit with that because you tend to be very protective of your mother and you're just sick and tired of seeing her get hurt. And I think what people underestimate is the initiative, the intuition of young people I think and they also underestimate their knowledge at a certain age group and I guess that's why I grew up very, very quickly and so therefore I mean

13:30 as far as I was concerned they came and they went. You know they were not an important part of my life.

And did you stay living in Wagga for or how long were you

No. Left there in let me think, we all left in 1960 I think from memory or '59 and we moved to Sydney and basically I finished school and then my mother always wanted me to be either an accountant

14:00 or a lawyer. Not a doctor, an accountant or a lawyer. I did accountancy for two years and I found it dead boring. Now in retrospect, I mean it's helped me enormously later in life but at the time I found it very boring and we lived at Point Piper in Sydney and one day I was going home on the tram I think and New South Head Road there used to be a tram and I saw a couple of these young army guys not misbehaving but laughing

14:30 and having fun and I thought, "Gee," you know, "I'd like to have a go at that and get out of accountancy," and that's exactly what I did. I got off the tram at Rushcutters Bay and went straight down to the recruiting depot and signed on and of course I came home to considerable distress at home, where initially you know refusing to sign documents because I was under nineteen and but finally she gave in and I joined the army.

15:00 **So that's interesting Mick. That sounds more like a whim more than**

Well yes and no. I mean we come from a long line of military people. My great grandfather was a minister for defence in the Kaiser's cabinet for instance. My great grandfather was, my mother on the other side of the family was a general in the German army and right through

15:30 if you trace our history to the 1600's I mean, we have basically military, civil servants and judges in our family. And I think it's just I'm not saying it's genetic or anything of that nature, it just something in me I guess being Germanic in part just wanted to have a crack at it, wanted to have a go and also at that time I was totally dissatisfied in what I was doing and I didn't know what I wanted

16:00 to do. So for me that was a bit of a an outlet. First thing my mother said is you know, "Why don't you become an officer?" and I said, "No," because in those days if you basically got a commission it was for life and I didn't know whether I wanted to join for life. So I joined for three years. In those days you could sign on for three years and I thought, "Oh well if I like it I keep going. If I don't I just go back to accounting." So for me it wasn't really a whim, it was a

16:30 definite decision where I was not happy in what I was doing and I decided to do something which was a bit more adventurous than book keeping.

So at that stage I'm just wondering what you actually knew about your father and your history, your family history

Yeah.

That you've just mentioned.

Yeah. At that time very, very little. Very little because the divorce between my mother and father was really quite acrimonious.

17:00 I mean they both come from very good families and there was a lot of blood letting and deliberately my mother said that my father was killed in the war. So I had no idea that my father was alive at all and that was part of the lie until I was about twenty one. So unfortunately I didn't know a lot about my father per se but I knew a lot on my mother's side because obviously I mean her brother for instance, was a flying officer in the Luftwaffe

17:30 in the last war and on her side there were a lot of pacifists but her brother actually served in the Luftwaffe. I didn't know much about my father's side until much 'til much later on.

So you knew some of the stories

Oh yes. I mean my

About the Second World War?

Oh yes. Oh yes. It very much so I mean, because I used to read about it and I was interested. I mean you know you if you're German and German born and you know the

18:00 Australians and the English and all of the allied forces have fought against the Germans I mean, you really wanted to know what it was all about. So I did enormous amount of reading just to study the history but I didn't know a lot about my father's side until I was much older.

But the military involvement from your family history is on your mother's side?

No, both. Both.

Both.

Both. Yes. Both but I guess it wasn't a

18:30 real driver but you know I guess being again, it being Germanic and having that, you know what they say. I mean one German on his own or her own is not bad. Two Germans are bearable and get three together and all they want to do is march all day. So there's a bit of that.

I hadn't actually heard that before but it's

Yeah.

Interesting.

Very true though. Very true.

19:00 **Right. Okay then, well so you got off the train.**

Yep. At Kapooka or at Bonegilla?

No, at no at in Rushcutters Bay.

Rushcutter yeah I got off the tram. I went straight down to the recruiting depot and just went in and said, "Look I want to join the army," and of course in those days I mean they were desperate for people to join the army. So it

19:30 wasn't hard. You know you do your IQ [Intelligence Quotient] test and get your medical but then because I was under nineteen I had to take the documents home for my mother to sign and that's when there was a World War III but in the end I had my way.

And what was her resistance?

Oh she felt that I was throwing away my life I think. You know and I was doing well in accounting. I was in my second or third year or just starting my third year and she felt that I was just throwing away my life and I didn't agree with her

20:00 and also I was very active. I was always again, because of my Christian Brothers background, I mean I was a very good sportsman. I played five sports for the army. So I was a very good sportsman and that's what I enjoyed as well. So you know here I could see with the army I was also going to be paid to play sport. So that was an additional incentive for me to join the army.

So before you joined the army what sort of sports were you playing?

I was swimming,

20:30 water polo, boxing obviously still. Rugby. I didn't do athletics and basketball until much later, until I joined the army but I mean the core sports for me really were boxing and swimming and rugby.

And would you have described yourself before you joined the army as a bit of a loner?

Ah yes, yes. A loner in terms of being quite happy with my own

21:00 company. Being quite happy with my own company but a team man. I mean you can be a loner in terms of being happy within yourself and on your own and with your own company but at the same time responding positively to team work. And I think being a loner sometimes too is not a negative things in terms of leadership qualities, because sometimes as a leader you you've got to make the hard decisions on your own, whereas if you're a

21:30 person that likes clusters I mean you tend to seek consensus to make decisions and I think sometimes leaders have to make hard decisions on their own. So therefore if they're used to making decisions on their own and being on their own I don't think it's a bad characteristic. I've got mates but I was quite happy with my own company as well and I think that's from being an only child. I mean from a very young age, you've just got to entertain yourself you know and it's part of if I had

22:00 I mean I've got a half brother now who lives in Germany from the second marriage but if you had you know plenty of siblings, well then obviously you wouldn't describe yourself as a loner but having been an only child I think circumstance makes you a bit of a loner.

It's just interesting to hear you joining up in the army at the in the early '60s

Mhm.

And I'm just

22:30 **wondering if any of your mates did it as well or you were**

No, no they didn't.

On your own.

I mean another thing that sort of spurred me on a bit. I mean I was a great believer in the domino theory. Again, that was part of my Catholic education where we really believed that Communists were gonna roll down here and that was the doctrine even at government level in those days and I'll never forget I was working in Pitt Street in Sydney and one particular day I came out because I used to catch the bus home

23:00 and then tram.

How old are you now?

Oh I'm sort of around about eighteen and one day I came out and I saw this huge headline in Martin Place in Sydney you know with just bold and all it said was war and it was the Cuban missile crisis and that's something that sort of stuck with me and I remembered that forever. Because this is not long after the war, the Second World War, it was probably one of the most profound

23:30 sort of news items that I can recall. You know then of course Kennedy's death and a few other things but just that huge headline in Martin Place and whether subconsciously it stimulated something in me to join the army I don't know but I was a rabid anti-Communist and a right wing, so far right just you know crazy and yeah, further right than Genghis Khan I would say and I

24:00 just felt that in a small way perhaps you know, I could do something and this is a kid that's eighteen. You know is not really mature. Hasn't studied political science but just felt that and of course we'd had Korea. Currently we had the insurgency in Malaya. We already had soldiers on active service and I just felt that you know it was an opportunity for me to do something. So it wasn't just impulse. I mean there was some political motivation as well that drove me to join

24:30 the army and again, an adventure really. I mean I'd been an action man all my life and it was an adventure and I think also part of my family background I got bored easily in jobs. I got bored easily in one location. I had to move. I had to look for the next challenge and I felt this was the next challenge for me.

And where do you think those early formulations of a belief system

25:00 **and values**

Oh my mother, definitely. Yeah. Oh she had strong views on everything. Very strong views and oh yeah, definitely. I mean definitely, no question about it. She had strong views and she imbued those in me and fair play and doing the right thing and all those sort a things. I mean they were very much my mother and I must say the Catholic education system. You know it's just one of those things that

25:30 in those days you know now with all of the adverse publicity but as I've said previously you know I'd had nothing but wonderful experiences in the Catholic education system and they did really teach us some wonderful values, which are lacking today in young people.

It is interesting to hear about those times and that headline that stuck with you.

Mm, very much so. Huge headline. It was just big blocks, 'War'

26:00 and underneath it in very small print you know, "Kennedy calls Khrushchev's bluff." That's I think the headline from memory and never forget it. Never forget it because I think having come from a country because of war and then you end up in Australia and you to get away from war I guess and the ravages of war and then you see this headline and you know as a young eighteen year old I thought, "Wow look at this." So I think subconsciously that probably had an effect as well.

26:30 **So you mentioned that you had to go through a medical of some sort when you**

Oh yes you know the old thing. Touch your toes, cough. All that sort a business that we go through and I mean I was super fit you know and I wasn't colour blind and I didn't have flat feet. So I mean they had to accept me and my intelligence was reasonable. So you know they took me and, as I say, I got the documents signed and

27:00 then I'll never forget, we reported to South, South Head? Yes, South Head, which was the old artillery depot and of course got up there with a great bunch of new recruits so to speak. We were all in civvies and we had from memory I think we had two nights up there or three nights up there sort of before we could catch the bus to the train station to go to Kapooka and we had a wild time. Absolute at the Watson's Bay Hotel and

27:30 we just had a wild time and I'll never forget we had a warrant officer class 1 up there called Ronnie the One. He was a Scot, Ron McDonald and he used to get us to do the most menial tasks you know just to keep us occupied I think. Just picking up cigarette butts and matches and all that sort of thing you know and I thought, "Oh God what have I let myself in for?" You know that's the first thing I thought. "What have I let myself in for?" Anyway and we tolerated

28:00 that because we were drunk every night down at the Watson's Bay Hotel and we'd come back to barracks. The next day we'd pick up some more butts and more matches and then I think three days later, I think they used to get them in from all over New South Wales you know and parts of Australia I guess. And then we bussed down to Central Station, caught a train and then got off the train in Wagga and by bus then to Kapooka and then we had recruit training where it all happened.

So just

28:30 **one question before we go on, why not the navy or the air force?**

I'd had a bad experience, when I was thirteen I thought about the navy. I even at thirteen because in those days you could get a bursary to Jervis Bay, which was a naval academy but I had a real bad experience coming out here on the Fairsea. In those days the Fairsea was an old Norwegian air craft carrier that had been converted to

29:00 a so called passenger ship. I'd say a stock vessel would be better. Livestock shipper would be better and because I was six or seven I couldn't sleep in the women's quarters for obvious reasons. So I had to sleep in the men's quarters on my own but it was up forward, the front of the vessel, and it was just a huge cavernous you know steel bulk heads everywhere and double bunks all over the place and of course the forward part of the vessel

29:30 is the roughest part of the vessel and I got terribly sea sick and I thought, "Mm, mm no. Navy not for me." Air force, there's only one thing I'd be if I joined the air force and that would have been a pilot and I really didn't have the physics to be a pilot. My maths was general maths was good but my maths 1 was pretty ordinary. So I just didn't have the education to be a pilot so and I thought, "Well, I'll join the army"

30:00 and also I like my feet on the ground. I think that's sort of part of the security angle.

And how did you feel as a migrant still relatively

Mhm.

New in the country joining the Australian services?

Yeah. I mean I think because in those days my name was Deak, D-E-A-K, and doesn't sound Germanic at all

30:30 and I didn't have a German accent. I was an Aussie. I mean everybody thought I was an Aussie actually. So it had no sort of adverse affect at all. I mean it's only when somebody asks me where I was born that they realise, "Jeez, you're German. I didn't know that. Wow." So no, there was absolutely nothing adverse at all and once I was sort of at that, remember too that I'd learned to look after myself. So I mean I was boxing at Kapooka.

31:00 You know so I didn't have any difficulties at all. I was playing rugby at Kapooka. I mean I was selected to play inter service rugby for the army out of Kapooka as an eighteen year old recruit. One of the few that's ever achieved that and I think because of my sport and because of my character I mean you know I just didn't have any difficulty at all. You know I was just one of the gang, one of the guys.

Well what was on the syllabus at Kapooka when you got there?

Oh lots

31:30 of drill. Lots of drill, which actually I liked believe it or not. I enjoyed the discipline and I just enjoy the team work. I mean watching a company on parade shouldering arms and attention and standing at ease and presenting arms. I mean and if you get it right, I get goose bumps just thinking about it, if you get it right, you just hear like on the present arms or the royal salute where everybody just slams their foot down at the same time

32:00 I mean it's you say, "Wow, gee that was good." So that whole recruit training for me again, it was fun. It was an adventure. You know I boxed. I swam. I played rugby. I learned how to shoot. All those sort a things. I mean it was fun. So again, for me it was an adventure and I'd also made friends at Kapooka that have been friends for life, interestingly enough who didn't become officers. Who stayed on as soldiers but they

32:30 became friends for life. So we all came from all walks of life. That was the interesting thing. You know we had guys that came from well-to-do families and we had guys that were jackaroos, garbage collectors, out of gaol or about to go back into gaol. You know we had a real if you like mix of society and to throw people together like that into a training environment

33:00 and to see just how well they get on I think that's one of the strengths of military service. And I think that's one of the things that I believe in National Service, I really do, simply because I think youngsters today need more discipline. I'm not suggesting two years and I'm not suggesting take them to war or anything like that but I think a period of time in the military just teaches young people discipline and values and that's really what my whole recruit training was about and at the time there, all

33:30 I wanted to do was basically to join infantry. You know they come out and say, "Well which corps do you want to go to?" and I didn't fancy myself in a tank. I didn't fancy myself sitting behind a gun like artillery and I just wanted to go to infantry because it was, it's always been my ambition to get into SAS and it and infantry was the best corps in those days - it really was mostly infantry that got into SAS. They didn't take people from other corps until much later. So for me it was always my ambition to

34:00 be an SAS soldier. So I went to infantry. So you know I did my three months at Kapooka and had two trips away from Kapooka as a sports man playing for the army, which was great because I didn't have to do the dishes, I didn't have to drill. It got me out of a lot of work, sport, it was fantastic and it got me out of a lot of work later on in life too in the army. I represented the army at swimming and we went to Nowra navy base where we

34:30 competed against the navy and the air force. I was very much a medley swimmer of the four strokes, a relay swimmer and a hundred metres. Then selected for rugby. They flew me to train or something I can't recall, probably train in those days to South Head ah North Head artillery base, where I represented the army in 1962 at rugby in June or July or something. So

35:00 you know that whole sort of recruit training for me was again, it was fun. It was an adventure. I didn't find anything untoward and you know like after a day's work or you know if we had any money left, we'd go up to the diggers' boozer and have a few beers and a bit of a giggle. And again, I made friends there that stayed friends for life and a very interesting if you like period, in terms of my development as an officer, was the fact that I'd actually done recruit training as a soldier.

35:30 Very much so.

And what sort of mentoring was there?

Very good actually. Very good. I mean at Kapooka I had a platoon commander whose name was Charlie Barnett. He was an Australian modern decathlon, athlete. Great bloke. Service corps and a good officer. Duntroon graduate. A really good officer and he used to support everybody but because he was an athlete

36:00 Himself, he would mentor and nurture young men that had athletic ability. So I just found him very, very good. Very, very good as a young officer. In fact I caught up with his son some years ago where we had a bit of a yarn and a bit of a giggle.

And I'm also wondering just about your in this training period who your instructors were and

Yeah, look I

36:30 really can't remember who my instructors were at Kapooka to be honest and the reason I can't remember them is that I don't think they were special. People that I remember are people that have made a mark on my life and as part of my life's journey, there were probably some nondescript NCOs there that I mean one particular guy I do remember and he was good, because he was on the rugby team with me. That was Bombardier

37:00 Kelly and the reason I remember him is because he was a good corporal and we did play rugby together and he was a regular guy but the others I can't remember. I'd have to really think about it.

And just in that those early kind of stages were you a rebel in any way or did

Oh yes. Oh yeah I I've always been a rebel. Always.

37:30 It's either a flaw in my character or it's what's kept me alive. You know it's either one or the other. It's either a minus or a plus but no, I've always been a bit of a rebel. Not in a soldiering way. I've always been very disciplined in soldiering but socially I used to get myself into a bit of a trouble from time to time, mostly with booze. Mostly the booze. I mean one particular

38:00 time with Bob Sinclair, who's one of these guys that you know I was ended up being his best man. I mean Bob Sinclair and I were both rugby players and we went away to Griffith together to play against Griffith, I think it was a Griffith rugby union team or something and he and I won some money in the poker machine. A lot a money in those days and he and I made a what we call a group six decision. A group

38:30 six is a rate of pay. We were on group one as a recruit but as you go up the ranks you as a non commissioned officer you get into groups. Anyway we made a what we call a group six decision and we decided, we met up with a couple of young ladies and we decided to miss the bus, which we did. So we spent the night in Griffith and we got a bus the next day and as we were going down to Kapooka with a cab,

39:00 we caught a cab in Wagga and we arrived at the front gate. The guard commander threw us straight in the gaol, which we both thought was hilarious. So that's what they used to do. You know I mean we were AWOL [AWL – Absent Without Leave], we were absent without leave. Although it was a Sunday we were still recruits. We were on duty when playing rugby but we were totally irresponsible. We'd had a gut full a grog. We had a couple a good looking women who

39:30 were looking very attractive by this stage of inebriation and we said, "Well we're not going back." So they threw us into gaol and we were charged and we both got I think from memory seven days confined to barracks and that was tough. I mean they really used to drive you very hard in terms of getting on the square with your pack and your rifle and your helmet and marching around and it taught me a lesson. It taught me a lesson. Don't get

40:00 caught. If you're gonna do something just don't get caught. You know so that was a misdemeanour. So you know when you say "a bit of a rebel" yes. I was. I was a bit of a rebel. Even later in life as an officer I was a bit of a rebel. So it's part of my character. I mean I can't change that. Never wilful, never wilful just full of fun I think.

Well our tape's just about to run out so we'll just change it.

40:30 Okay.

That's a very good character description.

Tape 2

00:31 **So where did you go after your three months at Kapooka, Mick?**

To the infantry training centre at Ingleburn where we learned to be infantry soldiers and we have some great officers and NCOs at that place. Fantastic. Really very, very good. I mean the commanding officer was a guy called Colonel O'Dea, who was just a terrific

01:00 bloke. Tough as nails and I had a platoon commander called Brian Doyle, who was again a tough bloke but a good bloke and yeah, they put us through our paces there and that again, that was fun. It was just across the road from the Ingleburn hospital, where there were a lot of nurses, so you know you could always get yourself into a bit of trouble and we had again, rugby. I had rugby there for the period and

01:30 in fact I was captain of the rugby side, which again is pretty rare for a guy of my age, cause I had older blokes in the team. But for whatever reason they elected me to be captain of the side and we played within the army competition in Sydney. So that was a three month course, which is really just to train you to be an infantry soldier and then from there you go onto one of the battalions and I was very lucky that I was posted to 1st Battalion, which is a good battalion,

02:00 which is just across the road in Holsworthy.

And what did you know of 1 Battalion?

Oh not a lot. Not a lot. I mean it was convenient for me because it was in Sydney and you know I mean a lot of my school friends and you know my mother was still in Sydney at that time and I thought, "Well Sydney'll do me." The other battalion was in Queensland and another battalion was in Malaya. So it suited me to go to 1 Battalion

02:30 because I knew the terrain so to speak but also 1 Battalion had a very good name as a combat unit. So I was quite honoured to go to that battalion.

So sorry, this is at Holsworthy?

Yeah. Yeah.

And what was Holsworthy like at this time? This is now 19

'63.

'63?

Mm. Oh '62, the end of '62. Oh it was typical of the time. I mean they were all wooden buildings.

03:00 Soldiers slept in huts. There were no divisions or anything. You just ten of you slept in a hut. The little room at the end of the hut called the jack room which was the section commander's room, which where he had privacy but nobody else did. Communal showers. Communal kitchens. You know you just queued up in a queue and went and had breakfast, lunch and dinner. Yeah, it was lots of parade grounds. I mean every company had a parade ground. I mean you got to march and you got to drill

03:30 and no, they were good times. They were good time. I really enjoyed myself in 1 battalion because at that time 1 Battalion was what they call pentropic. Pentropic is five. Five of everything. We had five companies. There were five platoons in each company. There were five sections in each platoon. It was an American organisation basically, which the Australian army at that time was trying on. So 1 Battalion was huge. I mean I think it was something like

04:00 overall twelve or fifteen hundred men whereas now the average battalion's only eight hundred. We had a terrific commanding officer, Colonel Sandy Pearson, who ended up being General Pearson, Chief of Army. We had a good company commander at that time. I had a good platoon commander when I first got there Barry French, who was just out of Portsea, and very, very good Second World War and Korea and

04:30 Malaya section commanders. I had some old heads as our sort of non commissioned officers and yeah, no I at that time just had a ball. I mean I really enjoyed my soldiering in 1 Battalion but again, I did very well in my soldiering but occasionally strayed in terms of my social misdemeanours.

Just one question I want to go to back to before joining 1 Battalion, did you at the end of

05:00 **your training period**

Mm.

Before you joined 1 Battalion did you have any passing out or graduation

Oh yes.

Ceremony?

Oh yes. My word. Yeah, we had a passing out parade. I've got photographs of that. We actually passed out, well Kapooka we had a passing out parade. At Ingleburn infantry centre we had a passing out parade. Oh yeah my word. You know and that's all part of the traditions of the army. You know you've done well, you've graduated. You can now march off to your new unit

05:30 and so yeah we did all of that before we went to 1 Battalion.

And how well did you pass your exams?

Oh look I must have passed well. I mean look, in at inf centre I can't recall whether there's a pecking order per se. I know I can talk about Portsea where there is but at inf centre I don't think there is a pecking order. You just passed you know and I'm sure somewhere along the line there's some sort of a report that says you know how you passed but where I can't recall. I didn't bother

06:00 but at 1 Battalion I then did a promotions course to corporal and I think from memory I came third on

that course out of something like fifty or sixty applicants and very pleasingly the guys that beat me, one of them is an officer who went on to Portsea, Bill Hindson, who's now retired in Canberra and I think he topped the course and the guy that came second

06:30 was Blue Mulby who ended up being my platoon sergeant in Vietnam. So you know I mean I don't mind being beaten by those guys, because both are terrific soldiers and good blokes but again, you know in terms of the quality of my soldiering I mean I came third on that course and the other two guys are great soldiers as well. So I was very, very satisfied with that.

I was going to ask you about your ranking and whether you joined 1 Battalion as a

Private, yeah.

07:00 I got my stripe, after that particular course I got my stripe and I think I had it for a day or maybe two days. Yes, we had an exercise called Sky High no, I had it more than a day, we had an exercise called Sky High up in the Blue Mountains somewhere I can't remember, Singleton somewhere up that way and we'd finished the exercise and

07:30 we were drinking at some pub in Singleton I seem to recall. And the publican, the actual publican asked me to come around and help him pour the beer because it was just so busy you know. So I, "All right, sure I I'll help you." Mind you, I'm, "One for me, one for you." You know I mean I he said, "Look help yourself." You know so

Are you in uniform?

Yeah. Yeah I was in uniform. Yep, my word and bush gear you know just bush gear and somebody

08:00 at the other side of the counter was giving me a hard time so I belted him. He was drunk and disorderly and he was not being very nice. So I just grabbed him over the bar and belted him and forgot all about it. Completely forgot all about it until we'd got back to Holsworthy where the company commander called me up and he said, "Mick, there's somebody threatening you with an assault charge." I said, "What for?" He said, "You belted somebody at Singleton." I said, "Yeah, some drunk," you know, "who was making a pest of himself"

08:30 and he said, "That drunk happens to be a solicitor in Singleton." So I lost my stripe but I got it back. I got it back. I lost my stripe and I thought, "Mm, okay. Next time if I do that I won't be in uniform," basically.

And how did you get it back?

Ah oh just being a good boy and not belting anybody for awhile. You know I just did what I did and my platoon commander at that

09:00 time recommended me to go back up and I did. So I'd learnt my lessons I think.

And so how long were you with 1 Battalion

Three years.

For?

Three years, yep. Three years and I had three very, very happy years. Very happy years and I thoroughly enjoyed my soldiering. I really did and again, I made friends there and I ended up getting to corporal you know section

09:30 commander. I ended up having a fantastic platoon commander, Pud Ross, who interestingly also won a Military Cross in Vietnam. He was ex-SAS and Pud was platoon commander and one day he and I were having a chat and again, I was playing rugby and I was playing water polo and I was doing all those sort of things but also doing some fairly serious soldiering and one day Pud Ross called me into his office,

10:00 platoon commander's office and said, "Look Mick you ever thought of going to Portsea?" And I said, "Not really," you know and he said, "No seriously, you ever thought of going to Portsea?" And I said, "Well why?" You know and he said, "Well," you know, "you've got the education, you've got the qualities. You've got the leadership qualities. You've got the I guess everything they're looking for. You play sport." He said, "You play rugby and they definitely need rugby players at Portsea," and I said, "Well look, thanks very much

10:30 but I want to just talk to a few people about it." And there was one particular guy in the battalion who I played rugby with and who I drank with and who was my one of my mentors and that was a guy called 'Dasher' Wheatley, who won the Victoria Cross posthumously. And I spoke to Dasher and he was a sergeant at the time. He was not in my company. He was in B Company but because of rugby we were mates and I spoke to him and I spoke to another chap called I remember

11:00 Terry Loftus, who was also a rugby player, and I just said, "Look," you know I mean, "what do you reckon?" And they said, "Mick, go for it." You know and that sort of helped me and then a couple of other NCOs in my company, in E company, also said, "Look, go for it," and then I looked at a couple of platoon commanders that we had in our company who were absolute dickheads and I thought, "Well if they can do it I can do it," and that's what spurred me on. I thought you know they were just

11:30 very poor platoon commanders and I thought, “Well,” you know, “I can’t do any worse than these and also I want to make a difference to soldiers. I want to make a difference. I want to be a good platoon commander,” and I thought, “Well I’ll apply.” So I applied and of course the thing with Portsea is applying is one thing, getting selected is another. You know but getting back to 1 Battalion, in that three year period I mean I met some fantastic officers,

12:00 some great NCOs and great soldiers and I really thoroughly enjoyed my soldiering in that battalion and again, some of those people that I met in that battalion are still friends today.

Well before we move on to Portsea just a couple more question on 1 Battalion.

Mm.

That whole time you were living in barrack?

Yep. Yep. I was a single man living in barracks. My word. Yeah in those days very few people lived out, single

12:30 people lived out. I mean it wasn’t encouraged. Really the people that lived out were married people or people in relationships but single people all lived in. It was cheap. You know I mean no rent and cheap food and why would you want to live out? And also it was part of the sort of camaraderie and part of the team work and part of the fun was living in barracks and it wasn’t unpleasant. I mean it wasn’t air conditioned. It was miserably hot and but you know I mean you could always

13:00 go for a walk or you could always find an air conditioned pub somewhere. So you know it was part of the if you like the culture in those days to live in. So you know we just lived in.

And you said you did some serious soldiering during those three years.

Mm. Mm.

So what was the nature of that serious

Oh most

Soldiering?

Mostly exercises and hard exercises. Very, very hard exercises. I mean one of them was when we found out Kennedy had been shot. You know

13:30 we were up in the mountains somewhere and we were actually totally rained in. They couldn’t get supplies in and I was a smoker in those days. Not a heavy smoker. Sort of a social smoker and we ended up smoking tea leaves. I mean that’s how desperate we were and grass. I mean not grass marijuana like pasture grass you know because we were rained in for I think it was about four or five days and

14:00 we were in a tent. It was raining and I’d picked up this thing on a radio saying Kennedy had been assassinated and it was November ‘63 I think from memory and or ‘64. Can’t remember. Anyway I said, “What was that?” So Kennedy’s been assassinated and that just again, with me it just left an incredible mark on me. That whole thing you know. How could anybody possibly you know assassinate Kennedy

14:30 because I thought Kennedy was fantastic. We all did in those days, although he was a Democrat you know but he stood up to Khrushchev and all that sort of thing and that sort of shocked us a bit you know but it was a hard exercise and we were given hard tasks. You know and they were tasks in those days I mean Vietnam was not on the radar. We had troops committed in Malaya and

15:00 we were basically stand by ready to go anywhere, so they used to put us through some fairly hard exercises but we all enjoyed them cause that’s really why we joined the army, for soldiering and being around the barracks and bashing dixies and you know what bashing dixies is? Washing pots and pans and being on the square, being on the parade ground, I mean it’s an essential part of soldiering but it’s not why we join the army. We join the army to get out and play war games or maybe have

15:30 real war games and 1 Battalion in those days did a lot of really good exercises and that was a serious part of the soldiering and I really enjoyed that.

So they were simulated

Yes.

Sort of field exercises?

Yeah. You know bullets, bullets. You know you didn’t have any bullets, you just had blanks but you had to sort of go through you know your tactics and you know your sort of everything that you’d been taught at infantry centre and everything you were taught by your platoon commanders and section commanders. You had to go through all of those drills

16:00 contact drills etcetera and yeah, I again, I found it an adventure. I found it fun. Very much so. So it was a serious time. I mean it was after Korea, Malaya was still going, Borneo was just about to start. You know so we were all basically training for war. It wasn’t just to keep us busy, we really were training for

war. So when we did go out I mean we all treated it very, very seriously. Now once we finished and we came back

16:30 and you know there was a wonderful watering hole in Liverpool called the Railway Hotel, which is infamous absolutely infamous oh yeah, we'd get on the grog and just you know relax and be totally irresponsible but out in the bush, out in the field I mean I can't recall anybody that wasn't serious about what they were doing. Very much so.

And you did mention that 1 Battalion had some Korean

Yes.

Veterans.

My word. My word. Well

17:00 my first platoon sergeant was a guy called, he's passed away now poor bloke but Whistling Tim Tyler and when I say whistling, when he used to get drunk he used to whistle when he talked. So we all found that very, very funny. We had another guy called Shorty Mavern, unfortunately also now passed away, who was Korea. The other section commander was a chap called Ernie Miskell, who was a roly poly funny bloke. He was also

17:30 Korea and Malaya and one very interesting person who well I hope he's still alive. I mean I know the others have passed away but a chap called Brian Moss, who was ex-Scots guards and ex-Rhodesian police force and ex-Malaysian police force and he was actually my sec first section commander at 1 Battalion and he was a great soldier. I mean just a great on a parade ground and also great in the bush because he'd actually done the hard yards

18:00 in Rhodesia and also Malaya in terms of jungle warfare and he was very, very good. So I was very lucky to sort of get that mix of people from the start and then Col Cooper, who's another one who's now passed away, he was just a wonderful bloke. Stretch Witheridge, who is now living in New South Wales and Bob Armitage. All these guys you know, all NCOs I served with a lot of them when I went back to 5 battalion in Vietnam because basically oh we'll get to that, they made a mistake sending me back to

18:30 5 that's all I'll say.

We'll come to that later

Yeah.

Story but it is interesting to hear how you learnt about the Korean War from mixing with these

Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean you know on the booze they'd always say, "Oh," you know I'd say, "Oh God it's cold," you know. They, "Oh not as cold as the winter of '52." You know they'd sort of revert talk about the winter of '52 in Korea, which apparently was absolutely miserable, forty degrees below, and yeah, no but they were good soldiers. I mean

19:00 they were rascals, they were rascals in terms of leading young men astray on the booze and all that sort a stuff but very competent and characters. I think part of the problem with the modern army today is that it's trying to stamp out characters and it's all trying to have this regimental number which is uniform all the way just down the middle you know and I think it's sad. Cause I think society also

19:30 is trying to stamp out characters and characters really is what makes a lot of society. You've got to have a laugh. Can I have a drink?

Absolutely.

Excuse me.

You do have to have a laugh. So what happened tell us about OCS at Portsea?

Yep. Well

20:00 I got selected and very nearly didn't go because of belting that solicitor in Singleton and the XO [Executive Officer] of the battalion at the time, this is an interesting story. The XO of the battalion at that time was a chap called Colonel John Warr and he tried very hard for me not to go because of this incident that I got stuck into and Colonel Coleman, who was the commandant of OCS [Officer Cadet School] basically told John

20:30 Warr to mind his own business and you know, "Deek's coming down to Portsea." I think he needed a flanker, he needed a breakaway in rugby so and that's the position that I played. So thankfully, thankfully Colonel Coleman agreed but the ironic thing is that John Warr is just a wonderful human being, cause he ended up being my commanding officer in

21:00 Vietnam. The same guy that tried to stop me from going to Portsea ended up being my CO and just a wonderful Christian. Just a wonderful individual. So anyway I my went to Portsea and I was a corporal and I had my wings, 1 Battalion I also did my parachute course at Williamstown as well. So I was already a super soldier as they called us with my parachute wings etcetera. Do you want me to go back

to that?

Well that's interesting.

21:30 Mm.

So how many jumps did you have to do to

Ah eight. Eight jumps to qualify you know and that was interesting because again, we had a lot of fun up there. Hard course but we had a lot of fun and

Do you remember your first jump?

Oh yes. Yeah. Yeah very much so. Yeah cause all the old instructors said it was better than sex. Yeah, they did. They did and I said, "Oh really?"

22:00 And by that stage I'd had a bit of experience at the former and they're single jumps. In other words you get a plane full it was an old DC-3. Do you know what a DC-3 is? The old biscuit bomber and we were all sitting there with our helmets and reserves and chutes and God knows what else and they are single jumps. You've got to go round and you go out on your own, not on a stick. You go out on your own and the instructors are down the bottom with megaphones actually talk

22:30 you down. So your feet position and your elbows are out, chin all that sort of stuff and of course I was probably, oh I'd say second or third last and the instructors did it deliberately, because you get terribly air sick. You're just going round and round and seriously I was glad they had me second or third last, because I couldn't wait to get out of the aircraft whereas the first guys you know, they're a little bit apprehensive. I mean you

23:00 are at something like fifteen hundred feet and you know I mean, especially being first up to the door you're first to go but by the time I was ready to jump, I was ready to jump because I was really starting to feel a little bit squeamish. Anyway I left the air craft and did my thing and landed comfortably and packed up my chute and walked to the vehicle and went back to the hangar and then we were debriefed but it certainly wasn't better than sex. So I don't know where they got that

23:30 from. I have no idea and then

But was it exhilarating?

Oh yes. Absolutely. What I recall quite clearly and that first jump is the feeling of freedom and almost I mean you're like a bird and you can see for miles. You know just unimpeded view all the way round and just freedom. I mean you're just up there you know and the only thing that's holding you is a bit of dirty washing that's sort of up there

24:00 and yeah, I think total freedom and also doing something which is not natural for man. I mean you know man's not supposed to fly. So again, you're doing something which is what's the word I'm looking for? Which is unique and again, that was all part of my master plan for me in the army, which was to finally get to SAS where you do a lot of parachuting. And so that particular course was a selection course for airborne platoon but in those days

24:30 they only took I think one or two into the platoon, which is a demonstration platoon, and my parachuting wasn't good enough to be a you know I never used to land, I used to arrive.

What does that mean?

Ah you walk away it's a good landing, whereas if you were doing demonstrations I mean you've got to land the right way and look good and I used to just come ploughing in cause I was sixteen stone. I was a big parachutist you know. So you'd come in a bit quicker than the rest and 'boom' and

25:00 you know. Shake yourself and check yourself and, "I think I'm okay." So you pack up your chute and away you go. But it was a good thing to do because it gave me parachute money. In those days I think it was something like an extra seven shillings and sixpence a day or something, which you know was good and you had to keep yourself current. You had to do so many jumps a year. I think two or three a year to stay current but that was my second year in 1 Battalion.

25:30 That's when I went up to do that course and then you do your other jumps, your night jumps. Night jump was interesting because you land about four times because you have no idea of distance and you're getting ready to land and your feet are starting to get ready and a course you're still about four or five hundred feet off the ground. And we did a water jump and again, that's something a bit different and yeah, no it's a great course

26:00 and the instructors up there are just magnificent. Wonderful instructors and the safety procedures are spot on and again, the guys you're doing the course with I mean you never forget them.

And where did you do your water jump?

Ah in Port Stephens. Just north of Newcastle, which is just a you know you don't jump with a reserve. You just jump with a main chute and so far off the ground you just unbuckle and just fall into the water and the chute

26:30 is picked up by a some people in little rubber ducky.

So that would have given you some extra skills

Yes.

While you were with

Yes.

1 Battalion?

Yep. Definitely.

So then you did finally arrive at

Portsea?

Portsea, where

I did. I did. My word. Yes and I'll never forget the first thing we did cause I've got

27:00 tattoos on both arms and

Can I just ask you before

Yeah.

We go on, are you at this stage a still free uncommitted single man by the time you get to Portsea?

Yeah. Oh yeah. My word. My word and I'll never forget as soon as we got there they sort of got us to our rooms or whatever and we had to get into our running gear and all the DS [Directing Staff] staff sit up on this grandstand and they watch the cadets run round and round until they're

27:30 in a state of total exhaustion. And there was Jimmy Black, who was from SAS and he's got tattoos, and there was another guy and the three of us with our tattoos are running around and round and they're saying, "Who are these guys?" "Who are these guys?" And, "They're going to be officers. They've got tattoos," you know. Anyway we just ran and ran and finally ran the rest into the ground you know. Not in terms of beating or winning but we just kept going and we'd been on the booze all Christmas. You know this is January in the heat in Victoria where you're

28:00 running around in a circle for I don't know, we must have run about five miles you know and yeah, that was a first sort of sight that the DS staff had of me and they sort of cause they sort of think, "My God what are we got here? What are we got here?" They have no idea who you are you know and yeah, it was an interesting period where you made an impression from day one basically

28:30 because it as a digger I got tattooed.

Well I was going to ask you about those tattoos and were those tattoos a sort of a rite of passage in a way?

Yes. Yes. I mean stupid. I mean I'd never do it again. It was just one of those stupid things that happens. You know you sort of you're drunk and not drunk, but certainly inebriated and well a lot of the guys from Korea and Borneo and Malaya I mean they all had tattoos. It was almost

29:00 a badge of office in those days and peer pressure and also again, a bit of the rebel coming out you know and, "Oh well let's go and get one done." So you get one done and get two done and then three and then maybe four and it was just part of the culture I think in those days and it's coming back and not just males.

And was that during your 1 Battalion time?

Yeah. Yeah. 1 Battalion. Oh yeah, I mean you know mother was horrified and all that sort of stuff but I

29:30 didn't care. I mean again, in those days I had no intention of becoming an officer. I just wanted to be one of the diggers. I want just want to be one of the corporals and just about everybody in our company or in our platoon had some sort of a tattoo. So you know, "Oh well I'll go and get one done." So you go and get it done you know.

And how did you choose what to

Oh I don't think you really choose. You know I mean at stage you think, "Oh that one looks good, I'll take that."

30:00 No, I don't have any female names put it that way or, "I love you Mum." I don't have any of those. You know they're all pretty straightforward.

But you did show your mum?

Oh yes. Oh yes. Oh yes. Absolutely and she was horrified. She was horrified but you know there's nothing you can do about it. In those days we didn't have laser technology and you know I mean I wouldn't remove them anyway now, because they're part of my character and part of my life.

And

30:30 **is that when you you know during that time began like really felt like you were a digger then?**

Oh yes. Oh very much so. Very much so. I mean I was enjoying it. I was enjoying it immensely and that's one of the reasons I hesitated for a while of going o Portsea. Cause I thought I'd miss my mates and I thought, "Oh I won't be able to play rugby for the battalion," you know. Yeah, I hesitated but when Dasher Wheatley in particular

31:00 said, "Look mate," he said, "You've got to do it." You know, "If you're gonna stay in this man's army the future is to be an officer. Go and do it. You've got the brains, go and do it." I thought, "Oh well I'll go and do it," you know but originally I had no desire and also I thought, "Well I'll just do this for three years," but then I was really enjoying it after that getting close to that three year period that I thought I'd sign on for another six and maybe you know get to the dizzy heights of warrant officer or something like that. You know I really was

31:30 enjoying what I was doing.

So what was on the agenda at Portsea? What

Oh again, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I mean Portsea without question probably was one of the best arms military colleges in the world. Very much so. I mean I've I have the highest regard for Duntroon

32:00 obviously, which was in those days the Royal Military College, where they do four years and obviously a lot of academic work but Portsea just had a wonderful syllabus. It had wonderful instructors and it just had a wonderful culture of training infantry officers in particular. More infantry officers than armoured corps or artillery and it was just a great course. I really thoroughly enjoyed it and although I

32:30 still got into the odd social misdemeanour there, which we can talk about later, but I really got stuck into it you know and by that I mean I was serious about graduating. I mean we went there with a hundred students and in my class only sixty four graduated and I graduated thirteenth in my class and I hardly studied. You know I mean when I say I hardly studied, I mean I did study but I didn't study as seriously as a lot of

33:00 other people and that's something now I regret because in retrospect I think to myself, "Well how much better could I have graduated had I really put my mind to studying," but again, I was having too much fun. I was playing rugby for the OCS. That played in the first grade competition in Melbourne. I ran. I was then back into athletics. You know I competed at the what they call ISCAM, the Inter Services College Athletic Meeting against Point Cook and also Port, um

33:30 Cape Jervis or whatever they call the damn thing, the navy academy, and again, I was having fun. You know but in retrospect now I just say to myself you know, "Gee, how much better could I have graduated had I studied?" Now the thing is nobody looks at your graduation from Portsea until you get much later in rank in terms of the stud book, what they call the blue book [Seniority List of Officers], but you know now, in retrospect I think, "Well yes, I could have done

34:00 better but it wouldn't have made any difference to my life basically."

So what were you studying?

Military arts. I mean we have a whole range of organisations and logic and military history and then we do subjects as well like English and military writing and staff duties and I mean it's an all round course. It's full on. Very long hours and night work

34:30 as well and yeah, what it tries to do, it tries to if you like yes, develop you into an infantry officer but at the same time also just round you off a bit better as well in terms, oh we used to have dancing lessons. We used to call them the dragon squad. They used to bring in what we called the dragons, which was again, a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun where we had to learn how to dance

35:00 properly and hold our partners properly. I was very lucky because my mother had taught me how to dance. I knew how to waltz, put it that way and then you know they teach you the sort of gypsy tap and the Canadian three step and foxtrot and all that sort of stuff you know and yes, yeah, they used to get a bus full of dragons we used to call them the dragon squad and they they'd bring them in. Oh there's some wonderful girls amongst them. I mean some really good looking women too but I guess it's just a nickname the cadets gave

35:30 to the dancing group that used to come in.

Were they service women?

No. No. They were all from Rye and Rosebud and Mornington and Portsea and all looking for a young officer I suspect you know but they didn't have a lot a luck with me.

So this is like an introduction into society in a way?

Yes and it was also how to conduct yourself. I mean they you know they taught you table manners and all that. I mean I was very lucky again because I'd

36:00 had all that as a kid. I mean my mother was a strict disciplinarian when it came to table manners and yeah, it was sort of to round you off. So in other words as you go through life as a as an officer, you can sit with the Governor General and have a meal and not be embarrassed. I mean you know to start from the outside and work in and all that sort of business whereas a lot of guys that went to Portsea had no idea. So for them it was a good thing you know and I'm not saying that to belittle them. It's just they hadn't had the opportunity.

36:30 I was very lucky, I'd had the opportunity so I was pretty comfortable with it all but no, it was a just a full on course of, if you like, the arms the fighting thing and the tactics, military tactics in particular and then sort of some of the social subjects as well but also some academic subjects and I think it was just a wonderful course.

So you're really learning the craft and of service?

Well you're learning the

37:00 craft of being a an infantry officer but also I guess to be more socially aware you know how to behave basically. So it was as I say, an all round type of course which developed good young officers.

And did you develop an interest in tactics at that stage?

My word. My word. Absolutely. I thoroughly enjoyed the military arts side of the

37:30 course. Some of the other things I could have done without. I mean you know we had Charles McDonough, who was our military history tutor. I mean he had a love affair and a passion with the American Civil War and I didn't really think that was relevant. Now in retrospect it was very relevant because of some of the lessons that were learnt in that war and in particular some of the battles and some of the tactics and the guerrilla warfare that the south used but at the time I thought it was just terribly

38:00 boring. You know but then we studied the Pacific campaign and that was much more interesting in terms of Kokoda Trail and fall of Singapore and things like I just found that all very, very fascinating and all relevant too in terms of what you know we were going to be doing in the future.

That is interesting to hear that the battles from World War II and Australia's participation in those

Yes.

Battles were on the syllabus.

Yes. My word. My word. Absolutely. Cause I mean that's our tradition. That's our history and

38:30 a very proud tradition and history and I think unless you're able to imbue that sort of tradition and history and pride into young officers. I mean what have they got, whereas I mean I've had dinner for instance with Peter Cosgrove at St James' Palace and I actually sat in the chair the Queen Mother sat in the night before and we're having a dinner with the Queen's captain, who is the guard commander of Buckingham Palace.

39:00 And then you're looking around the walls and you're looking at these wonderful old paintings and battle honours going back to something like about the 12th Century you know and here in Australia we're only two hundred and fifty years old. We don't have a long history and a tradition by modern standards in terms of military, so you know anything that you learn as a young officer or as a young soldier about the history of Australian service in various theatres of war and battles and

39:30 etcetera I think it sort of builds up if you like a regimental pride. It builds up an affinity with what's been happening in the past. More importantly your responsibility as an individual to carry that tradition on.

And we are coming to the end of the tape but were any of the Korean battles on that syllabus?

No. No. Korea was never studied for some reason. Whether it was just one of those United Nations things

40:00 or I've got no idea. The only thing we really looked at with Korea was the Battle of Kapyong, which was 3 Battalion, where they won their a unit citation but otherwise in terms of the tactics no idea. Korea. I learnt that much later.

Okay. Well we'll just stop there and change the tape.

How we going? All right?

We're going

Tape 3

00:31 **Michael we might we're still at Portsea**

Mhm.

And just grabbing some highlights, which I believe are some of those misdemeanours you hinted at

Yes.

Previously.

Yes.

What kind of tricks did you get up to at Portsea?

Oh couple that I can recall. I mean there were many but two that I can recall was that we were invited to a party down at Rosebud. It was some snobby place that I can't remember who but we were invited to a party and four or five

01:00 of us went down there and I was the adopted Kiwi at Portsea by the way, because we had Kiwi graduates there as well and of course they all played rugby. So I used to knock around with a lot of the Kiwi guys and I remember there was a goldfish bowl and I ate the goldfish in a live raw state and anyway nothing was said at the time. The guys are just cracking up laughing and I just drank a beer and another

01:30 goldfish and anyway the next day there was a complaint from the host because I'd eaten two of his prized goldfish apparently. So I had to make you know compensation for that little misdemeanour. So I basically bought two more goldfish and gave 'em back to him. The other one, we were at some other snobby place I think at Portsea actually, which is very snobby, and through the course of the evening

02:00 there was this white bust of some individual who looked like Nero or Julius Caesar or somebody but I thought it'd look really good in my room. So we snitched that and took it back, not for me personally but for our corps of cadets basically. A spoil of war if you could call it that and anyway news had got out that this had been pilfered from this property in Portsea

02:30 and I thought, "Well I'll disguise it." So I actually painted it black with spray paint, which was not a clever thing to do because it was marble, white alabaster type thing. So anyway I had to fix that problem, which I did. I gave it to a specialist to take the black off and then anonymously left it on the front lawn of the person from whom it was borrowed. But it wasn't

03:00 just me. I mean it was just us. You know it wasn't just me being socially irresponsible. It was just a group. "Mate what about what do you reckon we do this? What do you reckon we do that?" There was always those sort of peer pressures and the other thing too with Portsea is that I mean we were extremely fit. I mean the testosterones are raging. You're extremely fit. You're jumping out of your skin. You're just got to do something and so therefore you know we'd get into little mischievous type things from time to time.

It's

03:30 **an interesting point about the adrenalin.**

Oh yeah, very much.

Being constantly on charge. How were you able to ever wind down on occasions?

Only on the grog. Only on the booze otherwise you're just on tenterhooks all the time. You're just jumping out of your skin all the time and also it's the nature of the course. It's a very concentrated course where you know you just don't have time through the course of the week. I mean you know you're up at six in the morning and you don't go to bed 'til ten o'clock at night and you're working all the time. You know different parades,

04:00 different lecture rooms. I mean it's not like university today where you just sort of saunter, if you like, to the next lecture and if you don't want to go you don't have to go and you get your notes off the lecturer later. With us they were compulsory places of parade. You had to attend unless you had a sick certificate. So you're full on for that twelve month period and you really are jumping out of your skin. So I guess that in part is part of my excuse anyway for getting into social misdemeanours.

And

04:30 **when you graduated how many students were graduating?**

Sixty four graduated and you have a junior term and you have a senior term. In the junior term you're an officer cadet and because I was a serving soldier they gave me two brothers to look after. These are

two guys who have never served in the army, who are your class mates but you have two fellows, we call them brothers, and I've got to help him put his shoes on and put his gear on properly and all

05:00 this stuff and at this they give you a senior class man who is your senior, who is your father, and of course my father was a total idiot who will remain nameless. So I would have to look after my father and I had to look after my two brothers and my two brothers were just wonderful and so that's your junior class you know. But then when you get into senior class we'd carry rank you know and I was made a colour sergeant, which was a very high rank at that time, and I had a whole

05:30 company of like cadets to, not a company but a half company of cadets to sort of look after a company. And then you become a senior and then what I swore when I went into senior class I would not do the things that our senior class did to us. They were childish, they were puerile and they were not necessary. I mean we're all adults, we're not school kids and things like you know, oh, "Jones will you go down and sit on the toilet to warm the toilet seat

06:00 for me." Stuff like that. I mean it's just stupid stuff you know and when I graduated into the senior class I had a meeting with a lot of our other senior ranks that were also promoted and I said, "Look guys," you know, "we're gonna treat our junior class fairly. We'll treat 'em hard but fair and we'll have none of this bastardisation," and basically I stopped it and interestingly enough a lot a the guys in my junior class, we're still very, very good friends today whereas

06:30 quite often you'll find the difference between juniors and seniors is strained. Very much so. The relationship is strained whereas in my junior class we had no problems at all, because we stopped all this ridiculous stuff that our seniors did to us.

We have heard about that elements of this bastardisation that

Mm.

That

Mm.

Occurs. I mean what other examples of

Oh, standing out in the cold. You know I mean standing to attention out in the cold for a an indeterminate period of time. I mean what does that prove

07:00 you know. Things like leaps. You know I mean you'd say to a junior cadet, "Okay I want to see you in your pyjamas down here in five minutes." So the kid's got to go up to his room, get out of his gear, get into his pyjamas and come down and stand there. Like you know and then you say, "Right, now I want to see you in your number two order," and he's got to go back to his room. I mean what does that achieve? Doesn't achieve anything but it was just part if you like in those days, very

07:30 much a part of the old English public school bastardisation which crept into the military establishments and I never believed in it. I believe if a guy does something wrong I'll punish him and or her but I just won't bastardise people like that. Not necessary.

Or initiation or a rite of passage?

We didn't have any of that. No, we didn't have any initiation. It was just menial little things that they used to give you to do to let them to let you know

08:00 that you're a junior class man. You know the worst type of human being. You're a junior class man and a lot a those guys in the senior class that used to exercise this right were really weak individuals. You know it was almost their time in power so to speak. Very much like the school yard bully. You know if you stand a school yard bully up, invariably they'll go to water, yet here you couldn't do that because you were a junior class man and you know you see it in the old movies all the time in terms of West

08:30 Point and here at Duntroon there was a big investigation once upon a time in terms of bastardisation and certainly in my class, the '65 class at Portsea, we stopped a lot a that and I believe, talking to my junior class, they also carried it on. So a lot of those menial things really stopped at Portsea from '65 on.

Well that you're really changing a culture.

Absolutely. Absolutely. No, I in my junior class I saw some of these things going on and I just thought, "This is

09:00 ridiculous." I mean it's not even funny you know and I swore that if I got into a position of rank, which I did, I would change it and thankfully all of the guys that were the senior ranks in my senior class they all agreed with it. They all felt the same way. So it wasn't just me, it was my class actually that changed the culture of Portsea and in '65 to these menial tasks. We used to do funny things with them but they were harmless funny things and we'd all crack laughing.

09:30 You know but it wasn't where you singled out an individual and make an individual look like an idiot and that's degrading and does nothing for a potential officer at all.

Well what did you do to kind of make it shift to

Oh

A more humorous

Yeah, yeah. Well

Fun loving

For instance you know like we had we used to have these terrible boots, they were called water hen boots. They were Second World War boots that we used to have to spit polish and wear and everything else and with our junior class

10:00 at the time that we were graduating, I mean just one of the things, we got them to line us up to march us in single file where we had a cliff at Portsea, which went down into Port Phillip Bay, where we marched up in slow march and just threw our boots off the edge of the cliff. You know in other words the junior class doing it to us rather than we doing something to them. So they were laughing watching us do this sort a thing and also we'd

10:30 address people and ask them questions. You know like intellectual questions, not stupid questions, to test their military knowledge. In other words you know we would know what level of the syllabus they were at and you know we'd say, well I mean Jimmy Knox was one of the junior class men and he was a terrific bloke. He was in SAS with me later and I'd go up to him and I'd say, "Officer Cadet Knox, name the characteristics of the M60 machine gun," and

11:00 he'd have to rattle it off. Well I mean that's not bastardisation you know and you know things like you know, "Name the Military Cross winners from Portsea." You know they'd have to actually go down to look at the honour board at Portsea to see how many Military Cross winners had been through Portsea. So I guess what I tried to do personally I tried to be hard, I was tough but I'd try to intellectualise the if you like not the bastardisation but try

11:30 to intellectualise the enforcement of a senior class man's position, more than just doing stupid things like sitting on a toilet seat. You know and menial tasks. "Go and get me this, go and get me a cup a coffee." "Get," you know I mean they're not servants. You know they're not servants, they're not batmen, they're fellow officer cadets that just happen to be six months junior to you.

Well aside from the fun elements what other responsibilities did you have over your junior cadets?

Well I mean,

12:00 my being a colour sergeant, I had a CSM [Company Sergeant Major] that was senior to me but I was very much responsible for discipline in the company. So I was almost like a sort of master of arms or an adjutant so to speak at that time. The CSM was the overall person that was in charge and he was the if you like the spokesperson for the company but I was very much responsible for discipline.

Well what was your graduation

12:30 **ceremony?**

Yes, it was wonderful. It was on the lawns at Portsea on the oval I recall and I was one of the senior under officers. I remember this quite clearly because I carried a sword. I was at the front and I said to my officer cadets, my junior class, who were behind me, I said, "Guys it's a bit windy. Make sure you're got your hat on properly." You know it's a sort of a peak hat and of course they all go you know over the ears like this and of course here am I, I'm

13:00 the first, I'm at ease. That's right, I'm resting the blade on my shoulder like this and of course the parade's called to attention. "Attention." 'Flick'. My hat, my hat goes off and like a good soldier I did not move. I just left it there you know and we then had to march past in slow time and give the eyes right with the sword as you're

13:30 passing the dais and I think it was a Chief of Army who was reviewing us going past and there I am without a hat and then one of the instructor warrant officers very sneakily picked up the hat. So as I was coming past in slow time and I'm like this and then we had to do a left wheel, a left form and form around like that. He quickly came over to me and put the hat back on my head and now that's the good news. The bad news was

14:00 it was like this. It was right down like this and here I am, I'm trying to see. So for the rest of the parade I'm, cause I wouldn't touch my hat. I wouldn't so I'm marching like this. So anyway we got around the back and then very slowly that's where they couldn't see me, I lifted the peak up and away we went. So yes, I had a lot of fun with my junior class. A lot of fun and I think it's interesting even today

14:30 some of those junior class men are still friends of mine. I mean good friends who I then served with later on in life and you know we still have a bit of a giggle about some of the times. I mean because I was a colour sergeant, Officer Cadet Knox used to call me "Galah" because the short thing for colour sergeant is "Colour." You don't say "Colour sergeant", you used to say "Colour" but he used to say "Galah." So you know and I used to look at him and think, "You having a go at me?" but what do you

15:00 do? You know you just say, “Yes Knox, thank you.” So anyway.

You had some really memorable times at Portsea.

Yes.

How did you feel about graduating and leaving?

Um, oh look I was the proudest man imaginable that time. I mean you know you work very, very hard and you come out with one pip on your shoulder and you know your Sam Browne and all your sword and all that sort of stuff and no, look it was a really for me

15:30 it was a very, very proud period. I thoroughly enjoyed Portsea. Didn’t have a bad time there at all. Admired some of the instructors. Some I didn’t admire but they were all there to do a job and you know we’re all different personalities and made some very good personal friends too, because you know you’re going through a very, very tough period of time and you know when you share tough times, you tend to build up bonds and friendships and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I think it’s a fantastic course.

16:00 Unfortunately I also went to the last parade where they closed it down. It’s now back to what it used to be originally, it’s now a School of Army Health but it used to be what do you call it? Quarantine station. Beautiful bit of real estate. Absolutely superb. Right on the edge of the bay, Port Phillip Bay, and I’ve got nothing but really good memories of that place. Thoroughly enjoyed it. Yet I know a lot of other people who’ve

16:30 gone through and hate it. You know and I just think, “Well we’re different people.”

Mm. Well where was your first posting after Portsea?

Ah went straight to 5 Battalion, which now in retrospect I’ve discovered was a mistake. They shouldn’t have sent me to 5. The unwritten rule is that if you graduate as an officer and you’ve come from a unit as a soldier, they should never post you back there because of the

17:00 familiarity and also you’ve still got a bit of an OR [Other Ranks] complex. You know you’re still you’re an officer but you’re still one of the diggers. Where they made the mistake with me was that 1 Battalion, when it was pentropic, which was nearly fifteen hundred strong, they halved that and formed 5 Battalion. So a lot a the guys that I’d actually served with as a digger they were all in 5. So they sent me back to 5 and when I marched

17:30 into my company, A Company, first, there were probably half a dozen diggers in my platoon that I served with as a digger. So that was in one way ah good but another way could have been difficult too where oh you know, “Here’s Deeky back.” I mean you know blah blah blah I mean you know. So I had to work hard to earn that respect. In other words, “Listen guys,” you know, “you can call me Mick or Skip,” you know, “but on parade ground you salute me and

18:00 call me ‘Sir’.” So you had to work hard to re-establish your bona fides.

And how did the diggers respond to that?

No problems at all. No, I did not have any problem at all with the diggers. None whatsoever. No, no it was interesting. I expected a bit of trouble. I mean look, there’s one in every ration box. There’s always an idiot somewhere but you handle that very quickly but mostly all of the guys

18:30 I’d served with they respected me and they accepted the fact that I was now an officer but deep down I was still one of the boys. So there was this complexity. Almost a sort of a paradox where on one side you’re actually carrying a rank but on the other side they can still have a beer with you and a giggle. So I guess I had the personality to carry that off. I had the strength of character to carry that off too because I had moral courage and if somebody did something wrong, irrespective of

19:00 our friendship I’d pick them up on it. I’d say, “You can’t do that.” The other thing too I think, which is interesting in terms of leadership and I speak quite a bit on leadership as a subject is, that I’ve never given an order to a soldier. I’ve never, ever given an order to a soldier. I ask them. In other words you know you could say, “Pick up that butt.” I come up to a soldier and I’ll say, “Hey Jonesy,” cause everybody in the Australian Army’s got a nickname you know.

19:30 “Hey Jonesy.” “Yep, yes sir.” “Can you do me a favour?” “Yes sir.” “Could you pick up that butt?” It’s just the tone and the way that you do things and you know and I guess because I’d been a an NCO in the battalion I’d been through that myself and I just knew how some officers spoke to soldiers and again, I said to myself, “I’ll never talk to my soldiers like that.” So I tend to just treat the whole thing differently and by being that way I think you just earn the respect

20:00 where they think you’re a pretty solid sort of a guy.

And where did you join 5 Battalion?

At Holsworthy, yes. Same lines that I left. Nothing had changed. I was in a different company but it was basically nothing had changed. The soldiers’ canteen, the chapel, the guard room, the company headquarters, the soldiers’ huts. All still the same that I’d left in December of ‘64 was all still the same.

20:30 **So orientation would have been quite easy.**

Oh very easy. I knew where to park my car and I knew where to do this and do that. No, no. No problems at all.

So how long were you at Holsworthy before you found out about the posting to Vietnam?

Ah not long. I mean I knew when I graduated I mean I was absolutely delighted that I went to 5 because they'd already been warned out for Vietnam. So I knew I'd be going to Vietnam but I didn't realise how soon and I arrived I remember in January and I was

21:00 on the plane going to Vietnam in April because I was on the advance party. I went over first and we spent time with my other old battalion, 1 Battalion, in Binh Hoa that were up in War Zone D and yeah, I mean four months I was in Vietnam. I mean graduated as an officer in December '65 and I was in Vietnam in April '66. So it all happened very quickly.

So there was very little time for preparation

Very little time.

In there.

Very little time. I had

21:30 I was at that time I was I had three platoons when I was in Vietnam. I had 2 Platoon A Company and I did some exercises with those boys and they were great blokes, terrific blokes. I did some exercises with them to sort of get us up to speed but then the next minute I'm on a plane and I'm off and I met up with them again when they arrived on the Sydney, which was something like six weeks later.

So what exercises did you start off with in Holsworthy to get them ready?

22:00 We did oh at with well constantly we'd but … We did several big ones up near Singleton, which were very much helicopter training, cutting down trees to have helicopter landing zones. I mean the greenies today would be horrified you know but that's the way it was in those days and also communications. I mean we operated radios in very difficult terrain because communications are just absolutely vital.

22:30 So what we would do is we'd well we're training for war and it wasn't so much of the fitness side because we were all pretty fit. It was more the tactics and the communications were very, very important. Radio communications.

And then you left. What did you know about Vietnam before you left?

Very little. Very little. The only thing that I knew was that two things that left a mark on me in terms of Vietnam. One,

23:00 there was a sergeant at Kapooka when I was in recruit training who was not highly regarded by anyone and his name was Hackett. I mean not regarded by the diggers cause he was a hard he was a tough nut and he was the first Australian killed in Vietnam and he was killed when I was at infantry centre and then when I was at Portsea in on our last board of studies. I mean board of studies is when you go bush and you do all your tactics and things. The senior instructors

23:30 actually called me in from one of our exercises where they told me that Dasher Wheatley had been killed in Vietnam, who was a very good friend of mine, and I mean I was devastated you know and I really felt it. I cried. I felt it and that's when I started to realise that, "Hey, this is really this is serious. It's not another Malaya. It's not another Borneo." Not taking anything away from those conflicts but it's a different

24:00 type of conflict and I then started to realise it was very serious. So I started to do quite a bit of reading about Vietnam, just the history. Dien Bien Phu and you know the French occupation and all that sort a stuff and then as part of our training going to Vietnam within the battalion, I mean we had some heavy reading to do as well in terms of the history of Vietnam and learning Vietnamese. Purely bar talk. You know not fluent Vietnamese but we had to learn the basics. You know, "Hands

24:30 up." "Stop." All that sort of stuff but at that time in terms of what did I really know about Vietnam I'd say very little. It was all superficial basically.

And personal preparation to go to Vietnam. How did your mother react to the news that you were going?

Well she was already back in Germany. So oh, horrified. Horrified. I mean they retired and went back to Germany in end of '65 after I

25:00 graduated, '66. Horrified because the Germans at that time were totally against the Vietnam war. The only presence they had was a hospital ship in Saigon, otherwise they had no connection with Vietnam. No, I felt I mean she was horrified but and there's a story coming as to the consequence of her being horrified because she then all of a sudden found that my father was alive.

25:30 So you know.

And did you get that news before you left for Vietnam?

No. No. No. I was in country probably for about four months when all of a sudden she sent me a letter saying, “Surprise, surprise. Your father is alive.” So I then communicated with my father and that’s how he and I established, re-established our relationship.

That’s amazing that

Mm.

In that circumstance in a war zone

26:00 Yeah.

You then had this personal

Shock.

Yeah, and you have to

Shock and you got to deal with it you know. You’ve got to deal with it and my father at that time was in Brazil and you know we’re communicating via letter etcetera etcetera and you then realise that you know for whatever reason your mother had not told you the truth and that you’d been living a bit of a lie in terms of your father not being dead or killed in the war

26:30 and then you’ve got to sort of as a twenty one year old, you’ve got a pick up and re-establish the pieces so to speak.

Well I mean that just picking up on that point of being a twenty one year old, before you left for Vietnam did you write a will?

No. No. Didn’t have anything to give away really. I mean you know as a young person I mean you, you know you might have a car and some bits and pieces but no, I had no

27:00 I wasn’t married. I didn’t have children. No. I think we were encouraged to write a will and I think we probably did but I mean it was a very generic thing. You know, “I bequeath all of my personal belongings to my mother.” Probably what I wrote. I don’t know to be honest but as a young twenty one year old in the army you don’t have a lot of assets, put it that way.

So and you flew out in April

Mhm.

To Vietnam. Did you fly out in uniform?

Yes.

27:30 My word. Oh yes. At that time you know our battalion actually marched through Sydney before they boarded the HMAS Sydney and there was no paint throwing or anything like that at that time. That happened much later.

And how did you get over to Vietnam? What was the journey?

Oh it was just a Qantas flight, charter flight, and I remember landing at Tan Son Nhut airport and just opening the door

28:00 and getting hit by the heat. I just remember just going ‘whack’ just the heat hit us, the humidity and the heat, and I thought, “My God.” You know, “I’ve got to put up with this for the next twelve or fourteen months,” you know and anyway yeah, that was it and then the smells. Yeah.

I was

Smells. It’s interesting, you never forget smells you know. If I walk into a house and somebody’s cooking chicken soup it immediately reminds me of my

28:30 childhood because my mother always had soup on the stove as a young person you know. Yeah, smells is an interesting thing but, as I say, these smells in Vietnam yeah they hit you as soon as you get off the plane. I thought, “My God, what is that?”

Could you describe what they were?

Oh it was decaying probably rotten food or something. Something putrid. That’s all I recall and certainly I mean

29:00 the heat. I mean the humidity and the heat and the smells. It’s a funny smell. I mean it’s almost, and I don’t want to be racist but it’s almost an oriental type of smell as well and I’ll talk to you later. I mean I could smell the bad guys after a while from a great distance.

Mm. So where were you based? When you first landed where

Yeah. We went to 1 Battalion, which was at Bien Hoa, and I was sent to

29:30 basically the advance party to learn you know. I was sent down to what they called AN, ANC separate which was a A Company and C Company separate, which was part of their defensive perimeter around the airport at Bien Hoa where 1 Battalion was stationed.

And how did you get acclimatised?

Well you just live and just

30:00 I mean initially move very slowly because I mean if you move too quickly you just sweat like a pig so quickly. So you just move a bit slowly at the start. I used to go for little jogs and little runs to get my metabolism going and so I'd acclimatise a lot quicker. You know you're just wearing your shorts and boots and your rifle over your shoulder and a hat of course but that was about it. I mean there was no real acclimatisation. The

30:30 acclimatisation came with time in country.

And you were sent in the advance party. So what preparations were you making for 5 Battalion?

Really I went out on a couple of patrols just to get a feel so that by the time the main body came up, that at least some of us knew what to expect and we'd spent some time in country and I don't know why I was selected but anyhow I was one of the guys that was selected

31:00 and yeah. It was very beneficial because then I could brief my guys a bit better too in terms of, "Look," you know, "make sure you," cause also whilst you're sleeping with the other guys you know like in a little officers' tent you're also listening to the stories. You know over a beer they sort of tell you things and you're picking little nuances up etcetera which you just store, so that you're learning from the soldiers that have done it for twelve months basically.

I'm expecting

31:30 **a very steep learning curve**

Oh, yeah. My word.

There. What did you learn in those first few patrols?

Um. Oh the density of the jungle. The difficulty for navigation. The importance for communication, especially silent communication between you know signals, hand signals and you know all that sort a stuff and again, the equipment that you carry.

32:00 I mean the equipment that we had was totally unsuitable so we quickly went and bought ourselves some American gear to carry. We learnt that very early. Our boots were unsuitable. So we bought some American boots and little things like that you know you sort of pick up as you patrol, because otherwise you just don't know. I mean you know you get out there with all your issue stuff on and you suddenly realise, "This is not comfortable."

32:30 You know, "My feet are falling to bits," because no water gets out. The boot our boots had no holes or anything for water to get out and you're constantly in water, whereas the American boots with the canvas sides you know they've got little holes in them so when you get out of the water at least the water runs out and you've got a chance of drying out, so you don't get trench foot or athlete's foot or you know bad blisters. So little things like that you sort of pick up very, very quickly.

And did you have any

33:00 **contacts on those patrols?**

No. No. No, no they were they they're called TAOR [Tactical Area Of Responsibility] patrols, tactical area of responsibility. Just an immediate area. They weren't operations out from the major base. I mean they were conscious of not getting us involved initially because you know it was really a sort of a weaning exercise type thing. So they were just TAOR patrols.

And how what warnings were you given? I mean later we will discuss more of this

Mm.

From your own experience

33:30 **but in the that initial stage what were you told about the VC [Viet Cong]?**

Oh we, we had done extensive studies on the enemy and the weapons that they carry and their tactics and oh we were pretty well versed on if you like the generic characteristics of the Viet Cong. We didn't learn much about the NVA [North Vietnamese Army], which were the Northern what you know mainstream forces. We didn't learn much about them because we felt that we would only really have

34:00 to deal with the local Viet Cong. You know the black pyjama crowd and we were totally wrong in that regard because we came across quite a few NVAs in Phuoc Tuy province later on.

So can you tell me how the reconnaissance platoon came about then?

Yeah. It was again, it was social misdemeanour. Not really a social misdemeanour but a what's the word

34:30 I'm looking for? A mm, an indiscretion. Indiscretion. I was in A Company and I won't mention the company commander's name, it's not necessary, but anybody looking at this tape'll know who I'm talking about and we were out on patrol and there was a contact, fairly major contact. I mean firstly the company was lost. I wasn't.

35:00 I knew exactly where I was. I mean navigation was always one of my strengths. I knew exactly where I was but the company didn't know where they were and the company commander kept saying you know, "Come in," and Sunray was my call sign and I was I can't remember now but something 1 9er or 2 9er. You know, "Sunray 2 9er," you know, "come in, come in, come in," and anyway the bottom line is he was lost and I got into a bit of an argument on the phone you know on the radio.

35:30 Meanwhile there was a major contact where company headquarters was attacked and they were only with 1 Platoon, A Company, and John Hartley was a platoon commander of that. John Hartley ended up being a major general in the Australian Army, he's only just retired, and we had to try and get in and of course the enemy between us and the company, which was scary, but anyway finally either we frightened them away or

36:00 the other guys frightened them away and there I came into this company position. There was John Hartley sitting on the ground with a bayonet trying to get a bit of shrapnel out of his ankle and I said, "John, well that's gonna stop. I'm gonna get a dust off and get you out." He was wounded. So we called in a helicopter and meanwhile I thought, "Where the hell is the company commander?" Couldn't find the company commander anywhere or the CSM. The CSM is A Company sergeant major who's supposed to be responsible for discipline of the other ranks.

36:30 So everybody's running around with bandages and cause three guys were wounded and I got up on this big log, I'll never forget, and I looked down on the log like that and there was the company commander with the CSM and I just looked down and I said, "You can get up now sir. It's all over." Well I was fronted to the CO for insubordination and I got a slap on the wrist. I got

37:00 a slap on the wrist. Meanwhile we then kept on doing our things but the relationship between myself and the company commander was never the same after that. Anyway he basically told the CO that I was playing cards with my soldiers for money, which I was. I'm a gambler you know but we weren't playing for you know cattle ranches. We were playing sort of pretty

37:30 small beer but anyway it was contrary to the conduct of an officer. So he fronted me to the CO again. Finally the CO realised that there was a conflict of personalities here and he had a yarn to me. John Warr, this is the guy that tried to stop me from going to Portsea, John had a yarn to me about my problems with this particular company commander and I told him. I said, "The guy can't navigate. He's gutless and he's

38:00 unfit." By unfit I don't mean unfit as a character but unfit in terms of keeping the company moving and I said, "He's gonna get someone killed," you know. "I just can't serve with him." So anyway John said, "Well we'll transfer you out of 2 Platoon," up to what's called anti-tank platoon, which was for me a bit of a let down because I didn't know what their master plan was. They didn't tell me what the master plan was and I thought, "Oh God," you know, "anti-tank

38:30 platoon." Cause anti-tank platoon is almost like a surplus platoon, which is part of support company and in those days the Viet Cong didn't have tanks cause anti-tank platoon has special cannons which knock tanks out but I had to get away. I was devastated leaving my soldiers, I really was, and some of those guys are still mates of mine today from 2 Platoon and anyway I went to anti-tank

39:00 platoon and I didn't realise that they had some plans for me and for reconnaissance platoon but before that I got a hold of anti-tank platoon and there were some pretty ordinary soldiers in that platoon. You know NCOs which of the old school, not the modern school, and anyway I did as best as I could. Soldiers

39:30 were great. I mean soldiers were great but I did as best I could and there was probably two good NCOs in that platoon. The rest were what I would call marginal or ordinary. Anyway we did a couple of patrols and then we did a major exercise, which was the one up in the Nui Thi Vai mountains where we had to climb the mountain with this anti-tank platoon in front of battalion headquarters

40:00 and we got up to the top pretty quick but we were absolutely exhausted. Absolutely exhausted and all of a sudden there's gunfire behind us and I felt a bit guilty because we're supposed to have cleared this for the battalion to make their way up to the top of this mountain and it was really gradient of one in two. I mean it's a hell of a climb. So the company commander Max Carroll, support company, terrific bloke.

40:30 He got up and said, "Well," you know, "you'd better get yourselves down and clear this so that we can move up," because I mean you can't have battalion headquarters attacked. I mean that's our nerve centre, it's our command centre. So we dropped our kit and we just went down with our ammunition and guns and whatever and anyway I left one section up on the high ground with the machine guns looking down into the re-entrant. It was real re-entrant with big boulders and rocks and almost impregnable really

41:00 and then I had another section which was up on the high ground up here. So one looking down that way, one looking across this way and myself with a lead section we went down into this re-entrant to try and find the enemy, try and clear the enemy when all of a sudden a shot rang out and my good section commander, Corporal Womal, got it through the throat and he was on a flat rock which initially we didn't know where he was.

Can I

41:30 **just leave**

Yep.

You here

Yep.

Cause the tape's winding up and I don't want to

Okay.

Miss what comes next.

That's all right.

So Womal's on the rock.

I'll just stretch my bum.

Okay

Tape 4

00:31 **And Michael I just want to pick you up where Womal had been shot through the throat and was now laying on a rock.**

Mhm. Well firstly I mean all he said to me was, "Skip, I've been hit," and I didn't know where he was. We had no idea and as we were moving towards him, or trying to find out where he was, I mean that's when the enemy opened up with everything and we just couldn't get to him. Basically we couldn't get to him

01:00 and so we're moving around, fire and movement. Trying to get behind cover, behind rocks, behind trees. I'm calling down fire from one of the sections at the top. It was Corporal McLean's section and they're spraying the whole region. You know we then had the section up on the high ground actually behind me and we just had no idea, I mean we had no idea where the enemy was and that was the terrifying part. And whilst I'm down there

01:30 I'm terrified that I'm gonna lose somebody else and not know where they are because of the boulders and the rocks and being stuck somewhere and in an impossible place to try and extract anybody that was wounded. So whilst you're conducting this battle and it was a battle and even today we don't know whether it was three or thirty that were there because every time I gave an order, there'd be

02:00 some shots fired my way because obviously they'd realised that I was a commander and then once I'd shouted I'd have to move very quickly, fire and movement. So that when they did shoot I'd already gone and it was just utterly frustrating. Absolutely frustrating. So I called my platoon sergeant forward, Skinny Calvert, and I said, "Look, we've just got to try and get Norm. We're got to try and find him and try and get him out," and cause he was

02:30 at this stage fairly mortally wounded and he couldn't tell us any more. He was still, initially after the , he was still up on one elbow apparently when and still giving orders to his section in terms of, "Keep firing," and, "There they are over there," etcetera, etcetera, etcetera but then you know he lost an enormous amount of blood and in a state of semi-collapse I guess and I had a stretcher bearer called Peter Fraser, who was one of our bands

03:00 men, played a cornet from memory, and terrific young bloke and we'd found the rock where Norm was at but the enemy were using him as bait. So every time we'd try to go towards him they'd fire rounds all round him and I thought you know, "What the hell do I do?" You know I mean, "If one of us goes up there we're gonna be hit as well so rather than get one out, we're gonna get two or three to try and get out." So

03:30 I thought at the time, not realising how seriously Norm was wounded, I thought we had to neutralise the enemy first before we could get to him and move him out but I certainly refused to leave him. You know certainly refused to leave him because we were all caught in this ambush, we were all ambushed, and all of a sudden I noticed that Peter Fraser was actually crawling up onto the rock and he started to dress his wound you know

04:00 and they're still shooting but deliberately not hitting Peter Fraser. Still using both of them now as bait you know and Peter actually had dressed the wound as best as he could and Skinny Calvert, the platoon sergeant, then organised for a couple a guys to sort of try and slowly slip him off this rock so that we could get him onto a hoochie, which is like a bit of canvas that was almost like an improvised stretcher, so we could get him

04:30 up to some safe ground because our doctor had come forward, Tony White, to see what he could do to help in terms of the extent of the wound. And meanwhile we're still trying to find these guys and shoot at them and oh, just terribly, terribly frustrating. Anyway it took us a fair while to extract Norm off the rock and once the doctor had looked at him

05:00 he'd realised that you know all the blood vessels had been ruptured and Norm didn't have a lot of chance of survival. We then had to get a helicopter in to get him out, which was tricky as well because again, the enemy was still there and this helicopter had to land on a on an angle like that and it was a pilot called I think from memory Askew. Lieutenant Askew from Army Air Corps or army

05:30 flying and he was in a little Sioux, one of those little bubble Sioux. Anyway unfortunately Norm passed away on the landing zone but they flew the body out you know. Meanwhile we're still trapped. We're still caught and of course battalion headquarters further down was still caught as well. So we had to keep fighting you know and try and anyway we tried everything. I mean we just couldn't

06:00 find these fellows and you know we'd fire some rounds and then you'd yell something out like, "Have you seen any?" you know and next minute there's bullets coming your way you know. So it was really quite scary and daunting and I remember quite clearly at the time because Max Carroll, who was my company commander, he said, "Mick, what was going through your mind?" and I was up behind this tree, big tree like this. I mean biggest I could find trying to get on the radio and

06:30 the thing that was going through my mind at that time through that whole if you like contact was something I'd learnt at Portsea, which is a an appreciation of the situation. You know, "What if?" "How?" So this thing I'd learnt at Portsea, which was a tactical appreciation of the situation, was going through my head like a textbook. You know in other words, "What would I do now if this

07:00 was a tactical exercise of our troops?" I mean that's how you learnt tactics and nothing was coming to my mind. I mean I was just completely bamboozled because I didn't know where the enemy was. I mean that's the sad thing. I didn't know how many were there either. So at that time my first priority was to extract my troops out of the killing ground, because they were all down there in the killing ground. Probably seven or eight of us

07:30 were in that killing ground. So with fire and movement we very slowly you know had to withdraw and this is going on for hours you know. We had to withdraw. So I got all my guys out onto the high ground and the other guys were up here on the high ground when Major Peter Cole from A Company said, "Look," he could see where sort of we were shooting etcetera. He said, "We might be able to put some machine gun fire onto the

08:00 position." You know like shooting from another angle cause he was down right down on the low ground and I at that stage I was prepared to try anything. I thought, "Well, let's have a go," you know. I knew it'd be dangerous because of the beaten zone of a machine gun. You know machine gun doesn't fire at great distance it doesn't fire in a straight line. It's a beaten zone. It's a huge like this. So what I did is we marked our position with smoke and Peter gave the order

08:30 for his company to open up with machine guns but those bullets were going above our heads because of the beaten zone. So that was pretty scary. So I just said, "Stop," and they stopped straight away but they also hit the target as well but I wasn't prepared to accept the risk. So I thought, "No, I'd better do something else." We couldn't use artillery. We couldn't use mortars. So the only other thing I could use were gun ships. So we had some American gun ships on stand by. So we

09:00 called in two gun ships and again, we marked our position with smoke and the gun ships basically shot these rockets, white frosts and explosive rounds into what they could see were tunnels or caves. You know and that was pretty scary cause we were still pretty close to it. Very close to it actually but thankfully the Americans had a good day and they hit all the what we thought were the right targets

09:30 and they just did run after run after run and then after that there seemed to be almost quiet. Nothing. It was eerie. There was nothing and the only way then to draw fire again is to move. So again, I couldn't say to my commanding officer or my company commander, "Look, come up," because I couldn't guarantee that it was clear. I thought it was

10:00 clear. So with a section then went down into the re-entrant again that we'd just taken us two and a half, three hours to get out of to go back in to see if the enemy were clear and thankfully they all took off. These rockets from the choppers probably frightened the daylights out of them and also I think they realised that we were not just a platoon on our own. They realised that there was other forces supporting the action. So

10:30 I think they felt that they were outnumbered but at the time we didn't realise why they fought so tenaciously. Normally with the Viet Cong in particular they shoot and run. You know shoot and scoot and

these guys stayed and defended quite vigorously, which at the time I didn't realise why but I can tell you later why. We went back down into the re-entrant and we found blood soaked bandages and

11:00 blood in various caves and things like that and but it was getting dark. It was really getting quite dark and we had to get up to the top of the mountain you know. So the CO said, "Right," you know, "Fantastic." Like, "Push on." So we had to lead the way back up to the mountain, then the whole battalion headquarters came up behind us where we established a base camp for the night. And then that night I mean you know

11:30 we were all feeling very, very flat because Normie Womal was a terrific bloke. He was just wonderful he was a Thursday Islander. He came from Bowen in Queensland. I think he was a Thursday Islander. He was married with four kids and he was just a terrific NCO, terrific and he was a real loss to us and I'd known him for years. I knew him in 1 Battalion when I was a digger and we were all very, very flat and very down and because Norm was known right throughout the battalion, not just in our company

12:00 and anyway I was interviewed, not interviewed I was debriefed by the adjutant who was the assistant ops officer and the operations commander who was Max Carroll and gave them a sort of a word picture very quickly as to you know where I thought things were and the next day John McElhony went down, who was assault pioneer platoon,

12:30 and of course he was hit again and he also won a Military Cross but he got hit again and lost one of his soldiers as well you know, Private D'Antoine where the enemy was still there you know. In other words, what they'd done, they'd retreated into the tunnels and then came out again and John attacked this tunnel with a flamethrower. Because he was assault pioneers he actually had a flamethrower. So he scorched

13:00 them you know or what was left of them I guess and again, you know you sort of think, "Gee," you know, "these guys are still hanging around." I mean it's just amazing cause normally they just take off. Anyway then we got the engineers in and once you know the wounded of assault pioneers had been taken out the next day we went down again and got A Company up to help us do the search and

13:30 we discovered that in fact what had we thought were Viet Cong were actually NVA, the North Vietnamese 274 Regiment, and it was their regimental headquarters and out of that we found their radio. Nang Hung who was their commander we found the commander's radio with his log book and apparently it ended up being probably one of the most important intelligence discoveries in Vietnam during our tour of duty because it showed exactly where this regiment

14:00 had been and what they'd done and contact etcetera etcetera and I went down into the some of the tunnels with the engineers to have a look and it was just amazing. I mean there were underground hospitals. There were underground communication centres. There was underground kitchens. It was just a huge complex and again, even today we don't know how many people we hit. You know whether it was three or thirty or a hundred and thirty. I've got no idea but

14:30 it was probably one of the I'd say most important in terms of the intelligence that they gathered, one of the most important discoveries that we had had in our trip to Vietnam at that time, this was October. So it was significant in terms of the intelligence that we gathered but it was terribly sad in terms of soldiers that we lost. You know and even today sometimes you know I get the guilts and I think, "Gee," you know, "is there some other way that I

15:00 could have handled the situation without losing Norm Womal," but everything I did was in accordance with the book. You know I mean guns up on the high ground, reserve force behind me, assault force in front of me. Me behind the assault force. I mean that's the way you're taught, that's the way you do it. If you had your way all over again and I guess again with the experience of time, because obviously you know you learn

15:30 as you go on, perhaps you would have taken it a bit slower, not as fast, but again in terms of assaulting an enemy position you don't do it slowly. You do it fast. I mean that's the way you're taught but in retrospect looking back at that situation, perhaps if we'd done it more deliberately and slower and more fire and movement behind rocks and things you know it may have ended up differently. I don't know but you know you can't go back in time and you can't recover what's done. All I know is that

16:00 we lost a very good soldier.

That was just riveting, it really was but we will come back and discuss elements of that

Mm.

But how did the reconnaissance platoon come out of that?

Yes. Well I went back to base from that and Dennis Rayner, who's another good mate of mine, another platoon commander. He also won an MC on that we won three MCs on that operation.

16:30 Mine was the first, then there was Peter McElhony and then there was Dennis Rayner and because Dennis also had a fairly major contact he did brilliantly actually. I mean he didn't lose anybody and he probably shot about twelve or fifteen of them, which is pretty good. The CO sent both Dennis and myself off to Saigon for Vietnamese National Day where we had to march through Saigon but he really sent us

away

17:00 to get a bit of a rest. You know just to do a bit of recovery time and so both of us were away for the weekend. You know just we just flew up there for the weekend and you know we marched with Vietnamese armed forces through Saigon on this Vietnamese National Day and then when I came back from that I was a bit more relaxed. I was still upset but I was still a bit more relaxed. I was called up to the CO's office and I'll never forget, there was the CO,

17:30 the IO, the intelligence officer who was John O'Neill, ah Bob O'Neill. He was a Rhodes Scholar, very very good IO. We had Peter Isaacs, who was the adjutant, and Max Carroll, who was my company commander, and they said you know, "Mick we'd like to see you form a reconnaissance platoon." Of course I was just blown away. You know I thought, "Gee, how good is this?" You know and they said, "Yep, we believe that there is a

18:00 gap between SAS," which is thirty thousand kilometres out, "and the battalion," which is back here and also with SAS they would go into a position, they'd find some enemy activity, they'd fly out, they'd be debriefed at task force headquarters. By the time that information had been if you like dissected and analysed and the information came down to us by the time we could get our battalion moving,

18:30 invariably was too late. So what our CO was looking for, he was looking for a unit from our battalion which could fill the gap, not take the job of SAS. I mean they're totally different but to fill the gap. In other words, as soon as SAS re flies back and reports enemy activity in a particular area, we can fly out straight away and basically establish a little if you like a reconnaissance base ourselves to see if the movement is still there.

19:00 Not checking on SAS or anything else like that but to report back to our battalion that, "Hey, there's still a lot of activity. You might as well come out and have a bit of a go at this." Otherwise a battalion mobilises and comes out for nothing. So that's just a waste of a resource. So there was that part of the situation which was part of the brief and the other one was to basically be the eyes and ears of the battalion. So if the battalion was operating in strength with companies

19:30 we could do some a the hard yards because we were smaller and not necessarily fitter but probably better trained. Where we could do some of the hard tasks like going up into the high ground where rather than take up a hundred men to clear a bit of high ground, I could take up twenty and we'd do the same job and mostly the enemy weren't up there anyway, cause they stuck down to the river systems but you couldn't afford to take the risk. You had to clear that high ground.

20:00 So we got jobs where we could operate quickly and effectively as a smaller group, whereas A Company going up there again, would have been not the waste of a resource but you would have been knocking diggers around unnecessarily. So there was that part of it and the other part was to operate in small four or five man patrols like SAS but no more than ten thousand metres out. We used to

20:30 always try and operate within artillery range which, our artillery range, which was our direct fire support, which is ten thousand metres.

So what I mean was this a new tactic for

It was.

The army?

It was a first, well I mean that they'd had reconnaissance platoons in the order of battle in the past, I mean Second World War, etc., but there was no reconnaissance platoon on the order of battle of the Australian army at that time and this was the first one that was formed.

21:00 So it was a bit of a buzz, a bit of an honour I guess and the beauty is that ours was the first and now the reconnaissance platoon is on the order of battle. So I guess the success that we had, then gave other commanders, battalion commanders, the confidence to continue on with it, so that now the reconnaissance platoon in every battalion is on the order of battle. In other words, there is a reconnaissance platoon in every battalion but in our time it

21:30 was a hunch by the CO. It was an experiment. It could have been a dangerous experiment too. It could have backfired but luckily in terms of the people that I ended up selecting, I ran a selection course etcetera, I got the right people. Very much so.

Well can I just talk to you briefly about that selection process?

Mhm.

What qualities were you looking for in these men?

Yeah. I was looking for fitness, physical fitness and commitment and

22:00 a mental hardness, a toughness I guess and good soldiers. I mean good with other soldiers, good with themselves and also good with their weapons and their tactics. Interestingly enough we said to the CO, "Well how do I do this?" He said, "Go to the battalion. Go round the battalion and get a group of volunteers," and I said, "Oh okay." So we sent a signal out to all the company commanders looking for

volunteers. Well if you're a

22:30 company commander are you gonna let your best soldiers go? No. Have you seen the movie 'The Dirty Dozen'? Lee Marvin? Yeah, well this was The Dirty Thirty. Seriously. The Dirty Thirty. I got a lot a guys from other companies that company commanders were quite prepared to see go because a bit like me, good soldiers but occasionally social indiscretions if you can call it that. Interestingly enough I

23:00 got soldiers into my platoon as NCOs who I was mates with as a digger. They came to my platoon. Blue Mulby, the guy that I said came second in the promotion course, he came over. Bob Carney, the guy that wrote Crossfire, he was in my section when I was a corporal. He came over. Harvey, he e and I played rugby together, he came over. Bobby Searle, he and I were diggers together. He

23:30 was in anti-tank platoon. He stayed. You know he was there. So it was very interesting where I got a mish mash of people from the other companies and of course I had anti-tank platoon guys you know and, as I said, anti-tank on that particular contact up on the hill just performed admirably. You know there's no question about that but I knew some of these guys simply would not make reconnaissance platoon. They were too old. They were too set in their ways. They were too comfortable sitting in Land Rovers with their

24:00 recoilless rifles used to knocking tanks out you know. So I just said, "Right, who wants to stay? Who wants to go?" and a few of 'em packed their bags and went. Saved me the hassle. So away they went. So we ended up with about forty I could guess. I made contact with SAS with a Major John Murphy, who was OC of 3 Squadron, and I took three SAS instructors down with me to Vung Tau where

24:30 I basically wrote a two week program. I had two weeks to put this thing together where I drove 'em very hard. By that I mean we used to run through sand hills you know early in the morning. After being on the grog the night before I'd push them right through the sand hills until they could hardly walk you know. We'd run through water in our waists in the beach you know just to sort them out physically, who's gonna make it, who's not gonna make it and then we did all the sort of SAS things. You know our communications, our

25:00 demolitions, our first aid, polished up on some of our language skills again but principally the SAS tactics. You know in terms of fire and movement and how slowly they move. I mean, an SAS patrol might only move four hundred metres in a day or two hundred metres in a day depending on the enemy position you know. In a battalion we weren't used to that because we're used to patrolling in strength you know as A Company or a battalion size and you

25:30 go slow but you go at a fair pace. You know you might move two or three or four thousand metres in a day. In SAS because you're out there on your own and you really are basically reconnaissance and you're wanting to avoid contact, you've got to travel very, very slowly and that's where we had to learn as small groups to travel very, very slowly. So we did that and at the end the period I had almost like a board of studies that I had at Portsea. Myself

26:00 with a couple of the NCOs from SAS and said, "Look guys," you know, "which of these do you think," you know, "is gonna make the grade?" We did patrols with SAS as well out in the bush so that they could observe the guys as well and we came up with a list and they came into my platoon and the rest I sent back to their companies and they didn't go back to their companies with any stigma or anything like that. I just said, "Look, I'm sorry. I can only take so many." You know, "If

26:30 I could take x I'd have x but I've only got so many," so we sent the rest away. So I ended up out of the forty I think I probably ended up with something like about twenty seven, twenty eight roughly.

That that's a really interesting selection process that you went through. What personal qualities were you looking for? You mentioned before good soldiers

Yes.

And what makes a good soldier?

I think it's an attitudinal thing. You know there's what I call show ponies and there's what I call

27:00 the real draft horse, the real worker, and I didn't want show ponies. I didn't need show ponies. I needed real you know working horses and just they don't complain. You know they just get onto it and there had to be if you like again, from within these guys there had to be that sort of commitment and there had to be, again if you like a sense of adventure. In other words, we're getting into something really

27:30 unknown here. We don't know how we're going to perform. We don't know whether it's gonna be dangerous or we don't know etcetera etcetera. So there's that fear of the unknown and I was really looking for guys that could handle that and handle it on their own. In other words and also what we trained to is if any of 'em got separated from any of their patrols they had to get out on their own. You know so they had to be good navigators, definitely navigation was an important part.

28:00 They had to be good communicators in terms of radio skills. Attitudinal. I think just a positive attitude, a can do type attitude. A, can do myself and B, we can do. So there was a sort of if you like a team type spirit that I was looking for. Some something that I wasn't looking for super soldiers or anything like that. I was looking for people who could work together in a team but be absolutely

28:30 committed and do it in such a way as not to complain and I guess I was very lucky in being able to select those guys.

And so you took them back to the battalion and

Yes.

What was your first operation?

Yeah, first operation was a very simple one. Was basically a patrol out east where we were supporting one of the companies, I can't remember which company it was but it might have been

29:00 it would have been in November I think from memory. Yeah, November and it was purely to act as a screen in front of A Company. I think it might have been D Company, Major Paul Greenhalgh, where quite often they would attach us to A Company and then the company commander was encouraged to use us the way that we should be used, not as a normal platoon. So that for instance if D Company was advancing somewhere and there was a bit of dirt over here that needed checking out, they'd send us out to check it out so the

29:30 company commander could keep his company in if you like in structure and do his normal thing. Quite often too, a company would lay up and harbour up and then we would go out in small groups around that company to act as either listening posts or ambush patrols. They were simple things that we did initially, just so we could get the confidence etcetera but as time went on the tasks became more,

30:00 not onerous, wrong word. They became more demanding basically. Much more demanding.

And how did the relationship between the company and the platoon first work? I mean the dynamics?

Yeah.

How was that?

Initially because you know we were like, as I say, we were The Dirty Thirty and we looked like Banditos the way we used to dress. I mean you know no helmets, just sweat bands around

30:30 our head. No hats. Just a sweat band tied you know like a sort of Apache type head dress. We painted our weapons camouflage. You know all camouflage cream etcetera. We mostly had American gear on, which we'd either purchased, borrowed or stolen. We had stacks of ammunition and weapons and there's a reason for that.

31:00 So yeah, we looked like an odd bunch I think and originally I think the diggers were fine. The diggers were probably a bit jealous at the start you know. "I've got to dress like this and they can dress like that," but the company commanders initially were a bit apprehensive you know. I mean you know, "What are they gonna do?" and, "What can they do that we can't do ourselves?" and all this sort of stuff but once we'd managed to work with

31:30 all the company commander we had were fantastic. You know the ones once they got rid of some you know, which I spoke about earlier, we ended up with some terrific company commanders and once they had the confidence in us to do what we said we could do, they would ask for us and say, "Look, can we take recce platoon?" and that's why we spent so little time in the bush, ah so little time in camp. A, they used to keep us out because they knew in camp we'd always get into trouble so they'd

32:00 take us out and B, all the companies would ask for us. So they'd take us out there and get us to do things and after a while we became just an integral part of the battalion and the battalion's activities, where there was no animosity or jealousy or any concern whatsoever but initially there was a bit of sort of stand off you know. "Who do these guys think they are?"

At not jumping too far ahead but it is relevant when talking about

32:30 **the platoon in itself, that notion of always being out and always being on demand. I mean**

Mhm.

How much pressure did that place on the platoon?

Oh enormous pressures. Enormous but again, because I was very lucky I had a good leadership group in my platoon and also because again, this can do attitude. It got to the stage where my platoon, the diggers in my platoon or our platoon rather than my,

33:00 our platoon, they used to be dissatisfied if they weren't being used. In other words for them it was the challenge. They knew they were doing an enormous amount of time in the bush. They knew they weren't spending a lot of time in base but it became almost like a fait accompli. It became a culture of the platoon that we were always out, we were always doing something. So it was a pride thing and there wasn't any pressure at all. I mean

33:30 once we came back in the base my God we hung one on. You know like we just hit the boozer and we'd relax for one or two days but then as soon as we got over the hang over, we were already preparing for

the next one. So we'd go out again and it became almost like a cultural thing where we just we didn't want to be in base. Really we would rather be out on our own basically.

Well what was your first operation? What was the name of it?

Oh God, first one would have been

34:00 mm, I think I'm just tryna think. Do you know I can't remember.

Cause I really want to take you back to Hardihood if I may

Yeah. That's all right.

But I think we've just jumped so far

That's all right.

Ahead.

That's all right. I yeah, that's fine. Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, no look I can't remember the first one we did as I'd have to go back through the book or through my diaries but the first one as reconnaissance platoon would have been some time in November and I seem to recall it was a cordon

34:30 and search exercise where we had to guide some people in to a cordon, which one of the villages I can't remember which one.

Excuse me.

That's all right. You've got a cue card there.

Yeah. Well yeah I mean Hardihood was you were with anti-tank platoon is that

No. A Company.

Yeah.

2 Platoon A Company on Hardihood.

Right. Um

35:00 We were with the Americans.

So was Hardihood when, I'm getting confused now. Can you just stop for a moment? Thanks.

Yep.

Okay, well basically it was our first op you know and we were working with the Americans as well and I must say that we were a bit terrified because one of the companies of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, had been in a major contact

35:30 in our area that we were going into. They'd lost sixty guys. I mean it was a huge contact. I think it was something like thirty killed and thirty wounded. So we knew that we were going into a pretty bad area. So for our first op you know it was a bit daunting but we had the Americans there to help us etcetera but it was it all happened so quickly. I mean we were in choppers, we were out of choppers and we were sort of feeling our way and

36:00 doing navigation and Singleton is one thing, doing navigation then in Vietnam is another. Getting the communications right and a very steep learning curve for everybody in the battalion. An enormous learning curve. Thankfully we had some good planning. I mean we had some very, very good planning. The CO, the ops officer, the IO and through that good planning it meant that there was if you like less conflict, less clashes etcetera.

36:30 We lost our first National Serviceman on that op. He came here from South Australia. His name was Errol Noack and that knocked us around a bit you know because he was a National Service man but and I guess there was a bit of history being made at that time and I guess from my part you know, coming back to how you do things in Australia then how you do things in Vietnam, in the first contacts that I had in Vietnam

37:00 I used to walk around and you'd hear the crack, the bullets going over your head and you're sort of walking around and you're saying, "Well look Jones," you know, "Bill will get down there and Harry," you know, "just get the gun down this track." And you're directing traffic almost until I saw a Viet Cong get shot through the front of the head and it blew the back of his head out and I thought, "Wow. That's what a bullet does." I had no idea what a bullet did cause we're

37:30 conditioned a bit to the westerns you know. I mean look at the guys in the westerns you know. They get shot and they keep going. They've got five or six bullets in them and they keep going. Well the bullets of

today they basically either blow your back out or just blow your arm off. You know I mean they are high speed and they do enormous damage and as I say, I used to walk around in a contact until I saw what happened

38:00 to this guy's head and I thought, "My God." So from that moment on as soon as there was a shot fired you'd have to be very, very fast to beat me to the ground. I'd get to the ground real quick because again, it's a part of our training that we didn't do. We used to have these sort of mock up wounds that you know we'd bandage up etcetera but it doesn't really do justice to what the real thing is and I guess that was the biggest shock in terms of what a bullet can do to the human body.

38:30 You think, "My God," you know, "I'm gonna get to ground real quick in future." So it changed my whole attitude in terms of my personal if you like initial reaction if we were being shot at.

And can I just clarify the purpose of Operation Hardihood?

Yes, it was to clear our area of responsibility of the enemy so that we could establish a firm base at Nui Dat. Nui Dat had been selected because it was high ground.

39:00 It was also in the midst of a huge Pirelli or Michelin rubber plantation. It was well enough away from friendly villages or so called friendly villages so that we could set up DFs, defensive fire positions around etcetera so we wouldn't disturb the local populus. It was located on a major north/south road. Yeah, so it was purely an establishment of our firm base, which was our firm base

39:30 for over ten years.

And from the intelligence that you got from that briefing how thick with VC was that area?

Well actually I think the Americans had done a very good job. I think they'd either shot them all, mind you at great casualties to themselves, or they'd decided to withdraw and wait 'til the Americans had pulled out cause you know, the Americans just had incredible fire

40:00 power there with them and I think the bad guys actually withdrew back into the jungle waiting for the Americans to pull out so they could have a crack at us on our own and that's exactly what happened, cause that's how Long Tan happened you know. I was out there the day after Long Tan.

And where sorry what part of Phuoc Tuy

Phuoc Tuy

Phuoc Tuy,

Mhm.

Thank you

40:30 **was A Company clearing?**

We were on what you would call the western side of the road and I'll never forget you know when we established base first they had my platoon, 2 Platoon, on the other side of the road. Totally isolated on its own. I could never understand that and here's a road going down the middle and we're over here on our own. The rest of the company's over there and that was our esteemed Company commander that established that and I could just you know I could

41:00 never understand that because seriously, I mean had the enemy's intelligence been better I mean they could have just wiped our platoon out with ease being stuck out on our own so you know

We've come to the end of this tape. So

God it goes quickly doesn't it,

It does.

Forty minutes?

It got a bit

Tape 5

00:31 **When you**

So Mick, you were with 2 Platoon A Company for Hardihood and you've just explained the brief of Hardihood, that

Mhm.

The area wasn't that secure when you

No.

First got there. So

No, no. I mean, as I say, the 173rd Airborne Brigade had had some fairly major contacts in that region. So we didn't know what to expect but obviously when we first

01:00 moved in there were some contacts but they were spasmodic. So I think the enemy withdrew to consolidate, to observe, to watch and to pick their time to hit us, which they actually did in August with the battle of Long Tan against 6 Battalion.

And well how do you go about establishing the security of the area?

Well initially I mean

01:30 obviously it's a search and destroy. I mean you're clearing areas of operations. You then find a place that you consider will be a good base to establish. You dig in. You know fire pits, weapon pits, command posts etcetera and you constantly patrol around that region. I mean you have what an area which is called a tactical area of responsibility and each company has an a tactical area of responsibility which you patrol to mortar range

02:00 out, cause the bad guys had mortars. So you patrol about three or four thousand metres out to clear it on a fairly regular basis, daily actually because that ensures that the enemy haven't got a time to sort of build up in any particular area. You patrol only by day, not at night.

And how many would go out on that patrol?

Oh they were sections. You know sections of between seven and ten. Depends. Could be half platoons. Depends on

02:30 the previous activity or reported activity of the enemy. So you patrolled you know on a regular basis. Every platoon, every company would patrol on a regular basis. Constant patrolling actually but that's the only way that you can secure an area. If you don't patrol it gives the VC [Viet Cong] the opportunity to move back into an area. It gives them an opportunity to establish a mortar base plate and then they mortar your position, create havoc and you know then they take off

03:00 you see. So you you've just got to constantly patrol your area of responsibility and that's the only way you can have a secure base.

And at this point what's your rank and

I'm a lieutenant, second lieutenant. A one pipper.

And what sort of maps or navigation aids were you using?

Oh very simple. I had a map of the area, which was covered in contact, so

03:30 if it got wet it wouldn't disintegrate. We had different coloured sort of crayon, pencils, which were pilot's pens actually, which you could mark positions on the map and they didn't wash off with water. They were like a sort of an oil based type thing. Very simple prism compass. One that you actually look through like that and a protractor basically,

04:00 to measure distance and also to measure angles on a map. That's all we had. I mean there was nothing else. No GPS [Global Positioning System] systems in those days and the other thing we had was some of us had sheep counters. Sheep counters so that you can count the steps because in jungle areas with a canopy and very flat and no visible noticeable features very, very easy

04:30 to get lost or to get you know confused in terms of your navigation.

So during these patrols on Hardihood was there any getting lost for you?

Not for me. No. A few other people did, yes. Company commanders actually but no, no I didn't have I don't know what it is. Oh look I I've been out. I've been out in terms of you know

05:00 my navigation but I used to have a little trick that I used to use to find my way again and that's I'd call in artillery on somewhere where I knew I wasn't. In other words, you always know when you're not on a mountain right? So I would call in artillery and to a particular target and it would hit the target where I knew that I wasn't. Obviously you're not gonna call it in on yourself and of course there's the primary.

05:30 So there's the primary and the secondary of artillery. The primary is where it gets shot and the secondary is where it lands and if you do that and you're very quick with it you'd quickly shoot a bearing to the primary, you shoot a bearing to the secondary. Cause you know where your primary is, cause you know where your fire base is and you know where you're not and then you just basically get a back bearing from both locations back and it gives you a little triangle of error and

06:00 roughly that's where you're at. Yeah.

That's a good trick.

Yes. It I used it quite often actually. Used it quite often. Artillery never knew why I did it. I think it's about time they knew. I used to basically just call in a target. I'd say I wanted a sort of a just a one gun fired for effect just as a sort of a register a target. There's silent registration of targets and there's noisy

06:30 registration of targets. If I was a little bit confused I want I would not, yeah I was confused. I was confused with my navigation. I needed the confidence to know where I was to go to the next step. I would sometimes call in arty [artillery] on that basis just to shoot those back bearings so I knew roughly where I was at.

So you learnt this trick fairly early on?

Yeah. Quite by accident. Nobody taught me. Just commonsense. You know I'd think to myself, "Well if I know that the given

07:00 spot on a map is where the fire base is because we've got that recorded on our map and I know I'm not sitting on top of a mountain," and I used to do the targets in such a way so that there was if you like, say ninety degree angles. So you'd have this triangle of error that comes in. So I'd find a feature that was somewhere off to my say east or west and I knew that I wasn't on a mountain or I knew I wasn't in a river,

07:30 creek bed or something. I'd just call that target in and it'd go 'bang' and 'bang' and you just shoot your bearings. You then do a back bearing and then you draw it in on the map and you say, "Right, I'm in that grid square right there." Now a grid square's a thousand metres square. You know if you knew what grid square you're in at times you're doing very, very well because you you'd never call in artillery that close anyway. You know you wouldn't call in artillery. You might

08:00 walk it in. You walk artillery in. Once the first round was on the ground and you felt that you know you were safe then and there was enemy contact, cause I used to use a lot of artillery, you then slowly start to walk it in but in terms of as a navigation aid it's fantastic. It's the way to do it.

And they always responded.

Absolutely. Artillery over there were fantastic. Absolutely fantastic and I think

08:30 that with the battery in direct support of us there's a bit of the old recce platoon in those guys. I mean they're sitting on a gun line. You know they want to do what they're paid to do. They want to get out there and fire their guns. You know I mean that's what they're trained to do and there's nothing worse than digging your guns in on some fire support base and not being in a position to fire your guns. I mean artillery's there to fight a war as well and they fight best with artillery pieces.

09:00 So I think with them too there is a sort of a something that drives them, which basically says, "Hey look, here's a fire call. Let's get out there and let's do it."

So these patrols you're doing during Hardihood in those early days they're just day patrols?

Yeah, mostly day patrols. Yep. Yeah and search and destroy. I mean you know in those days we'd find things like rice caches. You know just the bad guys would have rice

09:30 either buried in under ground that we'd find or we'd just find them in a bamboo clump covered in black plastic and what we'd do is we'd just get that rice and either destroy it as best we can or we'd get you know we'd ring up and somebody would come out and pick it up and give it to the villagers and the villagers would then give it back to the Viet Cong. So it became a bit of a circular argument. So after a while what I used to do is just blow it up.

10:00 You know and not give it back to the villagers.

And why was that?

Because the villagers, you'd give the rice back to the villagers and then the Viet Cong come into the villages and take it back off them and it ends up being in another rice cache. So you're better off destroying it. Sad but that's the way it is.

And the point was to starve the VC or

Yes. Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. I mean the VC couldn't operate

10:30 without being supported by the villagers and they mostly had the support of the villagers through terrorism. Well if the villagers didn't have any rice to give them, well they go they've got to go and get it somewhere else.

So you're saying that they're quite large rice caches.

Oh huge. Yeah I mean one that we found I think would a been oh, twenty tonnes of rice. Big, big rice caches. Bag upon bag upon bag and just covered with

11:00 black plastic in a bamboo clump where you wouldn't see it from the air. Definitely not see it from the air and it just sitting out there in the middle of nowhere. So the Viet Cong would come in there and they got a bit smart after awhile. They started booby trapping them with grenades and stuff. So you had to

be a bit careful. So as people started to pull bags off and there's a grenade, next minute you've got a casualty.

And

11:30 **it would have taken quite a bit to blow it up.**

Oh yes. Yeah. You'd get engineers in. They're the experts at that and they'd come in. They used to love doing that. Engineers love blowing things up and you know you'd sort of fire on and 'boom' and there's rice going everywhere. You know but, as I say, that's one of the tragedies of war. You know you've got to waste food like that.

12:00 **So on those day patrols that you're doing what sort of pack would you take with you?**

Oh we'd always take you know our normal gear. I mean there was sort of the what we call the bum pack. You know and not with your big shoulder pack and your bum pack always had the basics in there. You know you'd always have a day's rations. You'd always have your first aid gear. Yeah, you'd always have your spare ammunition and water. You'd always have a poncho because you never knew

12:30 if you had to stay out there overnight but it was very much what we call lightweight patrol gear. So that you can move fairly quickly and quietly through a given area without having the encumbrance of the huge back pack.

And as you mentioned, this is an establishing operation

Mhm.

And quite a lot of companies all going out at once

Mhm.

To secure the area.

Yep.

So how would you avoid having company clashes?

Yeah well

13:00 that was a problem. I mean friendly fire is a hazard of war and we had several incidents of friendly fire I'm sure. We have incidents of friendly fire between companies and we had also incidents of friendly fire you know killing our own people with artillery as well and mortars. So it it's a hazard of war. It really is a hazard of war. Now in terms of

13:30 friendly fire between companies, I mean that invariably is not caused through bad planning by battalion because a battalion gives enough room between companies to operate where that should not happen but because if you like, at times problems with navigation it's very easy all of a sudden to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and then somebody hears a twig crack or something and you just turn around and go

14:00 'bang' and next minute you've got a friendly casualty. So it's unfortunate and if you look at just the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan I mean friendly fire is a problem and it's not just a problem with Americans. I mean we have it too and it's just one of the hazards of war. In terms of artillery and mortars I mean when that happens that's just bad, bad management by the company commander. Just bad. Shouldn't happen. Should never

14:30 happen. I mean if you know where you are and you call in artillery well you should never blow up your own people but if you don't know where you are or you think you are where you are and then you call in artillery and a round lands in your company position, well then you are the man that's responsible. Unfortunately what happened a lot in Vietnam, not a lot but it happened a couple a times, it happened once to me was that because the ground in the wet season is just so soft and muddy

15:00 like for instance a mortar base plate is just a what it is. It's a base plate and it's got a big knob on it and the mortar sits there and it's got the tripod that keeps it there. Well if the mortar's like that and you bed the mortar in. You know you get a couple a rounds away and it goes further and further back. So the trajectory goes higher but the distance is less. So there's always a danger of a drop short with a mortar

15:30 that is not bedded in properly in terms of say soft ground and that's not the fault of any mortar man or anything else. They bed them in as best they can but sometimes there's that give. With artillery there was a couple of incidents when I was there where the artillery dropped short. That's their nickname, drop shorts. It was again, just poor management and I think what they did change in my time was that, before any rounds went off

16:00 the gun sergeant or the troop commander or whatever, he would actually check the barrel angle with a chronometer to make sure it was at the right angle before rounds were actually fired. So it was it's just one of those physical things that you have no control over but I think effective management can basically stop that sort of stuff.

Well how would you or would you be briefed on the whereabouts of

16:30 **other companies before you would go out**

Oh yes.

On those platoons?

Oh yes. I mean part of your briefing I mean you know there's things that you never forget. Situation, mission, execution, command and sigs, admin and log. They're the sort of normal operation order and situation is always enemy forces and friendly forces and you're always told where the friendly forces are, so you you're very aware of it and of course in those days we used to wear little coloured

17:00 bands in our hats so that we could identify our own troops. You know but we used to change the bands because the enemy used to wear them as well. Very smart. So we'd wear gold ones and red ones and blue ones. So that you know if we were in somewhere and through the jungle all you could see was you know a hat if you saw the blue, which you knew you were wearing for that particular operation, well you knew it was one of your friendly forces. If it was a different colour you'd shoot him.

17:30 Simple.

I'm just gonna stop there for a minute. That's

Well it's interesting to hear you talk about those colour identifications and that they were easy to spot even through the jungle.

Mhm.

Why was that?

Oh look, I think again, one of the things you're trained to do is to not look at jungle, look through it. So there's a skill in looking through jungle. So in other words if you see somebody

18:00 with a hat and because you're very conscious of your own forces you know. If you're in a free fire area and you know you're the only one out there well there's a danger of that person getting shot but if you know that you're in somewhere in reasonable proximity of friendly forces I mean you just look through and you just see the hat and it saved a lot of soldiers. Definitely saved a lot of soldiers, because the Viet Cong or the NVA used to wear green hats like ours too sometimes and you know again, he who hesitates is lost.

18:30 You know and if he's got a weapon and you've got a weapon it's the one who gets the quickest round away that survives. So the old head band was a very, very important part of unit identification.

And what were the other tricks I guess of moving through the jungle that you learned in those early operations?

Oh just I mean you know bamboo is a bugger of a thing to get through. There's lantana, which is a terrible

19:00 thing to get through and after a while I mean you tend to, well you're almost animal like. You know you're almost sort of picking your way through very carefully so that you don't have bamboo pricks on your shoulders and lantana tying you up with your weapon. You know you sort of you're folding foliage back as you're moving through very slowly. You're very careful in terms of where you put your feet. A, in terms of mines

19:30 and booby traps and B, in terms of if you're in the dry season in particular I mean if you're very close in to the enemy in the dry season I mean you can put your foot down on a twig and it breaks and a leaf that makes a noise. You're just very, very conscious of movement in the jungle and you develop almost animal instincts in my view where you are just in survival mode. Your adrenalin's going at a hundred miles an hour and

20:00 you are just basically doing things that come naturally to you and they're not, they can't be taught. I mean certainly in terms of where you put your feet and everything else that can be taught but in terms of making your way through bamboo and stuff it's experience. You just find a way through and the thing is the person at the front, especially the forward scout, he is very important because he is actually then making the route for the rest of you to come through.

20:30 So invariably the forward scout has to be the most experienced in terms of finding their way through the jungle or through areas which are considered to be you know a little bit uncomfortable.

And would you maintain radio silence or

Oh absolutely. Absolutely. As much as possible. I mean we'd always be on air but we'd try and be as quiet as we possibly can. I mean if once I went to recce platoon, well

21:00 you know my patrol had two radios. I mean we had one which where I basically controlled my three other patrols, because I was the fourth patrol, and the other one where I had a rear link back to my battalion where I could talk to my battalion direct or I could just flick the frequency and talk direct to

air support, artillery, naval support, whatever I wanted.

And with 2 Platoon?

With 2 Platoon all I had was

21:30 one radio, which gave me back to my company commander basically and there was no radios between the sections. The sections were all visual communications and hand signals and stuff like that. If a section went out on their own to do a listening post which is like an observation post, early warning system, they would take out their own radio but generally a platoon just had one radio.

And still staying with

22:00 **2 Platoon, what sort of hand signals or communication signals did you use?**

Oh the whole range. I mean they're all standard hand signals that are used in the army. You know 'The position is clear.' 'Enemy.' 'Stop.' 'Listen.' 'Have a look.' And I'd start this one, 'Nose,'or we'd go 'Smoko' or 'Brew up' or 'Down' or 'Up'

22:30 or you know all simple things. Principally the important ones for us were sort of this, 'Stop' or that. That's the one that used to get the best reaction. You know soon as you do that guys very slowly would just go to ground and look out either side just to see and then you you'd communicate again with hand signals as to you know

23:00 'Me' you know like platoon commander 'going for recce' going for a look. So you'd move slightly forward of the platoon or section or patrol and have a bit of a look and you'd come back and you'd realise that all was clear and then you know you'd just say 'Move on.' And that's why one of the things that was interesting with Crossfire when they wrote Crossfire one of the titles they were gonna give that

23:30 book was 'Stop Whispering' because when we used to come back off patrol into base camp, we'd still be talking like this and then the guys that had been in base you know who were either resting or had some infections or something would say, "Why are you whispering?" You know because you've been out for ah three or four weeks and you know everything's like this. So they'd say, "Stop whispering."

24:00 "Sorry." So look the Australians in terms of jungle warfare and fire and movement in the jungle and tactics are amongst the best in the world, if not the best in the world and we've learnt the hard way. I mean we've learnt from you know the Kokoda Trail, the Japanese, Borneo, Malaya you know and if you look at our sort of whole areas of influence and, if you like, how our whole areas

24:30 of likely confrontation for years to come it's all jungle. And I think they're skills that we have picked up since the Second World War and they're skills that we will continue to use and have to use and it really is a different sort a warfare entirely to what you've seen on the TV at Iraq, with tanks thundering along at sort of sixty miles per hour.

And what was your weaponry when you were with 2 Platoon?

Yeah very simple actually. I mean when I first went over there I had a thing

25:00 called an OMC, which was a an Owen machine carbine, which is a nine mil [millimetre] Second World War weapon with two little handles and a magazine and a wonderful fun weapon you know but in one of the contacts that I had, I actually put almost a full magazine into a VC who ran away. I suddenly realised that this was not a very good weapon. You know just

25:30 didn't stop people. The rounds were too slow. It was too clumsy. It was too awkward and it was inaccurate. Either I was inaccurate, I was shaking too much, but I got him cause there was a blood trail you know but an OMC didn't stop him whereas later on I got an Armalite, you know. That stopped people in their tracks. So initially the OMC, although it's a lovely old weapon and very reliable

26:00 it was simply not suitable for what we had to do and bit awkward too to carry whereas the AR-15, the Armalite, just a I think fantastic weapon.

Well we might talk more about the Armalite later but just in those early days I'm wondering can you recall the first time you shot you fired your weapon?

Yeah. Yeah, oh exactly. That was this. This was that episode where we were in very close quarters and

26:30 it was with 2 Platoon and there was I think two or three of the bad guys and the forward scout had I think got a few rounds away and then I got up with him and I got the whole magazine of this OMC away and we found a blood trail but we didn't find a body. So obviously and definitely we hit him. I mean there's no question about it because of the blood trail

27:00 but my gun didn't stop him whereas an Armalite, had you have done that with an Armalite and fired at six hundred rounds a minute you know, you would have stopped him in his tracks but the OMC was a bit cumbersome at that stage.

And you remember that feeling what was going on and what were you thinking when you

Oh exhilaration. Absolute exhilaration you know. I mean it was not that I was

27:30 kill happy in terms of little Viet Cong hats on a forty four gallon drum as some people did but it's what I was trained to do. It's what I was paid to do and as a platoon commander it's what I had to do and to have that first contact and have the first kill yeah, it gave me a buzz I must admit. Yeah, I didn't have any qualms or anything about it at all. In fact I conditioned myself. You know I conditioned myself where

28:00 the Viet Cong as far as I was concerned they were the lowest form of vermin imaginable. If I'd thought of 'em as a human being I wouldn't have been able to do what I did, because I have respect for my fellow man and woman but in treating them subconsciously as vermin and worst than a mangy dog, no problems at all shooting them. None at all, because as far as I was concerned they had to be exterminated, they had to be eliminated and some of the terrible things that they were doing in terms

28:30 of the villagers to their villagers and to women and children and everything else I had no conscience or qualm or whatsoever in terms of putting those guys away. None at all but it was a conditioning that I had to go through. As I say, if I felt that I thought of 'em as human beings like me there might of been some hesitation at times. Cause it's not in our nature to go round shooting people. It's just not in our nature you know.

29:00 **And you've told us about the hand signal that you would use to**

Mhm.

Signify enemy but what terms would you use to refer to them?

What do you mean sorry?

Like what would you call them?

Oh they're just field signals.

No, no, no. I mean like

Oh

Names that you would use to refer to your enemy. Like

Oh slope. Slope and towards the end there we used to call 'em Nigel. Yeah. Nigel. Don't know why.

29:30 Whenever today somebody introduces themselves to me as Nigel I have a quiet chuckle. I don't know why. I don't know who started it. I think it's somebody in our battalion who said, "Look all of these guys they look like Nigels." So that stuck a bit. Slope because of the slope of their head with the hair cuts they used to have. So we used to call 'em slopes. Nogs. Nogs and Cong. Short for Viet Cong. We used to call them Cong, nogs,

30:00 slopes, and most of the guys we called Nigel, were the guys in Vung Tau. You know the taxi drivers and stuff like that. "Look out, here comes Nigel," or something like that. No idea. Black soldiers' humour.

Who was Nigel?

That's right. It's almost as bad as being Bruce.

That's very strange.

Mm. Yes. It is strange.

But you would

30:30 **normal what were your most commonly used names?**

Oh, nogs. Yeah, nogs. I mean everybody you know you come, "Look out, here comes some nogs." You know and they were mostly the bad guys you know. Cong. We hardly used Cong you know. Slopes we'd sort of use purely in just sort of loose conversation. You know, "A couple of slopes came down the road," and all this sort of stuff you know but in terms of talking about the enemy as mostly nogs.

31:00 I don't know where nogs came from either to be honest. No idea.

And out on those patrols sometimes you would be able to take smoko

Oh yeah.

And as you say

Oh yeah.

Harbour down and brew up.

Yep. Yep.

So would you be able to smoke when you were out?

Oh yes. Oh yes. Yeah. I let the guys have a smoke. My word. I think I mean I didn't smoke at that time. I stopped smoking through water polo basically

31:30 but no, I'd sort of say you know, "Take five," or you know, "Take ten," but you you'd always take your rubbish with you. You wouldn't leave any butts or anything like that. You'd sort of put it in your pouch and take it with you and I guess in retrospect today now if you thought about it, see the other thing too is that we could smell their cigarettes because they smoked very

32:00 strong Galliano French cigarettes. Very, very strong and I could smell those about fifty metres. You know they were just so pungent. Most of our guys smoked the cigarettes that came out of the American ration packs. They actually used to have little cigarettes in the ration packs like Salem you know. Winston. Phillip Morris etcetera and they were all fairly mild sort of cigarettes. You know you really couldn't smell 'em unless you were really right on top of them but it was all sort of par for the course

32:30 in those days. I mean as a platoon in terms of reconnaissance platoon it was a bit different. They were totally different set of circumstances.

Well we'll come and talk about that later but I'm just wondering when you did harbour down and brew up or, sorry

Mm.

When you did stop and brew up and have a smoko would that give your own position away?

Yeah. What we would always do is we'd always go into a harbour. We wouldn't just stop on the side of the road. I mean if we're on patrol and

33:00 we felt we were reasonably secure you might stop on the, not on the road because hardly moved on roads but sort of a little track or something. You might just basically have escorts out to the flanks and establish a harbour, all round protection like that, which was an improvised quick harbour, a quick harbour and guys'd just quickly get their hexy [hexamine stove] and have a brew and maybe a cigarette and

33:30 a bit a cheese and a biscuit and then get on patrol again. If we went into a night harbour because what we used to do we'd we would never harbour up through the course of the day because that's what gives your position away. So what we would do is we'd stop at around about four o'clock and we'd have our dinner. You know like make a curry and all sorts a food on the Hexy stove etcetera. We would be in a natural harbour position. We would have our sentries out and we'd all have

34:00 time to eat. We'd all clean our weapons. I'd check all my targets. I'd check my codes and I'd get ready for the evening's activities and as soon as the light was starting to go down I'd already picked where we're gonna actually sleep that night. We'd never stay where we had dinner. Never. We'd then move off at last light until it was almost dark and then basically camp or harbour up in an area at night and then in the morning you'd

34:30 get up first thing in the morning and you'd immediately, as soon as it was first light starting to appear, you'd move out and you wouldn't have breakfast there. You'd move out and you'd stop somewhere else to have breakfast. This way you're one jump ahead of the enemy all the time, where in other words if you're stopping somewhere and you're eating and there's smells of food and Hexamine cooking etcetera etcetera and the enemy knows that you stayed there, they stumble across you almost by accident, they'd

35:00 then go back and get some of the other bad guys and establish a mortar base plate and you get mortared. Well that's fine providing you've already moved. So we would then move and then if they came back we'd already gone and the same in the morning. You've been sleeping there all night. You know and guys you know moving and there's always a bit of noise and if the enemy knew that you were there, they'd try and attack you at first light. You know as soon as it is, so we would move out before first light. We'd already gone and then we'd stop

35:30 somewhere where we felt secure and that's where we 'd have breakfast. So it's constant movement all the time to try and be one or two steps ahead of the enemy.

And how well would you sleep overnight?

Ah not well. Not well. I mean if I got two hours a night I'd be lucky. Lucky. Yeah because there's pickets and sentry and you're got to share sentry duties with the diggers and you know if you got two hours, two three hours you'd be really lucky and this is constant.

36:00 Absolutely constant and even now I'm still a very early riser and I still sleep very light. I don't sleep heavy at all. Unless I've had a few drinks, then I'll sleep heavy.

And what would you use for a bed at night?

Me? I used to just wrap myself up in a poncho cover. That's all. I tried all of the old tricks. Initially when we went there we had those blow up mattresses. I refused to allow them to be taken out because they're too noisy.

36:30 When people move around on 'em they creak and make a noise. So I said, "Well you can take the

mattress but you've got to take the blow ups out." So there's no point. You know just flat hard ground. I'd always dig a little hip hole for my hip. Just a little hip hole then I'd just put down my poncho and I used to have a parachute silk that I used, just a very light silk from a parachute which I'd sort of wrap around me and I'd just roll myself up and sleep on

37:00 my pack and that was it. There was no tent. We never put tents up at night in on patrol. Never. We'd always be sleeping very, very close to the ground and the other things it that when it rains, it really rains. Like it's monsoon and you just keep sleeping. I mean you just stay in the wet. It's amazing and you really developed this real animal instinct you know where

37:30 if you like, a frame of mind where nothing really is uncomfortable. You're still alive so nothing is uncomfortable. So even if you're sleeping in the wet it doesn't disturb you. Doesn't worry you. You get up the next day and you're absolutely soaking but you're gonna be soaking anyway patrolling the next day because of the temperature and the humidity. So very primitive conditions. Very primitive conditions. So there's no sort of fancy bed and stretchers or

38:00 tents or anything like that. Cause tents can be seen through the jungle. Close to the ground nothing can be seen really. If there's a bit of ground cover you're very, very secure.

Did you feel secure?

Yeah. Most of the time. Most of the time cause I used to find the most horrible place to harbour up. You know in the middle of a bamboo clump. I would harbour up because I knew the enemy wouldn't come in there. Seriously. I mean we would find the

38:30 most horrible bit of dirt imaginable to harbour up, because the enemy simply would not be able to attack and get in there. So we quite often would lay out or harbour up in places where you know nobody else would but I used to, because they were nature's natural defences so why not use them. And after awhile too you know, I found with me anyway, I started to think like them. I really did start to think like them

39:00 and I became a guerrilla in a guerrilla war. So I started to do things which were a little bit out of the ordinary.

Such as?

Such, that as an example. I mean quite often you'll find people tend to harbour up in comfortable areas and I never used to find a comfortable area because a comfortable area also is an area which has easier access to the enemy if they want to attack you. So I used to just get to places which were really uncomfortable and we used to make them comfortable in

39:30 terms of sleeping there ourselves but they were very uncomfortable to try and get into. And also I mean if heavens now in retrospect also, if we got hit by the enemy, they'd also be hard to get out of too. So it was a double edged type sword. We couldn't run quickly, put it that way cause bamboo's a terrible thing. I mean especially the spiky bamboo and we used to just get in there underneath and we'd just sleep there and no way

40:00 would the enemy come and attack you in an area like that. They certainly wouldn't stumble into you, put it that way and that's always a risk where they just stumble into your position but in something like that they just they wouldn't do it. Also VC always follow tracks. They always follow tracks. Very rarely will they go through the bush cause a lot of them didn't have compasses. So all they had was local knowledge. The VC. NVA is different but

40:30 the VC would mostly use tracks etcetera and that's why we ambushed so many of them because that's their principal form of navigation.

Okay. Well we've come of the end of another tape. So

My God, al

Tape 6

00:30 **We were talking about Operation Hardihood and I was just wondering if you could just describe for me some of the tactics that you set out with?**

Yeah well it was principally platoon tactics because we were operating as a platoon within a company environment. We were patrolling as platoons but the actual, the real tactic is at section level. I mean in Vietnam I think probably you know two of the most important command

01:00 structures imaginable was platoon commander and section commander. I mean company commander, battalion commander were all very, very important but they were operating in a totally different role. Not as much hands on per se, whereas section commander he's a first port, he's at the first point of contact and then the platoon commander has to take charge after that and then later the company commander gets involved. So most of our tactics at that time were platoon tactics and then section

tactics

01:30 and mostly in the form of pre-trained contact drills. You know contact right, contact left, ambush right, ambush left and you did things instinctively. They were things that were instinctive, which in a peace time environment are good in terms of instilling a certain degree of discipline and training so that people move instinctively under fire, the same as throwing yourself out of an air craft. You do that instinctively, not naturally and I guess where we had to adjust

02:00 in Vietnam was, that sometimes when you went into those contact drills I mean the enemy had set booby traps, they'd set mines, all sorts of things. So you had to modify the tactics a little bit to cope with the local conditions and I mean they didn't play by the rules. I mean they were guerrillas and they didn't play by the rules. So after a while we didn't play by the rules either. So we changed our tactics slightly in terms of what we'd be originally been taught here in Australia.

02:30 **So what were some of the key things you learnt when you came away from that operation?**

Oh a little bit about myself I think as a person. I mean ah, yes I can do it. That's the first thing. I learnt a lot about my soldiers and section commanders. Those that could hack it and those that couldn't and I guess also I learnt at that time too that you know that we had some weaknesses at the higher level, at company level.

03:00 And I just knew that at that time, I just knew I was gonna have difficulty at that level dealing with the company commander, because I just didn't feel he knew what he was doing to be honest and it was proven to be correct.

Did you come across in that operation any Viet Cong huts or bases?

Oh yeah quite a few. Yeah, quite a few. I mean we found many if you like ex or not ex but they were

03:30 actually dug defensive positions of the Viet Cong which they had vacated but also a lot of huts and things. And in those days what would happen, I mean it was crazy actually, because of the nature of the war pre an operation, what we would do we'd throw leaflets out saying, "There's gonna be an operation. Get out of the area." So in other words, "Hello," you know because we were worried about

04:00 shooting friendlies. You know but my view in those days was that there were no friendlies and if they were in the free fire area they were gone you know, because you couldn't afford to take the risk. So what would happen is pre operation if there were friendly villages in the area and we were going to go in and do a search and destroy exercise, we'd actually send leaflets out of air craft asking them to either surrender or move out because we were

04:30 moving in. So the security in that aspect was pretty stupid actually but they were the rules of engagement and that's what we had to do. We couldn't just go into an area and assume that everybody was enemy and blast the hell out of them, because there could have been Mums and Dads and little kids that weren't Viet Cong at all but that's where I struggled, where we basically advertised the fact that we were going to be operating in a particular area. Well obviously either the enemy

05:00 would take off or they'd wait for us and ambush us, which is exactly what happened. So it was a crazy way to fight a war really.

Mm and I was going to ask like the major problems that came up with that tactic and

Oh a major problem I mean I'd hate to think how many innocent people we killed. I'd hate to think really. If I thought about it it'd probably distress me you know because when you're in an area that you assume is what we call a free fire area

05:30 you assume that everybody in there is a bad guy and I know for a fact we shot people up that weren't bad guys. But the man that's at the front, the forward scout, he's actually on a very, very fine line and if he hears something and he gets off a round of shots and then we do a sweep through, we find a person that's had their head blown off I mean what do you do? The person shouldn't have been there yet we didn't find any weapons or any ammunition or anything. The person

06:00 was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was just one of those unfortunate things the Americans call it collateral damage you know and the collateral damage in Vietnam was enormous. Quite enormous actually.

So that's one of the dilemmas of this war is that defining or determining who the enemy was.

Well it's difficult.

Very difficult.

It's very difficult. I mean you'll be riding on an APC [Armoured Personnel Carrier] track you know like an armoured personnel carrier and here's little people in the fields you know with their little hats on and you know their black pyjamas and with a hoe and

06:30 working in the rice paddies etcetera etcetera and they're looking and they're smiling. And as you're going along you're thinking, "Jesus I wonder if I'm gonna meet up with you tonight somewhere on an ambush." You just didn't know who the friendlies were and you didn't know who the enemy was. So my

view to my soldiers, and I was quite clear on this, “As far as I’m concerned in the bush they’re all enemy,” because I wasn’t about to sort of get into a debate with someone. Next minute you know one of my soldiers gets killed because he’s taken the soft option.

07:00 So I’d always say, “Take the hard option,” because if it wasn’t a free fire area the the good guys should not have been there. Unfortunately communications in Vietnam amongst the villagers is not good and I think some of them strayed out to get bananas or to get some paw paws or mangoes or to get fire wood even, simple thing like that and unfortunately they come across a patrol occasionally and they get killed. Very sad but that’s the collateral damage of Vietnam

07:30 unfortunately.

How did they ever make themselves known to be innocent or

Well very hard when they’re dead. You know I mean once they’ve been shot that’s it. I mean we didn’t know. I mean the thing is you really don’t ever really know. I mean because they’re not carrying a gun doesn’t make them friendlies. I mean they could be a courier. They could be a just a spy, a reconnaissance situation. Giving the appearance of being an innocent wood gatherer or something. You just don’t know

08:00 and I wasn’t prepared to take the risk with my guys. I’m not proud of it but I wasn’t prepared to take the risk. I said, “Look, this is a free zone free fire zone area. If there’s anything out there it’s bad. Shoot it.” Shoot first, ask questions later because if there’s that hesitancy you know, “Oh is it, is it or isn’t it?” You know ‘bang’ next minute you’ve lost a guy and I don’t think you can afford to have that on your conscience. I’d rather have those people that perhaps were innocent on my conscience rather than my

08:30 people.

The you say that they would then ambush at night

Mhm.

Once they knew that they you were coming through. What were you were these are the very early on in your time in your tour

Yep.

So what were you learning about VC tactics from these ambushes?

Mm that they normally didn’t stop to fight. They’d shoot and scoot. They’d take off. That they were very good at using booby traps. They

09:00 were very good at sucking us in. That was part of the tactic and very rarely did I follow, physically follow up. I always used artillery. I wouldn’t follow up cause that’s the oldest tactic in the world where there’s only one or two of them and they open up and you shoot and they run and then you run after them. Next minute you run into an ambush. I never used to do that. I if I didn’t get them in the first burst of fire I thought, “Well there’s two of ’em gone,” but then immediately I’d call in artillery or mortars and put it behind

09:30 them to act as a block hoping that they’d run into that or also hoping that if there was a larger force concentrated further down the track that our artillery or mortars would get them and that’s happened several times, where I’ve been proven to be correct. So you know I think the principal tactic of the VC was to shoot and scoot, to run. The NVA were different. The NVA would basically stop and fight and the interesting thing that I noticed, the difference between VC and

10:00 NVA, VC were not well disciplined. They were tough, very tough but not well disciplined and certainly in terms of shooting at you they’d shoot very high. That’s why I used to walk around cause bullets are going up through the trees. The NVA, the North Vietnamese, would shoot about this high off the ground. Totally different training and that’s why they were much more effective because when they shot, invariably they got somebody because their rounds were no more than, say, two or three feet off the ground.

So was it

10:30 **at Queanbeyan that you really started to see the difference between the VC and the NVA?**

I think so. Yes, yes because all of my contacts up to that point in time to the best of my knowledge had very much been with VC. Local D 445 Battalion. Basically guerrillas recruited from the local area. You know ostensibly the eldest sons of families. Farmers by day and VC by night and then when we hit the NVA?

11:00 unit up in Queanbeyan you just knew this was not VC because they didn’t run, they stopped and fought and they fought because they had something to protect. There was their brigade commander and also their radio and logs and codes and all sorts a things. So I realised that in terms of the tactics that I had to employ and the training that I had to do with my guys we just had to change it a little bit the way that we worked. With the VC initially we were

11:30 a bit blasé if I can say that. In other words like, “These are only cowboys. Don’t worry about ‘em,” you know. Still careful and still terribly scared but a little more risky in terms of some of the decisions that we used to make. Whereas with the NVA we just knew, we were up main force and we knew we were up against very well trained soldiers and we just had to be a little bit more circumspect in terms of the decisions that we made.

Well you also said earlier that you could smell

Absolutely.

The enemy. At what

12:00 **stage do you develop this instinct?**

Yeah, look I it’s a sixth sense that I developed there’s no question about it and some of my fellow platoon commanders developed it as well but I certainly I think I really developed it. Dennis Rayner, who’s my mate in WA, he developed it very well. It’s almost two fold. It’s almost an instinct where you know when a dog is angry or senses danger and the hair sticks up on the back a their neck?

12:30 My hair used to prickle up on the back of my neck and also I used to smell them. I could smell them from a fairly great distance because of A, they use drop pits as toilets. Their diet was pretty horrendous when it comes to toilets. Fish heads and stuff. Their soap, they used to use soap and they used to use a hair oil. A sort of a almost like oh ‘Californian Poppy’ used to be an old hair oil that you know

13:00 we used to use when we were younger, well like Bryl Cream type thing and they used to use that in their hair to sort of get spruced up occasionally and you could really smell that. You could certainly smell their food if they were cooking in a village and you could smell the fire as well but it was more their personal smell. It was a food that they used to eat, nuknam which is a fish sauce, lots of chilli and garlic used to come out through their pores in their skin and you could sort of smell that from I’d reckon twenty or thirty metres easy. In terms of the

13:30 intuition, that sixth sense, I can’t explain that. All I know is as the tour went on my sixth sense became far more acute to the point where sometimes I would just, “Stop,” and everybody else would stop and I’d just go, “Listen,” like this and we’d all listen and then I’d say, “Go to ground,” and we’d all go to ground and I’d just say, “Be quiet,” and we’d all just quietly sit there for fifteen, twenty minutes. Lo and behold all of a sudden three or four

14:00 guys would walk past. Now how do you explain that? You know it’s got to be an animal sense. It’s not mental in terms of you know being a psychic. It’s just an animal instinct where, “I don’t feel comfortable here. I think there’s somebody here. I think we’ll stop. I think we’ll go to ground. I think we’ll be very quiet and we’ll just observe for a while,” and sure enough, several times that happened. A group of guys would go by. So I think the human

14:30 body’s been conditioned through evolution to lose that sixth sense. I mean I’m a country boy and I mean I had a horse called Dolly for instance and one day we’re driving back or riding back to the homestead and all of a sudden Dolly took off. She was an old mare, fifteen years, and she never used to bolt at all but she took off. Next minute there’s this huge gum tree that crashed. It was a dead gum tree that crashed down behind where we

15:00 were. Now she didn’t hear anything. She didn’t see anything. She just had that instinct and she took off. Now I think we’ve got those basic instincts as well, which are now well and truly lost through evolution and modern technology and time but I think when you get into a scary situation where you really are on survival mode and you’re really living on adrenalin etcetera, I think that sixth sense slowly starts to come

15:30 back where you do start to develop very, very keen instincts. I mean women have got it. I mean women have got instinct much better than men in terms of mostly instincts about people, instinct about things. I think men, being principally if you like the hunter gatherer have got natural instincts or had natural instincts in terms of the hunting and the gathering and I just think in Vietnam during that period of time, that’s definitely something that I developed. No question about it.

And were there men in your platoon who had also developed the instinct?

16:00 Not as acute as me and the reason I say that I mean I don’t know, I mean we haven’t done a test on it you know but I think the reason they didn’t develop it as acute as me is that they had different responsibilities. I mean I had responsibilities for thirty men and I felt that was an enormous responsibility and what I was looking for was if you like, an extra edge. I was looking for a leading edge and I think in terms of my sense of responsibility

16:30 for my soldiers and also the fact that you know I didn’t want to be responsible for losing any more. You know because I’d already lost one, I just put that extra burden on myself to make sure that I didn’t lead them into an ambush etcetera. So I think it was a combination of adrenalin and survival and responsibility that just brought this thing to the fore, whereas a lot of my diggers really relied on me. You know they relied on their patrol commanders and they didn’t have to develop it as much

17:00 as me. I think there was a different need for them.

Well just picking up on that point about losing men, did you lose any men in Hardihood?

No. No, no I didn't lose anybody on Hardihood. No I was very lucky. I mean in fact 2 Platoon A Company did not lose one person in Vietnam, which I'm very I'm really pleased about because even after I left them, two platoon commanders went down and they were guys that I knew and they were good blokes but before we went away, I actually met a lot of the parents of those National Service

17:30 men and I made them a promise I'd bring 'em home you know. And then to be taken away from that platoon up to another platoon I felt a bit guilty, because I'd promised but then luckily the platoon commanders that went down were also good platoon commanders and they were very lucky and none of those guys were lost.

How did you find, just still trying not to move too far ahead, but how did you find the National Service men in

Excellent.

2 Platoon?

Excellent. Excellent. I mean I just couldn't speak highly enough of them. You know I mean here are young kids

18:00 and that's what they were, although they were older than me. I mean some of them had deferred. They were uni students. They might have been twenty two or twenty three but here are young people plucked out of their environment and put into a totally strange environment, e.g. the military, but then next minute you know three months, four months later or five months later they're fighting on active service. I mean you know seriously, I just wonder how some of them coped and we were the first National Service battalion, 5 Battalion, and I reckon we were a fantastic battalion.

18:30 And I'm just still amazed how the National Service men actually assimilated in with the rest of us and in fact some of the National Service men were a lot smarter than some of the regs you know. Some of the regs are more cunning but they weren't more intelligent. So there's this wonderful mix of street smarts from the some of the regs and if you like intelligence from the National Service men and I can't speak highly enough of them. I think they just did an outstanding job.

That's a huge responsibility to put on your shoulders, meeting the parents

19:00 **and**

Mm.

Promising to send their

Mm.

Sons home.

Yeah. They invited me home to a party in Ermington in Sydney and oh you know and a big party, big party and I mean here's the parents coming up to me, "Look after my Billy," and, "Look after Jeff," and you know and what can I say? And I said, "I'll do everything possible to ensure I bring these blokes home." That's what I said. So it did put a lot of responsibility on me but also I wanted them to feel good. You know I mean it wasn't

19:30 just a one liner. "Let's," you know, "I'm gonna get rid of these people." I wanted them also to feel that I wasn't just a platoon commander who was kill happy. I was a platoon commander that cared about my soldiers. I was there to do a job but I would never risk one of my soldiers for a hundred of theirs. Never and I've always said that quite openly in company. I've said it to my senior officers. "I would not risk one of mine for a hundred of theirs," because it's just not worth it.

Well after Hardihood, Nui Dat was established.

20:00 **Did you play any part in the establishment of Nui Dat and**

Oh yes. Yeah. I mean we all did. I mean it was an incredible time. I mean that battalion and same with 6 Battalion when they first went up there, the same thing. You know we had to actually dig our holes. We had to establish our shower blocks, our toilet blocks, our sleeping tents etcetera and at the same time do operations and patrol. I mean it was full on. Absolutely full on and I'd say that sort of

20:30 establishment of Nui Dat physically was probably the hardest that I've experienced in a long time because again, you're not sleeping much at night. We had the dreaded Bin Bah ten thousand, which was supposed to be the Binh Ba Regiment that was going to attack us and wipe us off the earth, and every night we're standing to behind machine guns waiting for the Binh Ba ten thousand to attack and you'd get an hour's sleep if you're lucky or two hours sleep and the next day you're up at stand to, which is sort of first light, so that's when the bad guys attack. And then

21:00 a quick breakfast and then you're back to digging holes and digging command posts and then patrolling, doing your TAOR patrol, your tactical area patrols every day. So it was full on. I mean that period of establishment of Nui Dat in terms of 5 Battalion in particular and then later on 6, must have

been the toughest for all the battalions to get up there. I mean the battalions later were living in steel huts. We were living in tents for the whole period you know. Later on they established

21:30 beautiful Nissan huts and they had beautiful dining rooms and air conditioning and all sorts of things at Nui Dat and we didn't have any of that. So I think our guys did it very, very hard and did a top job.

And you said on top of that there were patrols. So once you'd actually cleared the area and started to establish the base how threatened was it? Like how

Oh well it was full on because we were getting all sorts of intelligence reports and I mean it was really

22:00 for the enemy I mean they missed a golden opportunity. They missed a golden opportunity. They should have taken us on when we were digging in, when we were just starting to get established, because we were green. We were still an unknown quantity. We had a National Service men. We didn't have all of our defensive positions in place. We were still learning. They missed a golden opportunity. They should have attacked and they could have. They had the numbers to attack at that time where

22:30 the whole involvement of Australia in Vietnam would have changed like that, because of politics. I mean had they hit us at the right time it might have just changed the whole commitment to Vietnam by the Australian government.

That's a really interesting observation. I mean you were there

Mm.

Right at the beginning and you could see the vulnerability.

Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean I used to say to myself, "If these blokes come tonight," you know, "we're

23:00 not ready." We were not ready. I mean we thought we were ready. I mean a little bit of barbed wire's not going to stop them and we didn't have all the heavy guns that the Americans had. I mean we had one fifty calibre machine gun in the whole company. That's all we had. We had nothing on our side you know. We just had M60s you know. We didn't have any proper overhead cover. So if they wanted to mortar us they would have been devastating. I mean it would a killed you know hundreds of people but for whatever reason they held back. I think they were

23:30 a little bit unsure of us and didn't know how I mean we were Uc dai loi you know. Uc dai loi means 'land down south' and we're big too compared to them. We're fairly big and they didn't know what to make of us I don't think initially but had they really put some pressure on and said, "Right, let's take these fellows out," I think it would have just changed the whole Vietnam issue, cause we were full of National Servicemen. You know and just imagine you know all of a sudden the battalion's hit and there's

24:00 forty or fifty killed. I mean could you imagine what that would have created back here? So politically it would have been, as I say, it would have changed the whole situation. In my view it would have changed everything.

But from the Viet Cong's perspective, from the VC perspective Australia was it was quite a different enemy from them from the US

Oh yes.

And in some extent became more feared.

Yep.

What where at what point do you think that shift started to change?

Oh look I think they tried us on a couple of times.

24:30 I mean the battle of Long Tan, which has now gone into the annals of military history. I mean 6 RAR, D Company 6 RAR I mean they took on the whole two regiments. It was something like two and a half thousand people against a hundred, or not even a hundred. I think there was eighty of them in an extraordinary feat. Absolutely extraordinary and Harry Smith was a company commander and I thought they just did a fantastic job and my platoon we went out the next day to ostensibly follow up the bad guys

25:00 and to see the devastation and the way that battle had been fought I think they realised A, you know these Australians know how to handle themselves you know and then of course SAS was doing a terrific job out there as well. They were hitting them in their own area, places where they felt secure and that's why SAS got the nickname 'Phantoms of the Jungle' and that's why there was a bounty on SAS as well. As you know a big dollar bounty on SAS, anybody

25:30 that got an SAS trooper and they just didn't feel secure. They and we operate totally differently to Americans. I mean I've done patrols with Americans. I mean the Americans I've patrolled with go down the main road. They go down the main track. They don't scrub bash like us. We actually work our way through the jungle. We do not use tracks at all. We might be parallel to a track for a while but we're probably twenty, thirty metres off it because if you're too close to it you can still get ambushed.

26:00 So we used to use it purely as an axis of advance but we'd be well off the track and we go cross country

and also at times we move at night you see. The Americans don't move at night or they didn't in those days and sometimes we move at night as well. So I think we just we unnerved them a bit because our tactics were a little bit different to what they'd gotten used to with the Americans. The Americans in my view the Americans have more guts than brains. I mean they've got an incredible courage

26:30 and they're very nationalistic and won't shirk the issue but in terms of their jungle warfare and their tactics, sadly lacking. Sadly lacking. They're still fighting the civil war in terms of the some of the tactics they use at that time. Now it's probably different but yeah, I think they sort of realised that we really were not just from a different country but we were also a different enemy and so they treated us with a bit more respect.

That moving at night was virtually mimicking their

27:00 **behaviour as well.**

Yes, absolutely.

When did you know it was okay to move at night?

Oh mostly we'd try and move when there was a bit of moonlight. I mean so you could actually see, but not too well because if you can see they can see and also we did a lot of cordon and searches, which was a tactic that our battalion commander had devised, and our IO. Lots of the battalions felt that you could do more damage by taking people on and shooting

27:30 them and hopefully you know getting four or five or a dozen VC. We got more by hardly firing a shot. What they'd send me out to do is do a reconnaissance of a village and then what we would do at night, we would put in a cordon around the village, a physical cordon and then one of the companies would drive through at first light and then you'd see all the VC running out. You know they've been in at night catching up with their loved ones and they'd be taking off the back way. Next minute 'boom' and we got

28:00 so many VC that way and we got so much information and also we really got to know the friendlies and the unfriendlies in particular villages that we did these and cordon and search became a doctrine of the Australian Army in Vietnam and our battalion started that. So because it was all done at night we had to move a lot at night. It was quite funny. I mean some of the people, some of the things that happened to them it was really quite amazing. Cause we used to tie ourselves together with toggle ropes and oh you know people try

28:30 stumbling around following one another and you know the old thing if somebody at the front's going too fast you know the guy at the back's running. You know it's just incredible but you know we managed to get into position but we've lost a few people down wells at night. Lucky they weren't killed you know. Oh and people sort of stepping into you know shit pits. You know like toilets and all that sort a stuff and oh no, I mean it was hilarious at the time.

29:00 It could have been scary. It was hilarious at the time but very, very effective and once we'd got confidence of moving at night it didn't become a big deal. The first one I did I thought, "Holy hell, this is crazy." I mean you know moving around at night but once we got good at it and we'd put little luminous things on the back of our packs so you could always see where the person was in front of you and again, communications was absolutely vital and

29:30 you know we convinced the fellow at the front that he should move a lot slower. Because if that person at the front is just moving very slow it means the guy at the back might be trotting instead of galloping. You know we slowed the whole advance down and we got very confident with that and the enemy were never expecting that. Cause they don't they move at night with cause they're used to it and also there's no air cover at night and also the way they navigate they just follow tracks and move down tracks

30:00 at night. So for them it's sort of par for the course but they never expected us to do it and we did it a lot in the first, say, six months in country to do these cordon and search exercises or operations.

Well if I may skip ahead to Queanbeyan

Mhm.

Which you did talk about extensively

Mhm.

Prior but I just have some questions from that.

Mm.

Excuse

30:30 **me a minute.**

I'm glad we're editing this.

Firstly I did actually want to ask, when the fire power came in

Yep.

How long was it shooting for?

Well the machine gun from A Company down the bottom would have been going for oh, no more than a two or three minutes. It's a long time, two or three minutes of continual fire, and especially when it's sort of cracking around the top of your head. The helicopter gun ships would have been there

31:00 oh for a good twenty minutes. Yeah, good twenty minutes I'd reckon. You know getting the line right and flying in and firing one rocket and then veering off and you know they didn't all let it all go at one time because they were wanting these guys to lift their heads up so good they could get a good shot or see some of them scamper away etcetera. So you know it was there for about a good fifteen, twenty minutes I reckon. Helicopters.

And how close were you to that?

Ah I would say mm, not far. I'd say from

31:30 twenty feet. Twenty feet away. Maybe twenty five feet maximum but well down so that the shrapnel wouldn't come back and hit us.

Yeah I was going to ask about the shrapnel and protection from that.

Mm. Mm cause it was on rock as well and a course you get those ricochets but you know we were very lucky. Nobody got wounded by our own fire.

And when you discovered the tunnel system was this the first time you'd actually been able to get inside

32:00 **one of the tunnels?**

No. No. We we'd found a few tunnels on Hardihood where you know we'd go down and have a bit of a look and that's quite scary but thankfully we had engineers that used to travel with company headquarters and they were what we call the tunnel rats and they used to go down and check those things out. They were trained to do it. We weren't trained to go down but I'd been in a couple and I don't particularly like it. It's again, it's unnatural and you just

32:30 go down with a pistol. You never know what you're gonna find. You know whereas our engineers, our sappers used to do it all the time and I just admire them and you know occasionally you'd find somebody cowering down there, hiding down there and you'd get them up and sometimes you'd find guns and ammunition that was stowed down there or some food items etcetera. So tunnels and clearing tunnels was a very, very big part of the Vietnam war, cause that's the only way they could basically either hide themselves or also hide their

33:00 equipment.

And specifically talking about Queanbeyan, how big was the

Very tiny.

Space that you

Very tiny. Yeah I mean I went into one of them and I mean I'm a pretty big bloke and I struggled. I mean I really struggled to sort of get through but I was determined to go down and have a look. I felt I owed that to Normie Womal, that I really had to have a look to see why he died you know and I got

33:30 down in into some of these. Now once you got inside the major rooms oh they were huge. I mean they had an operating theatre down there, a hospital you know which was sort of six foot ceiling, because most of them are only five foot tall. So six foot ceiling and generators and lights and hospital beds and oxygen bottles. All sorts of things. Just amazing. A kitchen. They had a viaduct. They had fresh water running through. It was a very by Viet Cong standards it was

34:00 the Nui Thi Vai Hilton basically in terms of quality accommodation. It really was five star Viet Cong accommodation and oh, you get down into it and you know I mean you put your hand into something which is you know unsavoury but meanwhile the engineers have already been through. They've cleared it of booby traps and all that sort of business and a lot of the engineer tunnel rats were little guys. They weren't big guys and they weren't big guys like me. They were sort of tiny and slim and they could

34:30 move around in those tunnels very, very quickly and also they knew what they were doing and we didn't really know what we were doing. We were really didn't even know what we were looking for. It was more a curiosity factor quite often to go down into a tunnel but it's not my favourite pastime. Don't like it. Yet you know I've been in submarines and I've been in confined spaces but to be down in a tunnel I feel rather helpless and I don't like feeling helpless. Cause there's not much you can do with a pistol. Except shoot yourself maybe.

35:00 **And then that was quite an intelligence coup**

Oh yes.

For

Oh yeah, absolutely. Oh no, I mean it for our battalion it definitely it was one of the intelligence coups of our tour of duty and it wasn't just my platoon. I mean it was a team effort. I mean there was battalion headquarters, all right my platoon we got ambushed and we had to extract ourselves out of it. The next day John McElhony with assault pioneers went down and found a bit more and then we got the

35:30 engineers in and then we got A Company up to do a bit more. So no, it was a team effort as far as the battalion was concerned and but I guess from our part I guess we found the tunnels but it was then a team effort to clear the tunnels and find all of the other bits and pieces that were in it.

Well you were awarded the Military Cross for that.

Mm.

How did you feel about winning the Cross?

Well I had no idea.

36:00 Absolutely no idea. I mean I was assistant adjutant in SAS by this stage because I came back and went straight to SAS and my CO, Colonel Eyles, good bloke got me into his office one day and said, "Mike, we've got a top secret message." Cause I used to pick up top secret messages all the time. "We've got a top secret message in at headquarters we want you to pick up," which was headquarters western command and I went in there and there was a

36:30 chap there, his title is military secretary. He was ostensibly the person, civil servant, not army but a public servant who was responsible for officer postings and all that sort of stuff and I went in and he handed me this envelope. And he had a bit of a smile on his face and normally if I had to go in and pick up a top secret signal it meant that one of our squadrons in Vietnam had a contact and maybe somebody killed or wounded because I was also the family liaison officer, that would have to go out with the priest and advise them

37:00 that their husband had been killed or something like that. So I'd had no idea. I then came back and I handed the signal to the colonel and by this stage he got the adjutant to come in as well, Vin Murphy, and he said, "Well Mick," he said he stood up and he shook me by the hand and he said, "Mick congratulations. You've just been awarded the Military Cross." I couldn't believe it. I just could not believe it. I had no idea. You know I had absolutely no idea and

37:30 you know from my perspective it was a platoon effort. I mean I just happened to be the platoon commander you know. You can't do these things on your own but I thought you know I thought maybe there might be something. but it wasn't expected and certainly had nothing came out of it I wouldn't have been disappointed because lots of other platoon commanders and section commanders in the battalion, and soldiers, had done things far more memorable than me but that's the way it works. My stretcher

38:00 bearer, Peter Fraser, got a Military Medal. He should have got a Victoria Cross actually by crawling out on that flat rock but he got a Military Medal. We're still mates. He lives in Western Australia. My Normie Womal, who died unfortunately, he posthumously won a MID [Mention in Despatches]. Had he lived he would have won a Military Medal as well but he won a MID. So it's just one of things you know. You

38:30 don't expect these things but when they happen you grab 'em but you grab 'em with both hands on behalf of a lot of other people.

That contact that you had and the operation was really it it's big in so many different aspects, on a personal level and a professional level,

Yep.

Losing Womal I mean how did you pick yourself up and

Oh I found it very hard.

Get on?

I found it very hard.

39:00 it's sad really. I mean and that I think this is part of our problem with Vietnam soldiers. Again, it's this mental conditioning that you go through before you go and also after a period of time in country. You tend to detach yourself from reality. You tend to detach yourself from pain. You tend to detach yourself from something which upsets you. So I basically just brought down the shutters and that is a big problem with Viet Vietnam veterans in terms of emotions

39:30 and all those sort a things. The shutters just roll down. It's a condition that we condition ourselves to. I mean a classic example is that part of the problem of Vietnam veterans, they've never been able to mourn their dead. I mean I could never mourn Normie Womal's death. I mean he was put in a body bag, put in an air craft and flown out and back to Australia. He's now buried up in Queensland. I mean you know every other war you've had an opportunity to actually mourn your dead. You could have a bit of a cry

40:00 or you can say a few prayers or you know what I mean? But Vietnam Veterans didn't have that, I won't say luxury but they didn't have that opportunity and so therefore what you tend to do, you tend to mentally condition yourself where you just divorce yourself from anything that's nasty. You know you just push it to one side and that's what I did with Norm. I said to myself, "I'm the platoon commander. I'm responsible. I've got to get on and do the job. I don't care how bad all the others feel, we've got to lift ourselves

40:30 out of this and keep going," and that's exactly what we did.

Thank you very much Michael. We've just come to the end of

Another forty minutes?

Yep. Another forty minutes. Bet you didn't even realise.

Okay.

Tape 7

00:30 **Yep. Just Mick, you did tell us earlier on in the day the story about Womal but I understand that you had to give Private Fraser an order that he ignored.**

Mhm.

What did you say to him?

I said, "Don't go Peter. Don't go." It wasn't sort of an order like you know, "You will not go." I just said, "Peter, don't go. It's not safe. It's don't go," you know but he chose to go and

01:00 once he had decided to do that I mean there's not a lot I could do except to give him more support you know. I just didn't want two people stuck out there shot you know and I and at that time too, didn't realise how seriously Norm had been wounded. All I know is that we just simply couldn't risk any more getting up there and when I said to him like you know something like you know, "Pete don't go, don't go," I mean he went. So he didn't listen to me.

01:30 **And what did he do? I understand**

Well

He put himself in a very difficult position.

Oh yeah no, he actually crawled up and put his body between the enemy and Norm Womal to shield his body from further gun fire. I mean that goes beyond the call of courage.

And from where you were positioned could you see him?

At, oh I could then. Yes, my word. My word. Cause I then moved up to a higher ground so that I could basically if necessary shoot down and see the enemy from the higher ground.

02:00 Then I went back down and then we had to move Norm off the rock with the poncho with the platoon sergeant, Skinny Calvert, Peter Fraser, myself and somebody else, I can't remember who, might have perhaps might have been my sig to try and get Norm out of harm's way but by that stage we knew that he was struggling.

So in how did you go about calling the chopper? Like can you just take us

02:30 **through**

Sure.

How you bring in a chopper in a situation

Yep.

Like that?

Yep. At that time being sort of in a classic platoon environment, not a reconnaissance platoon environment, I had to work through my company headquarters, which was support company, and of course support company was right near battalion headquarters. So basically I just requested gun fire support and I got it fairly quickly. Then battalion headquarters requested from the American liaison officer and next

03:00 minute the choppers were in the air and then once the chopper are in the air I talked to them direct you know. I can say, "Stop," or, "Go," or all that sort a business because you can't do that through two other intermediaries in case something goes wrong, by the time the message gets there it's too late. So you then direct fire yourself and they come onto my frequency. I don't go onto their frequency, they come

onto mine. Cause they've got much more flexibility in a chopper and then you just direct the fire. You know you throw smoke and

03:30 he says, "I see green smoke," and you say, "Affirmative," and then, "Enemy position twenty feet east of green smoke," and that's 'boom' where they come in and hit - hopefully hit the target.

Because you were in a still volatile and quite small position?

Oh yes. We our whole platoon was still in a very, very precarious situation including our doctor and including I think the company sergeant major,

04:00 who was a little bit further down the track and also some of the sigs, sig platoon were also with their radios not far away. So I mean my platoon in particular because we're right in the contact point but also the advance of the battalion headquarter group too was in a pretty tricky position as well. So it yeah, it was scary. It was scary because of the closeness of the enemy and then of course also the closeness of the

04:30 rocket fire that was coming in as well.

So did you how far away from your original position did you have to move Womal to get to bring the chopper in?

Oh. Well the actual chopper to get Normie Womal out there was a rock ledge behind me. The contact position was at the front of me and the rock ledge was behind me. So again, the chopper pilot

05:00 took an enormous risk coming in. I mean A, the chopper blades were nearly hitting the cliff face because of the angle that I mean a chopper blades don't move this way. I mean they are vertical take off and here is this chopper coming in and there was a sort of a rock ledge here. The chopper pilot had to sort of move his aircraft in such a way that his chopper blade wouldn't hit the side of the mountain, so we could get Normie Womal on to the stretcher and to hospital but by this stage he'd passed away but I didn't know that.

So the chopper didn't

05:30 **land, it just**

Hovered.

Hovers.

Hovered. Yeah, hovered with full power still going and then some of my boys actually laid Norm onto the stretcher and then the chopper took off.

It's an incredibly dangerous operation. Not even considering that you're under fire at the time but just physically the geography of the spot that you were in.

Exactly. I mean Nui Thi Vai, that whole mountain range, we used to call it the Warburtons cause we hated that place.

06:00 When you know what's that song? "Don't go to the Warburtons. War please don't go to the Warburton mountains." It's a song that was going around at that time and we hated the place. I mean it really A, it was we'd had a lot a contacts there. The whole battalion had a lot of contacts there. It was a natural defensive and observation post for the enemy. Natural. It was so high up you could see for miles all the way around and the place was full of them and every time

06:30 we went there, there was some sort of a contact. C Company had a bad contact there. A Company. D Company. Everybody had contacts there, so it was just lousy with either VC or NVA and it was a very difficult place to fight a war because the gradient's about one in two and it's all rock slides and big rocks and not a lot of quick places to sort of get to. I mean you just can't

07:00 duck for cover. You've got to actually climb and get into cover. So it's a very laborious, slow way of fighting a war and that's why I mean I've been over the Kokoda Trail now since and, in a peace time environment I might say, and I just admire the guys that fought on the Kokoda Trail because that was very similar. Very narrow ridge and straight up and the Nui Thi Vai I mean they weren't as long as the Kokoda Trail but certainly in that short, if you like, two or three hundred metres

07:30 where we had this particular contact it was every bit as bad as the Kokoda Trail. So it was a nasty bit of real estate and we all hated it actually. Every time we said we're going back up I thought, "Oh no, not again." You know cause it brings brings back the memories of there certain things happened.

So on this day were you how were you communicating to everybody during

Shouting. Shouting. I mean top of my voice. I mean I've got a very loud voice

08:00 and I was using my best parade ground voice to communicate with all my soldiers and that's when the bad guys realised who the commander was. So every time I shouted an order there'd be a shot coming my way or burst of fire. So I what I'd do I'd yell something out and then move very quickly because next minute there's a burst of fire going and the next day I went down after John McElhony's platoon had

gone down and I went down to have a look at where we had our contact

08:30 and there was a tree that I was behind for a period of time that was just shot to bits. I mean about this far up it was all splintered and shot to bits where obviously they must have known I was there and they were just kept shooting at it and they couldn't get a decent, I don't think they could get a decent shot at me because of some rocks that were in front of it. So I was down fairly low but every time I yelled an order they shot where my voice was. So I had to sort of continually move around and I might add,

09:00 it wasn't just my tree that was shot to bits. A lot of the other guys' trees were shot to bits as well. So we'll never know, we'll never know I mean how many were there you know. We just won't. Seemed like a hell of a lot more than three.

And was it a surprise to you when you saw that the next day?

Oh yes. Yeah. Totally cause at the time I mean your adrenalin is rushing so fast and your mind is just going through a hundred things and interestingly, in all

09:30 the contacts that I've had and you know probably had over twenty contacts, you get a bitter taste in your mouth. A very bitter taste in your mouth and I think that's the adrenalin in your body. It's almost a sort of a dry, bitter taste. You know fear, survival, adrenalin. Something rushing through your blood and I noticed that with almost every contact

10:00 that I had. I got this dry, bitter taste in my mouth which now doctors have told me it's the adrenalin. Interesting isn't it?

And when you remember that taste now

Mm.

Can you liken it to anything? Like what do you think it tasted like?

Um. The only thing I can liken it to is in boxing. If someone really you know hangs a decent punch on you, you get that same bitter taste. You know

10:30 , it's the adrenalin I think. I mean you're out there. It's you're in defensive mode or in you're in attack mode and somebody you know gets one in again, you get that bitter taste. The same in rugby. I mean you know if I if I've had a real bad head knock again, I get that bitter taste in my mouth and I just think it's just the adrenalin. You're just running on very, very high adrenalin levels and it must come out through you know your taste buds or

11:00 something.

Is it sort of metallic or acidic?

Metallic. Metallic, yeah. Not acidic. Metallic. Really an off taste, which is interesting you know now in retrospect. At the time I didn't know what it was. All I thought it was just fear. You know you sort of you think and drinking water. I mean you know you're drinking water and then after a contact although I wasn't smoking I'd always have a cigarette. Yeah, just psychologically used to calm me. Just

11:30 a psychological thing but it was the dry if you like metallic taste in my mouth that really let me know that I'd been in some sort of a contact.

Well you would have been on high adrenalin during that particular

Mm.

Contact.

Mm. Yeah oh it was full on but the interesting thing again, I mean you know when you sort of look back is, that everything seemed to be going in slow motion.

12:00 You know it was like slow motion. Yet the three and a quarter hours that we were in contact with the enemy, or three and a half hours I think, seemed to go so quickly. I mean yet at the time, at the time that you're actually doing all this you're sort a saying to yourself, "My God, it will it ever finish?" You know it's going on and on and on but then when it's over you know you think, "God," but whilst things

12:30 are happening, it's almost like if you've ever been in a car accident or a roll over, everything happens in slow motion. It's just like a movie, like a replay type thing, and I found with a lot of contacts things, to me, were going in slow motion not in fast for some reason and it was almost as if my thought processes or my brain or whatever was

13:00 processing differently to the real situation or again, whether it was a condition that I put myself into to be not panicking and to be a little bit more cool and, not cool but certainly more calculating in a situation. So yeah, I found that although some contacts might only take five seconds, you know quick burst of fire, at the time it seems like five minutes but then when it's over you realise how quick it

13:30 was. So just a condition I think, a mental condition you get into.

It is very interesting to hear you talk about it and many have written about what has been termed "the fog of war."

Mhm.

Is that what you're describing when things are really in slow motion?

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean I didn't know to call it a fog of war but to me it was almost like a replay. You know you can even today, I mean some things I've forgotten

14:00 obviously but some things I can still remember quite vividly and they still almost play in slow motion in my mind as to what occurred. Whether that's a select piece of memory that I've stored and it's in slow replay, or whether it's just what's been stored at the time you know but I really think it's a condition. I think it's a condition that we get into in those sort of stressful situations, where things

14:30 just travel very slowly yet they're happening around you very quickly but you think, "Oh gee," you know and I mean even a bad guy lifting his weapon. I mean he'd probably seriously lift his weapon like that but at the time it's almost like he's doing it slowly. Interesting and then what you've got to do, is do it faster.

15:00 **And so the intelligence that you found you've mentioned you've detailed quite a bit about the**

Yeah.

Intelligence and there was a diary

Yeah, diary. Yeah, yeah the commander's diary and that was just a valuable piece of intelligence because what it had basically noted was the movements of that regiment for a period

15:30 of a couple of years. So what it established our intelligence to do, and higher authority I assume like task force and the Americans, to establish a movement pattern and course of business so to speak as to how these people move and how far they move and where their resupply is and their codes and their contacts in certain villages etcetera. So yeah no, it enabled us to launch some very, very successful operations after that.

16:00 **So what did come after Queanbeyan?**

Oh look we did patrols and oh, after Queanbeyan, that's when I went to Saigon for the two or three nights and Dennis Rayner and I had a great time in Saigon. We did march. We did march with the Vietnamese but the rest of the time we were just gallivanting around the place you know. Doing what the journalists do. The journalists were sitting up there at the top of the Caravel Hotel looking over war zone D,

16:30 watching the artillery and napalm and they were writing their notes about the war. Some of the war journalists and Dennis and I were up there and we were just saying, "God what a way to fight a war." Just amazing and then the rest of the time you know we'd go to some bar girls and have fun.

Well the media had really struck a chord with you much earlier on in your life.

Mhm.

The headlines of the news that

Yep. Yep.

You have talked to us about. So what was your relationship

17:00 **to the journalists and**

Ah generally not good I've got to say. Generally not good. I found most of the journalists negative and I also found that they were looking for bad hooks, not good hooks. I mean you know we all believed what we were doing up there. I mean I certainly believed in what we were doing there and there was a guy called Pat Burgess, who I'll never forgive actually, he just wrote the most blatant garbage you know, which was

17:30 read by Mums and Dads back home here, where the parents were worried about their kids. You know I mean they were worried enough anyway without over dramatising, over dramatics in terms of journalism and Pat Burgess used to really write a lot of pretty ordinary articles I've got to say and I didn't trust journalists, I really didn't, and that's why I was very surprised at you know I took Daryl Henry out with me to the Long Hai mountains because I trusted him. I trusted

18:00 him. He wrote a fantastic article in the Sydney Morning Herald as a freelance journalist, which is a full page in the feature section about our platoon and I mean I've tried desperately to find out where he is. I believe he was last seen in Guadalcanal or somewhere with a camera. I mean he's now out a circulation but a lot of the other journalists I didn't trust at all. No. I think they just wrote so much garbage and they didn't go out on ops with us. Most of them were in

18:30 Saigon or Vung Tau basically.

So you did mention that the R&C or the rest in country that you had and experienced a bit of drinking and a bit of winding down.

Yep. Yep.

So and you have told us about your rebellious nature early on in the days.

Mm. Mm.

Did you get up to no good or

Oh yeah. I mean you know you sort of you you'd

19:00 go to some bar and you'd find an attractive bar girl and you'd buy her some Saigon tea and you'd drink booze and if the opportunity was right you'd make her acquaintance. I mean that's what we used to do in my, there's that damn phone again. I've got to turn it down and my philosophy used to be is, you've got to have fun today because you could be dead tomorrow and one you miss out on's one you never get. You know what I'm saying and that's the way

19:30 we were. I mean I was single. I had no responsibilities to anybody and you just had fun. Basic and it's amazing how it allowed you to wind down. But it was rare though. I mean we'd spend a day in Vung Tau, a day and a night, and that was it you know. The trip to Saigon was luck I was lucky. It was I think three nights and two days or two no, two nights and three days where we had a bit a fun and came back and met some German nurses, which was even

20:00 better, who were with the hospital ship, the Helgalunt, in the Mekong River and yeah, and you come back and then you're ready for another stoush with the enemy and everybody was like this. Everybody. I mean everybody that had no attachments you know used to have that sort of fun.

Well you have talked I mean you are in a position of leadership as second lieutenant

Mhm.

So

20:30 **did you have any problems with any of your trips from these R&C trips or**

No, never. Never. No we used to have a lot of fun and you've got to remember, I mean a lot of these NCOs of mine, we were diggers together. They knew what I was like. They knew me and I certainly knew them and when we're out on the grog you know yeah, I was the boss but I was one of the boys but next day on parade they knew who the boss was. I mean and that's the beauty of these guys.

21:00 You know they had the maturity and the tact to be able to handle me in a proper way where at night you'd just get rolling drunk with them and the next day you could just be a an officer and they could be respectful.

Well there some officers who are of the view that the officers should stick with the

Mhm.

Officers.

Yes.

But you're not one of those officers.

I wasn't at that time and I I'm still not that way inclined. I mean there's an old saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt," and I

21:30 believe that firmly but it depends on the familiarity and it also depends on the people that you're familiar with. I think if an officer tries to be familiar to garner support or is familiar because he wants to be one of the boys, I think that particular officer is going to come unstuck real quick. In my case I was one of the boys. I mean I came from the ranks, I was one of them. They knew who the boss was and I

22:00 let them know who the boss was if I had to make a hard decision but in terms of relaxing and having a good time, I mean the thing is I didn't go on leave with other officers because they were busy doing their thing. I mean if our platoon went down to Vung Tau for instance for a day and a night just to rest and go for a bit of a swim there were no other officers. So I'm not gonna drink on my own. So I just went out with my NCOs or with my diggers.

22:30 So it's just I think in Vietnam basically a lot a that officer OR thing went out the window. I think you'll find a lot of officers were like me, not just me, especially National Service officers, cause they were only in for a short haul anyway you know and they were the same as some as the young Nasho [National Service soldier] diggers. So it just so happens one was selected for officer candidate school at Scheyville, officer cadet school at Scheyville, and the other one was a digger

23:00 but they probably came from the same town and same sort of socio economic group etcetera etcetera. So I think during the Vietnam era there's quite a bit of fraternisation between officers and soldiers.

So it never caught you out or

Oh yes, couple a times. Couple a times it caught me out. Oh, not so much with the diggers. More with other officers, where they thought it wasn't the done thing but it never stopped me from doing my job. It never stopped me from achieving

23:30 our objectives. It never stopped me from getting the respect of my diggers. So you know I didn't listen to those guys too much actually.

Well after Queanbeyan you were telling us earlier in the day that you then went on to or it was a as a result of the

Mhm.

Queanbeyan action and contact that you then formed the

Reconnaissance.

Recon

Mhm. Yep.

Patrol. So can you

24:00 **just detail it for us a bit more about how things changed for you**

Mhm. Yep.

And what the brief was for this new patrol?

Yeah. New platoon.

Platoon, sorry.

Yeah. Yep. Well you know as I said earlier it's to do with immediate reconnaissance for the battalion. We were to fill the gap between SAS and the battalion. We were to work off SAS intelligence

24:30 but not go out as far as them. They used to go out thirty, forty thousand kilometres. We used to go out about ten, maximum fifteen actually kilometres and I guess where it changed things for me was that I had a totally different responsibility. I mean I almost became a total independent commander with this platoon because in my platoon I had four patrols and each patrol had a radio, including mine.

25:00 Each patrol was a four man patrol, so there was sixteen. Myself, I had five because we had two radios, so there were twenty one. I mean twenty one used to go out on a regular basis and you know we'd always have a couple a guys on R&R [Rest and Recreation] in Bangkok somewhere and we'd always have to leave one or two behind because of defence and there was always somebody that's crook or not quite right you know. So we'd operate with about twenty in the field at all times

25:30 and because I had the two radios and I was in charge of these four patrols, I mean I almost became like a mini company commander really and also I had direct access to all of my fire support at the back. So that if I wanted artillery or a gun ship or anything else I just went straight to battalion headquarters. I didn't have to go through my company or anybody else and then if we needed some support from elsewhere, like I've also called in naval gunfire. If I needed support from elsewhere

26:00 I mean they would just put me in direct in touch with the Americans where I could actually talk to the Americans. So I had enormous resources available to me and I think that sort of made me realise that if I had these resources I could fight this war another way rather than the classic way and that's why I used to use a lot of fire power. You know bugger the dollars, just go for the bangs you know and I'd use artillery, I'd use mortars. I'd use American artillery.

26:30 I'd use fighter air craft. I'd use 'Puff the Magic Dragon', which was a DC-3 full of Gatling guns out the side and in one contact I used naval gunfire. So you know what it did for me as a young platoon commander, it gave me an enormous amount of experience and it also gave me enormous amount of satisfaction knowing that I could handle all this in a contact situation, which a lot a platoon commanders never had the opportunity to do because they still have to work

27:00 within and this is not a criticism, I mean they have to work within a company structure but me being out on my own a lot of the time, it just gave me total independence and I really liked that independence. Bit of that loner thing coming out again where I don't have to report to anybody, I just do my own thing.

But who would you be answerable to?

I was directly answerable to the ops officer, the operations officer yeah, who was also my company commander, Max Carroll

27:30 and then straight to the CO. That was my chain of command, to the operations officer and to the commanding officer.

So how often would you have briefing meetings with

Oh every time I went out on a patrol or an exercise I'd have a meeting with the ops officer or the intelligence officer or the assistant intelligence officer and then when I came back I'd always have a debrief. I'd always be debriefed when I came back off patrol and our CO I mean again, going back to the late he's passed away now

28:00 Unfortunately, John Warr. It didn't matter where I came in through the wire you know, there's this huge position which is surrounded by barb wire and no matter where I used to come back in, he would be there as uncanny where he would know exactly where we were coming in and yet I hadn't told anybody where I was coming in but he would be there with a big grin. "G'day Mick, how's it going? How's the boys?" You know he'd just check us all in. He knew all

28:30 of my diggers by name you know and he'd smile and yeah, I he was just a he's a terrific commanding officer. Just a wonderful commanding officer.

So you've got ah four man patrols

Mhm.

And how many would go out at once? About four?

Ah all the patrols would be out. I mean if we were doing a what we call a screening exercise for the battalion we'd have four patrols out. There'd be

29:00 perhaps two to my left and me here and another one to my right. So we're advancing in a straight line acting as a screen or if there was some high ground I might say, "Look, it's a bit scary up there. We'll split we'll work as two man patrols," no, sorry as two patrols. So there'd be eight and nine or ten and ten in each patrol going up on the high ground. If I was really worried about the enemy situation I would go

29:30 what they call reconnaissance in strength. I'd work as a platoon of twenty and a couple of times I'm glad that I did because otherwise I wouldn't be here. So you tend to read the situation and also who you're working with, the company that you're working with. By that I mean the company commander that you're working with because a lot of the time you'd said, "Well sir," you know, "what would you want me to do?" You know, "How do you want me to handle this?" and then he might say, "Oh look Mick it's up to you," you know but and I'd say, "Well look, I'm thinking of doing

30:00 this, this, this and this," and he's say, "Fine," you know. "No worries. Do it." That was it.

So you would work with A, B, C, D Companies

Yes.

And go in advance of them?

Yes, quite often. Mostly actually. Mostly. They would use us as a fourth platoon, because there was three platoons in a company, they'd use us as a fourth platoon but with a an entirely different role. For instance if one of the companies had to build the minefield down on the Horseshoe, which is just a

30:30 disgrace that exercise, they would put up us out in small patrols as listening posts to make sure that we're well out away from enemy mortar range, so whilst our people are working that the enemy can't mortar and then at night I would operate as a an ambush platoon, because these guys had been working all day knocking stakes in the ground and putting up barb wire and ostensibly buggered. They'd have to get a good night's sleep to work the next day.

31:00 Well, you know we'd been sort of just out there you know not resting but listening but not really working hard physically just mentally and then at night I'd concentrate them into a platoon and then we'd actually go and ambush as a platoon. What's going on out there?

I'm not sure.

Oh we'll change that in a minute.

So because you've got different configurations that you're working with did you have

31:30 **particular men that you would go out with or did you position I'm wondering how you would position yourself?**

Ah no all of the patrols were constant. In other words we had patrol commanders and my patrol was the command patrol and I had my platoon sergeant with me. So if anything happened to me my sergeant immediately took over those other patrols and we had two radios. So we had two radio operators with me and one who was a forward scout or a tail end Charlie because I

32:00 used to go up forward quite a bit and then if I got tired somebody else…

So yeah, you're working next to your sergeant.

Mhm.

Or with your sergeant.

Mhm.

So you you've just mentioned that you preferred to go up front.

Well it depends. I mean I'd either go up front or my sergeant would go up front or one of my diggers, my batman, would go up front. Depends very much on

32:30 you know how we were feeling and or and what the role was but you try and rotate because you can't have one person up front all the time, it's just too draining. Cause that forward scout role is a quite a critical role.

But you as commander you didn't necessarily have to put yourself out the front.

No, no but you've got to share the work load. You've got to share the work load and I thought I was pretty good. I thought I was pretty good out there in terms of remember the sixth sense and the smells and stuff? So

33:00 yeah and I did my share. I did my share up there.

And what was the advantaging of working in very small numbers?

Stealth and speed. You could, once you'd found something, I could concentrate my guys very quickly and get out and a small group can move quieter and less noticeable

33:30 than a big group. And also a small group can actually go to ground and just stay and listen and observe and it's amazing when you go to ground and just listen and observe what you pick up in the jungle in terms of movement of the enemy and as a company you can't do that. I mean a company's nearly a hundred strong. In fact it's a hundred and twelve you know. You just can't do that. A platoon is thirty. A platoon is more manageable than a company on reconnaissance but small, small groups of four and five for reconnaissance is the way to go definitely and that's the SAS

34:00 tactics. I mean SAS works the same way and we just adopted their methods.

And did that bring you even closer as a group?

Oh yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean the patrol commanders today, we have now have a reunion every two years. We had our first reunion, cause I was overseas for fifteen years, we had our first reunion oh gosh it would have been about four, six years ago and

34:30 it was fantastic. You know and it's interesting, I got them all put up at the Travel Lodge Hotel here in Adelaide and I went in to have a beer with them you know in the bar and I walked past the bar area. I thought, "No, my blokes no, they're too old. They're not my blokes." You know you've got this mind's eye. You know I thought, "No, they're too old," and then slowly you walk in and it's almost as if you're in a time warp. All of a sudden these faces become younger. Those old faces become younger. Like, "G'day

35:00 Terry. G'day Bruce. G'day Peter," you know. Very interesting. You know I've organised the reunions here and we' we've now had three and we're gonna have our fourth in well, two actually. We're having our third in Canberra next year.

Well I understand that on one occasion you were asked to go out there was some intelligence about a

35:30 **US spotter plane.**

Yes.

So can you tell us leading up to that, what

Yep.

How did that

Well

Come about?

It originally happened on Hardihood. On Hardihood there was a notice that came down to all of us that a spotter plane was missing and it's a what they call a FAC aircraft, F-A-C, for forward air controller aircraft and they're little prop jobs, they're Cessnas. Pilot and co-pilot with some rocket pods under the wings that they use to spot targets and then the jets come in

36:00 and anyway we didn't find anything but I went out on this operation with A Company on the rear of Nui Nghe, mountain of Nui Nghe, and we we're operating well ahead of A Company but as a platoon because that was also a bad area and Bob Carney was up front with his set patrol and all of a sudden a signal comes back,

36:30 "Wheel." You know like this and then, "Wheel," you know and then and by the time the message came back to me through four or five people, "Wheel? What do you mean wheel?" You know you like this and the message'd go up and then it'd come back. "Wing," you know. "Wheel, wing, plane. Okay." I went like

this, go to ground and I went forward to Bob and there was the wreckage of this aircraft.

37:00 So I deployed a platoon around it and we then went and inspected the aircraft or the remains of the aircraft and found two bodies actually but they'd been there for six months, so they were in a you know fairly poor state and the pilot was killed on impact. The co-pilot had a fractured femur and he'd actually managed to crawl out of the aircraft and put up the last stand because all around his body there was just empty spent

37:30 shells around him. And there was a bullet hole in the back of his head, so he'd been executed or he'd been shot from behind and you can only put these things together because once we then had a look all the way around, we saw fighting pits and what we discovered through our intelligence was that 274 Regiment had ambushed that plane when it went down on Hardihood, had dug themselves in and they were waiting for somebody to come and find the aircraft

38:00 to ambush them. So how lucky were whoever it would have been not finding that aircraft, because all around were the weapons pits all the way around this aircraft. Anyway I called up A Company, A Company came forward, Max Carroll at that time and we got a chopper in with SAS guys to remove the bodies and the bodies were put into a kit bag and taken out. And then four years ago and I'd always

38:30 wondered what happened to the next of kin of those pilots, cause they were missing for six months, and through Bob Carney and myself we got onto the old military network to try and find the next of kin cause the book had been written. Crossfire had been written and lo and behold, we found the son of the pilot in San Antonio, Texas and Denise and I, Denise is American, Denise and I had to fly to Dallas

39:00 anyway for business. So I got in contact with the son on the email and he came up and had dinner with us in Dallas and I presented him with a book and his wife, who was an ex-air force officer, he was an ex-air force officer, and two little kids were there as well and he when he left he hugged me and said, "Thanks, you've changed my life," and a course I've got a tear in my eye you know.

39:30 I said, "Why?" He said, "Well," he said that, "If you'd not found my father my life would not have been the same because my mother would not have remarried." You know when someone's missing in action I mean you really don't know as a wife and a mother. You know and she was a good woman. She just wouldn't have remarried and as it was, once the bodies were discovered and then brought home and then buried she then much, two years later actually, married

40:00 his flying instructor who ended up being a general in the American air force. He was the air force commander in charge of the air cover during Desert Storm, the first one. So yeah, it was interesting I mean and then I just wrote a letter to all my diggers saying that you know I'd managed to and lo and behold out of the blue, I get a letter from this guy, Jacobs, he's sending me a photograph of his father and with all of his father's medals.

40:30 Cause he got a he had a Bronze Star and a Silver Star and Purple Hearts and God knows what else and that we're going to, I haven't done it yet but I'm going to present it to our regimental museum in Darwin, because our battalion's now in Darwin and just put it up there as, if you like, a bit of a memento of the Vietnam War but it was a bit a closure I think for all of us. We never found the other, the co-pilot. The co-pilot should have won a Medal of Honour. I mean he just

41:00 he fought to a stand still. He had a fractured femur and he just fought to a stand still. He didn't know that his pilot was dead you know but we could never find his next of kin. He was single, I knew that, but now his parents'd be dead now because he'd be sixty five or something and we don't know whether he had brothers or sisters but at least the pilot we managed to get some closure.

That's a really good story. We'll just need to stop and

Tape 8

00:31 **Michael I do want to talk to you about east of the Horseshoe but before I've got this general question about POWs [Prisoners of War].**

Mhm.

When you were out on patrol

Mhm.

And did you take POWs?

Oh yes. Yeah. Well not on patrol, no. No. Most of the POWs that I was involved in were very much part of cordon and search. Out in the bush, no. No, no you just didn't take POWs

01:00 and I won't elaborate any further.

Well what, anticipating the answer to that, but what did you do with the dead?

If we had time we'd bury them. If we had time. If we didn't have time we'd just leave them and just you know again, shoot and scoot. Take off because as soon as you got into a contact I mean you you've basically breached your own security. You've got to get out of there cause you just don't know what else is in the area but you know we tried to bury the dead. Yeah I mean that that's what we did.

01:30 **That was a general question but**

Yep.

Now I'd like to start talking about east of the Horseshoe.

Mhm.

What was your brief for that?

Yeah, that was interesting. Well we were we wanted to establish a strong point out to the east of our location, Nui Dat, because the brigadier at the time, Brigadier Graham, had this notion of or this philosophy of putting in a minefield

02:00 which ran from the Horseshoe all the way south to a village oh kilometres, miles of minefield and the Horseshoe was a very, very important strategic if you like point in terms of its high ground, good vision, good fields of vision, and you could cover part of the minefield from the Horseshoe but not all. So we had to actually go in and fly into the Horseshoe with, I think from memory we

02:30 went in first and then D Company came in after but it was no bad guys up there, thank God. We just basically occupied the position and then from there basically we established, or we didn't because we then went out on patrol straight away, but D Company actually established a defensive position on the Horseshoe from which we could then operate and artillery was there as well, from which we could operate, because the where the fence was going in it was too far away to be covered by fire from Nui Dat. So it had to be covered

03:00 from a fire base on the Horseshoe.

And then you immediately went out on patrol.

Yeah, immediately out on patrol and again, you know we'd operate in small groups or half groups or as a platoon, depending very much on the circumstances and the likely enemy risk.

And how far out from where D Company was establishing base did you go before you

Oh

Came across your first contact?

Oh not far. I mean you know five thousand metres, I mean we had a contact you know but mostly sort of I'd

03:30 say we were sort of you know between five and ten thousand metres out. Again, the idea was to clear it of mortars and some of the mortars they had, the larger mortars, they could sort of fire five or six thousand metres. So we'd go a fair way out to try to deny them that access.

So I mean from my notes it this is one of the worst operations that you had.

Mm.

Why was that?

Well, I mean one of the things that we learned at Portsea is that all

04:00 obstacles must be covered by fire and here is this massive minefield being put down and you can't cover it by fire. I mean by cover it by fire it means you can actually see the obstacle to cover it by fire and what was happening, the enemy were coming in at night, lifting the mines and then laying them and then the next day our diggers would step on the mine and we lost three or four officers. We lost Bob Milligan, we lost an FO [Forward Observer], we lost a Major Bourne, the

04:30 company commander, we lost young Chris Rinkin, a platoon commander. We lost soldiers and they were our mines that the bad guys had lifted through the night and then brought back in and planted where they knew that we were going to operate to extend the fence. I thought it was a hair-brain idea, a stupid idea and well even at the time I was disgusted. I mean I'm still disgusted with it because I thought you know here's something they teach you in officer cadet school as one of the principles of laying obstacles is

05:00 to cover it by fire and here is a guy that's ostensibly you know a very competent commander who orders this minefield to be laid and I thought it was just an absolute hair-brain idea. Absolutely stupid. So what we used to do was to try and deny the enemy from coming and lifting more minefields. We would go out and ambush at night to stop them from coming in and yeah one night we were out there and we got into a fairly major fire fight.

05:30 **Can you describe the**

Sure.

The contact?

Yeah, no we found a track and you could see by the Ho Chi Minh sandal marks that it had a fair amount of use and also we had some pretty good intelligence because there was a village south of the minefield which had been attacked several times. So I set an ambush and again, when you're at Portsea and when you're in infantry training centre they teach you to lay linear, what we call linear ambushes.

06:00 They're ambushes in a straight line where you've got a sentry on one end, a sentry on the other. You've got a rendezvous at the back but they're in a straight line. I never used to do that. I used to set what's called a triangle ambush where I'd have a straight line on the killing ground but then I'd have my flanks protected and I'd have one gun facing down that track, one gun facing down that track and a gun behind and then in the front centre was my headquarter group and thankfully I did that, because it was about,

06:30 oh I think we'd had dinner and then moved into the ambush position and it was about probably about eight thirty at night, nine o'clock something like that. You could hear guys jogging down the track and you could hear the pots and pans shaking and I thought, "Hello here they come," and we opened up. Bluey Twaites, one of my machine gunners, he opened up and he got a few and but then immediately they went to ground and retaliated and fired back and one of the rounds had

07:00 hit Bluey in the back of the leg and cause he was wounded and his gun jammed too, which didn't help. Bit of grass got caught in the belt. So he couldn't fight back and then all of a sudden they started to deploy and then put in a counter attack you know and I thought, "Hello, this we're in trouble here." So immediately I get on, I call in artillery. First thing I did. Clean artillery. I mean we're still fighting and shooting but I thought, "Well I want to get some arty on the ground"

07:30 and we got in some artillery but then they employed some hugging tactics [getting in close]. So what they do is that you know I had to call in the artillery and I dropped it, because at this stage when they did the flanking attack around on the side of us, it was only that I'd set a triangle ambush and I had Bob Searle, who was my other patrol commander, with a gun at the back that we managed to break it up. Cause as they came in on a flank, this gun just turned around and hit them with enfilade fire from the side and just knocked

08:00 them over. So they then withdrew and then had another go at us and meanwhile we've got Bluey Twaites has got really bad bleeding and I mean his leg was amputated. I mean that's how bad the wound was and so my major concern once again was, "I've got to get this guy out." You know, "I've already lost one. I'm not gonna lose another one. I've got to get this guy out," but at the same time trying to extract myself from the bad guys and they kept shooting and tracer going left, right

08:30 and centre and anyway I had a bad feeling about this. I just had a really bad feeling because again, those guys were just too well organised and they didn't cut and run. They actually attacked, counter attacked and I reckon there would have been, oh twenty or thirty of them. You know equal numbers but what I didn't know, what was coming behind? You know so they could a been a battalion strength, they could a been the whole of 274 Regiment

09:00 and an interesting thing was that it was, but not at that time. They were a little bit further behind. So the first thing was to try and stop the bleeding and I couldn't stop the bleeding and my finger kept slipping off the pressure point on Blue's thigh and Blue Mulby, who was then my platoon acting platoon sergeant, said, "Get out of it Skip. Get out. I'll get it." So he got there he got it straight away. 'Boom' he was straight on. Stopped it bleeding thankfully. I mean we bandaged him up as best we could

09:30 but we're still under fire and I thought, "Now how the hell do we get out of here?" you know. So there was a bit of a lull in the fighting and you could hear some of their guys wounded lying in the killing ground and but I wasn't about to go and check 'em. So I instructed very quietly for all of us to quietly withdraw. You know just quietly withdraw without any noise or anything because I just had a bad feeling and I just felt that you know, "This is not something worse

10:00 is gonna happen here and I want to get out a here." Again, it's this sixth sense perhaps. So we slowly withdrew to an area cause I had to get Blue out too with a chopper as well. So we withdrew very quietly and this was in a sort of like a clump of bamboo and everything. So we withdrew very quietly and to a paddy field and quietly went to ground in the paddy field but still calling in artillery and

10:30 an air strike and that's when I called in navy guns as well and all of a sudden our own position where we had withdrawn from was being mortared by the bad guys. They actually mortared that position and I thought, "Oh God how lucky am I?" You know I mean we'd just got out in the nick of time because they had then managed to get their heavy weapon support up from the rear because it was a regiment, because the next night they attacked a village south of us. So they

11:00 then came under their mortars and they hit exactly where we were, cause the next day I saw that and meanwhile I've got to get a chopper in to get this guy out and anyway I got onto the dust-off [helicopter evacuation] and it was American dust-off and he was flying around up there and all my guys are still going back like this and by this stage, we weren't out of small arms fire but we were far enough away with our artillery

11:30 going in to take their mind off us if you know what I mean but I had to get the chopper in and it was a night extraction, which is very dangerous. So anyway I'm talking to the pilot and he's saying, "West or East?" Anyway he was confusing what I was saying and there was still a bit of gunfire and finally I could see that the chopper was gonna make the approach and I was terrified of using a torch and I wasn't going to send out a corporal or one of my sergeants

12:00 to actually guide the plane in you know or the chopper in. Because I thought, "If anyone's gonna do it, it's gonna be me because I've already lost one corporal. I'm not gonna lose another one. So I'll do it." But I wasn't going to use a torch because with a torch, guiding him in with a torch you've got a beam that goes up and it was that sort of humid sort of an evening. So that beam basically comes back on the origination point and I would have been a target. So I said, "No, I'll be clever

12:30 here. I'll use a Zippo lighter." So I always had a Zippo lighter, which is the old cigarette lighter, and then Bob Carney had one. I said, "Give me your Zippo," and he said, "What do you want a Zippo for?" I said, "Give me your bloody Zippo." So I just got the Zippo and I just got out there. As the plane was coming in I just lit the two Zippos and then by that stage Blue Mulby was on the radio talking the chopper in. So I'm up there with the Zippo thinking, "I'm safe here," you know. Next minute he throws the spot light right on me

13:00 and as Bob Carney said in his book he said, "I shat myself," he said in the book, because I'm totally exposed you know. So anyway and it's probably one a the most frightening periods I've ever had in my life cause any minute I expected a bullet in the back of the head. I really did. I thought, "This is it. I'm gone here," and you know when you're up there like this, you ever been in a situation where you try to shrink? You know you

13:30 sort of try to get small but you can't. You're just got to stay there. So anyway once they'd spotted me and once they'd seen how far they were off the ground thank God they took the spot light off and came down and we quickly got him on and he took off. Well that was the good news but the bad news was that all that activity had had alerted the NVA as to where we were. So we had to get out of there real quick because I was frightened the mortars coming in on that position

14:00 as well. So we had to withdraw to another position, which we did, which was a bamboo clump again, I loved that bamboo, and we got into that bamboo and then I called in more artillery fire and also 'Puff the Magic Dragon', because they were then putting an attack in on the village south of us. So it might have only been ten or thirty that had a go at us but there was a much larger number following up

14:30 after that and I thought we could break them up but we didn't. They were determined to hit that small village, which is south of us, but the next day I mean that we could then stay there that night and the next day they sent out a whole squadron of APCs, which was about fifteen APCs, because we still weren't sure as to whether it was totally clear. So I married up with the APCs and put my guys on board and then we

15:00 quietly went down to where we were had our first contact and you could see the area where we had our contact. You could see all of these mortar shell shells craters where they'd put the mortars in and then we went a little bit further on and we found some body parts and some sandals and packs and all that sort of stuff and blood bandages and everything else. So didn't find any bodies because they really do as a matter of principle take their bodies with them because they were worried that we'd mutilate them

15:30 and then the Buddhists believe you go to heaven without an ear or without a finger you go to heaven without an ear or a finger. So they're really quite conscious of that and also they have to be buried a particular way as well. So they used to be paranoid. You know not that we had done any of that but that's propaganda I guess. So they do everything to get their bodies out. So we'll occasionally we'd find all just little body parts in bags and bandages and blood trails and stuff like that. So

16:00 yeah, and that was a three hour type contact from start to finish roughly. Next day the CO rang me, like didn't ring me but he got me on the radio and said, "Look, I've got good news and bad news." He said, "The good news is Blue's all right. The bad news he's lost his leg," and I thought, "Oh God." This young kid came from Tasmania. He was a champion hockey player and I just really felt bad you know. Anyway he said, "Look, do you want to go down and see him?" I said

16:30 "Absolutely." So he got me a chopper and I went down to see him at the 36 Evac Hospital and at the time the Americans were just having a huge operation called Junction City and they were getting hit left, right and centre and I had to actually walk down a post op ward because Blue had the last bed on the right and I had to walk through this post op ward to get to Blue and I've never seen so many terrible sights in my life. You know guys with no arms and legs, guys with

17:00 their stomach out on the table next to them. You know I mean just terrible. These guys had just been shot up so bad and here's Blue he's he was on the morphine. They'd sort of given him a really good boost and he was happy as Larry you know because he was drugged. You know but anyway I said, "G'day," and, "How you going? How you feeling?" and you don't make reference of his leg gone because he's so doped up. You know you just talk to him. Anyway I had to walk back out of that post op ward and

17:30 a good friend of mine who was a doctor at 36 Evac, Australian, he also ended up being my best man. I said, "John I've got to go and get pissed. I've got to get a drink." I said, "This is just terrible." He said, "Look, I know," he said, "it's the worst I've seen too and I'm a doctor." So he and I just went out on the

grog all night. I didn't go back and we sent the chopper back and my CO understood. You know he understood and so John Taskie and I, who's now

18:00 a top anaesthetist in Brisbane, he and I got stuck into the grog and it was just depression on my part. I just had to do something because I'd I mean I felt bad about Blue but when I saw these casualties. I mean fifty, fifty badly wounded soldiers on either side of the post op ward and some of them were just horrific, horrific injuries. I just felt terrible. So yeah that was our little excursion in the Long Hais. No, that wasn't the Long

18:30 Hais, that was the Horseshoe type ambush. The Long Hais was another one where our B Company was doing a patrol down from us and at that time I was attached to D Company and they got me and our guys to go up on the high ground to support the high ground and just to clear it in case there were any bad guys there and that's when B Company hit the minefield and we

19:00 lost so many people in that. Just terrible and we could see it all from up on the top of the mountain looking down. I mean I didn't have binoculars. You don't need those in Vietnam but you could just see the plume of black smoke and you know a track that's blown thirty feet in the air. I mean this is a thirty tonne vehicle that's just blown to pieces and I think in that we lost I know there was I think from memory twelve killed and about twenty four wounded or something like that and it was just probably the

19:30 worst incident of the battalion's tour in Vietnam. So we were all up there and we were fairly depressed about all of that. I mean you know obviously relieved that we weren't involved but depressed for our mates, cause we knew a lot of those guys and one of my mates, close mates, was killed, Jack Carruthers and one of my instructors from Portsea, Bruce McQualter, who I couldn't stand as an instructor at Portsea. He and I just were on different wave lengths but I had a chance

20:00 of serving with him in the battalion and particular in his company, B Company. What a fantastic company commander. Really first class company commander. I think he just liked giving officer cadets a hard time you know and of course he was killed, which was just sad and a lot of other guys and a lot of guys were very, very badly wounded and that night we just harboured up, up on top of this in ah Long Hais and there across from us at night there was this

20:30 damn fire going, little fire and obviously it was a Viet Cong cooking and I thought, "Right, we're gonna get you blokes." So I called in mortars, couldn't call in artillery because the angle was not opportune. It had to be something that goes up and comes down. So and we got onto our mortar platoon and of course they were delighted to have a bit of a crack and we'd fire some mortars and the fire would go out. Say, "Ah, got him," and we'd all quietly sit there, next minute the fire would come back on again.

21:00 Next minute I'd call in some more mortars. The fire would go out. Then in the end the fire kept coming on and I said, "Well look," you know, "if that guy's that hungry let him have his feed." We just forgot about him. So it was a bit of humour in it towards the end of it but there in that whole operation was probably the low point in and we'd lost a lot a guys with mines you know. I mean our battalion lost a lot a guys with mines and it demoralises you. You know if you

21:30 can see the enemy and close with the enemy and kill them or he kills you I mean that's one thing but you can't fight against a mine. It's something that's in the ground and they were jumping jacks, M16s. They'd jump out and they'd just chop you in half at waist length, waist ah height. So that was probably one of our worst episodes I would think.

Well, where do I start? Firstly, you that

22:00 **when you're in the Long Hai Hills and you're seeing the**

Yep.

Your men walk into these

Yep. Mm.

Mines that's an interesting the anger that that

Oh absolutely.

That spurs.

Absolutely and anger and helplessness. You know anger and helplessness. I mean the anger as to you know like absolute cowardice but we weren't fighting normal people. We were fighting guerrillas and a lot of the same is being seen today in modern warfare in Iraq and

22:30 Afghanistan but it was anger but it was also wanting to square up. You know wanting to sort of find a few and that's when the chap across the gully from us cooking his meal I thought, "Right, there might be three or four of them there. We'll see if we can get 'em," but we tried and we couldn't shoot them because we'd give our position away. So we didn't want them to know that we were up there. So I was trying to use mortars and yeah, he just kept

23:00 lighting his fire and kept cooking but what we could see and what disturbed us all was the fact that we

knew a lot of those guys. You know we really knew a lot of those guys and we just knew some of those were the guys that were hurt. We didn't know at the time. I mean they came up on the radio and said that Sunray [Commander] and Sunray Minor [Second in Command] had been you know evacuated. So I knew the company commander had been one of the guys and I knew Jack Carruthers was the other guy. I mean Jack Carruthers is a mate of mine. He

23:30 and I used to go to an American officers' club obviously drinking and having a good time and I used to bet the Americans that my man, Jack, could drink a bottle of champagne standing on his head and the Americans would say, "God damn, nobody can do that." Jack would open a bottle of champagne. He'd stand on his hands and he would skull a bottle of champagne standing on his head and I would just take the money.

24:00 I mean that's the sort of bloke he was. He was just a wonderful character. A wonderful character and I mean it a very small sliver of shrapnel that went into his head here and yeah, must have done you know obviously irreparable damage. He was in a coma and then died in a coma. Never recovered. So very sad time.

Well you said when you lost Womal that the wall went up.

Mm.

Here

24:30 **you'd lost so many mates.**

Yep. Absolutely.

How what happened then? What was your personal reaction

You

To that?

Anger. Anger and questions as to why you know and you even start to question your Christianity or your Catholicism. You know, "If there is a God why does he allow this to happen?" and I don't think it's an unfair question to ask that and yes, you start to question also in terms of you know, "What are we doing here?" You know I mean no

25:00 sooner you have a contact and you think you've eliminated ten of them, next minute there's another ten. So even in those days you're starting to have some serious doubts about how the war was going. The thing is that we knew that we were winning the battles but also we felt we were losing the war because of the political turmoil that was being created back home here by Doctor Cairns and Junie Morosi and the moratorium marches and all that sort of business and you know I mean those newspaper clippings were sent to my diggers. You know we knew what was going on.

25:30 So you start to get a little bit demoralised as to you know, "Why are we doing this?" and, "Why are these people so angry?" and, "They can't all be university students and rent a crowd." You know, "There's got to be some real resentment there," and that sort of sticks in your mind a bit. You think you know, "What is going on?" and especially when you start to lose a lot of friends. You know you start to question what and it makes you angry, makes you very, very angry but I could still cut myself off. I could just cut myself

26:00 off completely whereas it almost didn't happen, which is sad but that's the way you've got to be because you can't break down. You, you know you just can't break down.

Well how did you keep the morale high? How did you lift morale in the platoon?

Oh through humour principally. Fun, humour. Pranks. I mean we're coming back from Vung Tau once on one of our excursions into Vung Tau

26:30 and we did a mock ambush of a little Vietnamese village where I pinched a pig, a little baby pig, but I didn't pinch it. I actually paid the guy a hundred Dong or two hundred Dong. I've got to say he didn't want to sell it but I didn't steal it. I gave him some money for it and we put it in the little jeep that we had and we got into base and nobody knew that we had this pig. Nobody knew we had this pig. So what I did, we painted it you know

27:00 sort of a tiger, cause our mascot was a tiger. So we painted it like a tiger and it used to sleep in my fighting pit. So if I was ever mortared I'd have to get down there with all of that pig crap etcetera and scraps that we used to feed him and everything else but interestingly enough, we had a company sergeant major who was not well liked by the soldiers. I won't mention his name but his nickname was "Pig". His nickname was "Pig" and

27:30 what we used to do is this pig became like a dog you know. It really used to follow me around like a little dog and I'd get Bob Carney or one of the soldiers to hold the pig down the bottom of the road in front of our tents and I'd get to the top. At the top of my voice I'd yell out, "Here pig, pig, pig, pig. Here pig, pig, pig, pig," and this particular CSM would stick his head out of the tent like this as somebody's having a go at him and next minute this pig is running up the road and the diggers are just rolling

28:00 around laughing just absolutely but there's nothing he could do. A, I'm an officer and B, I mean that's

my pig you know. So it was things like that. We had a boxing tent in the back of my tent where we'd box but we'd never box in the head. We'd just box in the stomach. So in other words, I'd blow the whistle and guys put gloves on and they'd just fight like hell hitting each other in the solar plexus and the stomach region.

28:30 Not done in spite or anything else but it got rid of a lot of frustrations and also a lot of giggles as well. We'd listen to a lot of music. I mean I was a Supremes nut. Johnny Rivers, the Supremes. Oh who's the other guy that I can't recall his name but it's definitely Supremes. They were in in those days. So in my tent you know I'd just have the Supremes blaring and you're not

29:00 supposed to drink in the lines and I always had booze in my tent you know. Bacardi and Rum we used, ah Bacardi and Coke we used to drink all the time and we'd have fun. You know we'd have fun. We'd have a giggle and the diggers'd get up into a bit of trouble. Like one particular time was Thanksgiving in November and somebody from my platoon stole a huge Thanksgiving ham from the soldiers' mess and of course we all ate it. We didn't know where it came from, well we knew where it came from

29:30 but I didn't ask any questions and the next day this pig CSM, the company sergeant major, was doing inspection of all the garbage cans in front of my platoon's tents and he found the evidence. He found the ham bone in one of the garbage cans. Of course it was Bob Carney's tent so Bob, as a corporal, was charged with stealing soldiers' rations and he was marched up to the CO

30:00 because only the commanding officer can hear the charge of a corporal and I went up as a character witness and a course here am I, the platoon commander, going up as a character witness and I'd also been aiding and abetting. In other words, I'd been receiving stolen goods. Cause I didn't know. I mean by this stage I've had a few drinks and I thought, "This ham really tastes good." So the CO because he knew, I mean the adjutant said to me, "What about Bob?" and I said, "Mate he's a terrific digger. He's fantastic and I think he's been framed," because Pig didn't like him.

30:30 So he said, "Look we've got to go through the motions and charge him and all that," and he said, "I want you to come up as a witness." Not as a witness, "as a character reference." So here's the CO and the RSM, the regimental sergeant major, and Corporal Carney without his hat and belt because he might use them as a missile standing to attention in front of the CO and the CO said to me he said, "Mick, what do you think about Corporal Carney? What's Corporal Carney like as a corporal?"

31:00 and I said, "Sir, he is one of my best patrol commanders. Loved by the soldiers and invaluable to our platoon but unfortunately when he consumes alcohol he's a social misfit," and oh God so they all cracked up. You know they all cracked up. "March out Corporal Carney." So Corporal Carney marched out and then Bob and I were walking back down towards

31:30 our lines you know. He said, "Hey skip." He said, "What do you mean 'social misfit'?" and I said, "Bob you know exactly what I mean," and he laughed. He just laughed but he got nothing. He didn't get a reprimand or anything else. So it was always I guess a sense of humour, trying to keep a sense of humour going and we had a lot of black humour at that time in our platoon. You know we would see the funny things in some fairly serious things but we would see the funny side of it.

32:00 Not at the expense of others in terms of those close to us but you know if we saw some Vietnamese doing, friendlies, doing something silly we'd all just you know laugh and carry on and yeah, and look I and I think again, it wasn't just myself that managed to maintain morale. It was my leadership group. It was my corporals and sergeants that helped to maintain that and they all had my sort of humour and I think that's interesting. It wasn't part of the selection process but it's the way it worked out

32:30 where we had similar senses of humour and we'd just laugh at the most crazy things and I think that in itself kept us going.

I think that black humour is an interesting

Mm. Oh, yes.

Aspect to it all.

Oh yes. I mean oh look, some of the things that Bob Carney did. I mean little thing like you know the drop latrine? Yeah. The drop latrine. We had a blow fly. Blow fly is

33:00 the battalion hygiene corporal. We call him the battalion blow fly and he's the guy that goes out and cleans you know the loos and all that sort of stuff and I'll never forget this. He was determined to get back at us. You know cause we used to give him a hard time and I can't remember who it was but but what he had done he'd actually put down petrol in the bottom of these drop latrines and one of the guys who'd been giving him a hard time went over to

33:30 sit on the loo and relieve himself. And he was a smoker and he lit a cigarette and dropped the match down and a course it exploded didn't it and all the lids went up and stuff blew up and he had some very serious burns around the private parts and again you see we just cracked up. I mean he wasn't serious he wasn't sort of third degree burns or anything like that. You know

34:00 but he was in a reasonable amount of discomfort and we just laughed. I mean it's that sort of humour and that's the sort a thing that kept us going. It's black humour. It's odd. You know some people would

say, “Oh my God that’s terrible,” but we would just crack up.

And can I just take you a step back to the minefield?

Mm.

Your platoon was quite fortunate that you never

Mm, didn’t have to work in it or didn’t have to walk in it or no, we were mostly out

34:30 from it and I’m very thankful for that because particular C Company I mean they lost three officers, C four, four officers and a lot a soldiers because of the Viet Cong or NVA lifting them and replanting them.

But VC or NVA mines how did you avoid them?

Well

35:00 you didn’t know because the way to find them is to step on them and then it’s too late. So you just never knew where there was a mine or a booby trap. You just did what you had to do. I mean we were taught certain tricks to find booby trips and trip wires and stuff like that but you know when you’re out there for a fair while after a while again you get a bit confident and a bit blasé and perhaps sometimes a bit you’re not doing things the way you should be doing but I think for the grace

35:30 of God you know we were very, very lucky that we didn’t hit any mines or booby traps.

So the minefield that B Company walked into was that a VC minefield?

Yes. It was a what they had done, very cleverly unfortunately, they had managed to find in that area a eight hundred pound bomb, which was a bomb which had been dropped out of an air craft and it was a dud. It didn’t go off but they managed to wire it in such a way

36:00 that it would go off on command and then they planted M16 mines out to the side. So as the track approached they detonated the five, the eight hundred pound and that track just went over here and just fell down and some of the guys were caught underneath it and then the immediate drill is to do a counter ambush drill. So immediately the second track dismounted with the platoon commander, Jack Carruthers, and rushed through thinking there was an enemy ambush and a course they rushed straight into a mine

36:30 field. So that’s what really happened. They were very clever the way they organised that. Very clever and that was more I think NVA rather than VC.

Mm. Sorry to be jumping

That’s all right.

About here but I’d like to ask you about R&R.

Mhm.

Did you did you take any

I took, yeah.

R&R out of Vietnam?

Yeah. Went to Hong Kong. I went to

37:00 Hong Kong with John McElhony who was my platoon commander of assault pioneer platoon. I was his best man when he got married. Unfortunately he’s passed away now but oh John and I just got on a plane and it was a Pan Am flight and it was a granny flight, all the hosties were grannies. I think they had to be on that flight to be safe and we got into Hong Kong and then immediately booked into the Hilton Hotel and I seem to

37:30 recall I went with two thousand dollars, which is a lot of money in those days, and I think John might have gone with two thousand as well and we came home with nothing.

And what did you blow it all on?

Oh well you know booze and women and more booze and more women and just having a good time. I did buy some clothes. I did buy some clothes and I did buy myself a Rolex watch and I did buy myself as I say, two thousand was a lot a money then. I did buy

38:00 oh some shoes and a couple a suits and stuff but I mean all of that would have come to no more than about five hundred dollars in those days and the rest we just blew up.

That, the women aspect

Mhm.

If I might touch on it

Mhm.

Briefly, how did you combat VD amongst your men?

Yeah oh look we had the old blue light outfit. You know I mean that's something that used to be issued to all of them and we had some fairly basic

38:30 training you know. Say, "Look," you know, "when you do this, you do this and when you do that, you do that." So we tried to instruct them as best we can but you know I think you know I think half the battalion had the clap in the time that they were there. I mean I don't know but I'd imagine. I'd imagine but it wasn't you know AIDS or it wasn't syphilis. It was just you know you were what they call it? NSU, non specific urethritis or something like that. So there were minor cases of

39:00 VD.

And would men be pulled out of the platoon or

Oh no not really.

Action?

Not really. I mean it was a good dose of penicillin and if the individual wasn't suffering or you know discomfort in peeing or something like that I mean he'd just go through. You just continue to do it but you know I was sort of pleasantly surprised as to how few of my guys got it for some reason. I mean I don't know why but

39:30 I think they were older. Some of the guys were older and also they'd been serving soldiers and they also realised what they had to do to protect themselves and they did.

Was there any black humour about

Oh yeah. Absolutely. Oh yeah, stacks. Stacks. Oh absolutely. I mean you know, yeah. Oh no, do you want me to go into it or

Oh just maybe one of the jokes.

Oh no. I mean you know, you know you always know when you've got the

40:00 clap because like it's like pissing razor blades. I mean that's an old cliché. An old army cliché and it is, it's a bit like that, and so you know if you could see guys struggling at the pissaphone, I mean we used to have at the side of our tents purely a sort of a tube, which is an old mortar tube, and we used to use that as a sort of just a urinal. You know and that's all we had and if you found a guy sort of really wrapped around a rubber tree you knew he was in pain.

40:30 Hm. "I think you'd better go and see the RMO [Regimental Medical Officer]."

Right, we might leave it here on that note.

Okay, yes. Oh dear.

Tape 9

00:31 **So Mick you you've told us quite a lot of stuff about your operations with the recon platoon**

Mhm.

And you've just gone through and discussed the Horseshoe but in your mind what was your worst time do you think in Vietnam?

Oh definitely the Nui Thi Vai I think. At least the contact down

01:00 in Long Green, as we call it, where Bluey Twaites got hit, at least I felt that I was in control. I felt there was some control in terms of what was happening irrespective of the size of the enemy or what they were doing. In the Nui Thi Vai I just felt totally helpless. I mean totally helpless because A I couldn't see the enemy, B I if you can't see them you can't shoot them. I didn't know where Normie Womal was initially.

01:30 Then being forced back by enemy fire and the risk of leaving him and saying, "Well we're not gonna leave him. We're gonna get him out." So that was probably my worst in terms of, operationally in terms of helplessness you know and everything is going through your mind. Everything that you've learnt, everything that you've experienced anecdotally or professionally you just feel, "What do I do now?

02:00 What do I need to do now to get out of this situation?" and that was probably the worst period for me I think and also guilt I think. You know guilt in losing Norm. Thinking that maybe I could have done it another way but I've sort of examined myself in that and I just don't think we could have done it another

way. That's the problem but you know you've got this sort of guilt losing a good soldier.

And do you think that guilt is still with you?

02:30 Oh for sure, no question about it. Yeah. Absolutely. I mean you never get rid of that. You can't you know although I had the ability of just you know shutting off in terms of emotions and things of that nature, stuff like that you can't forget ever. You simply can't you know, because you're always thinking about it you know. I mean here was a young man who was married with four kids. I mean is there another way? Was there another way that I could have done this and I've agonised

03:00 over it, I've searched and in all conscience I don't think there was another way of doing it. But perhaps we could have done it a bit slower and with less bravado and maybe with less speed. You know more fire and movement rather than a frontal assault but you know you just you don't know. You really don't know and I think that's something that lives with you forever.

And as you've said a couple of times today,

03:30 **particularly when you then went onto the recon platoon you felt like you began to think like your enemy**

Yes.

And in a sense you became a guerrilla commander.

Absolutely.

So

Absolutely.

What was it about or what was the key to being a guerrilla commander?

I think you've got to put yourself into their mind and into their shoes. You've got to think the way they do and you've got to be nasty and you've got to basically become a guerrilla in terms of the

04:00 thinking. Otherwise you're trying to fight them on your terms and yet they're not fighting on your terms but if you're able to, put yourself into their mind as to what would they do next? What would they do here? What would they do there and if you've able to basically if you like almost adopt a guerrilla mentality I think you're able to combat them a hell of a lot better because if you're doing it just conventionally I think you'll lose, quite frankly.

So what was the unconventional

04:30 **guerrilla**

Well principally

Style?

The way that we used to lay up in our harbours. They way that we used to move constantly. You know we'd never sort of stay in one place for too long. The same as them. I mean they didn't stay around for too long. We never used tracks. Quite often we'd go without water for long periods of time, which they do as well so that they're not caught on the creek. You know

05:00 in other words you're very careful with conserving your water because it's on the creek bed where you get hit. You know I mean that's where they get hit and that's where we get hit because we have to come down for water. They have to come down for water. So you'd constantly be looking at ways and means of trying to out think them I think more than anything but to do that you've got to think like a guerrilla and you've got to be a bit sort of nasty.

But you're not local to the country.

Mhm.

Did you feel like

05:30 **that you by the end of your time that you really understood**

Oh absolutely.

The terrain that you were working in?

Absolutely. No question about it. Knew the terrain. Didn't necessarily know it intimately but I knew the conditions that we had to operate in. I knew what they did. I knew the way that they moved. I had a good feel of village life in terms of how villages operate. I had a also had a good feeling as to what I thought were relatively safe areas to move in at a

06:00 greater speed and that all comes through experience in country. I mean it's just something that, it's steep learning curve but it's something that you pick up towards the end of your tour and I mean I put in for a bit of an extension originally. I wanted to stay you know. Cause I felt I was just starting to get

really good at what I was doing and I felt it'd be a waste to lose that but my CO at the time said, "No, I don't think it's a good idea Mike. I think you'd Mick, I think you'd better get on the boat."

06:30 So I went on the boat.

Well we'll come and talk about that in a moment. I just one question about how often did you get into villages and

Quite often. Quite often because we used to gather a lot of information from villages. For some of our patrols I had a Vietnamese interpreter with me, so it was very handy. Where we'd gather information and then assess a situation, analyse and then either report back to high headquarters or act on the information ourselves. So

07:00 yeah, no I mean we got very close, we got very close to villagers. Unfortunately in one particular village the VC came in one night and they took the village chief's daughter who was about fourteen and pregnant and disembowelled her and hung her up in one of the huts. Well we were there the next day and I sensed that this village chief was oh if you will, not in a good mood,

07:30 not with us anyway and I through the interpreter kept saying, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" and he pointed inside to his hut and that's where his daughter was hanging upside down and she'd been disembowelled and the foetus was hanging over her head. You know and again, you get this rage, you get this anger. You think, "Well," you know, "if you guys wanna fight, this is what we're gonna do. We're gonna get you." So you know you see these sort of things and you really feel for the village chief,

08:00 because it's his daughter and also the fact is that he'd been feeding you information. So you're guilty. You feel guilty about it all because you're the guy that's been getting the information from him and the VC must have found out about it and came in and decided to make an example and they did that very effectively.

And you saw the body?

Mm, oh yeah. Yeah. Yep. Not very pleasant.

08:30 **No and how could you did you keep up that relationship**

No.

With him?

No, we didn't think it was appropriate. No, we had to move on to another source of intelligence unfortunately. I mean look, I just felt terrible. You know I felt terrible for him and obviously the kid as well you know but no, I think he had done enough for us and I think it was time to move on and get information from someone else but I had fun. I mean you know that was a nasty but I

09:00 also had fun in the villages as well. Cause I used to eat all their food. They'd always give me a drink. Wikky Vietnam, which is rice whiskey, or they'd have a warm bottle of bami bah which is a sort of local beer. So I'd always have a bit of sip with them and eat some roasted pig's ears and nuknam and all that sort of stuff and yeah, no I'm a great believer that if you want to get close to people you must embrace their culture and that's exactly what I did and I never got sick or got

09:30 dysentery or anything like that, which was really quite amazing.

And how did that help, I mean apart from winning the support of the locals

Mm.

And relying on them for intelligence how else did it help you?

Oh look I think it certainly got us closer to the villagers in terms of hearts and minds cause quite often we'd bring things in for them. You know things that we knew that they didn't have in large supply we'd always bring

10:00 something in for them. We always used to pay for everything. We'd insist on paying. So you know if they gave us some whiskey or gave us some beer and we sat around a table and had a bit of a chat we'd always leave some money for them and I think in terms of hearts and minds it helped enormously and I learnt that really from a guy called Barry Petersen, who was an ex-major, Australian Army, who served with the Montagnards up in the hills of Vietnam.

10:30 Barry's also an MC winner and they call him the tiger man and you should interview him actually but Barry's that was his mantra. I mean he really embraced the culture and even dressed like them and I was at Canungra when he was there and I used to hear these stories and I thought to myself, "Well if I'm gonna get close to these people I've got to embrace their culture." So I did. So I did that quite often and my soldiers did as well. I mean that photograph with the young girl, I mean we were

11:00 cooking crabs that we'd got from a local market you know and cook it and ate with chopsticks and all that sort a business. I mean I think if you want to get close to people I think you must respect and embrace their culture.

And then that helped you when you were out on

Oh yeah

Doing patrol?

It helped us get information. I think there was a degree of trust basically. It helped us get some more info to work off.

11:30 **Well you've just mentioned that you did ask for an extension. So how did you feel when you knew your time was up?**

Well I just felt that I mean I spoke to the CO over a beer I've gotta say, it wasn't a formal request and I just said to him I said, "Look I just feel that I'm in my prime at the moment. I mean everything that I've learnt the last," cause I was there for nearly thirteen nearly fourteen months, because the advance party.

12:00 I just felt that I was right at my peak and perhaps I could do some service for the next battalion that relieved us, which was 7 Battalion. And my CO was very astute and he could see that I was, just by my face that I was drained anyway and he said, "No, I think you'd better go home," you know. "You've done your job. Go home," and the other thing of course that I didn't realise, I didn't realise that I'd been recommended for a Military Cross. So obviously he knew that, cause he was the guy that recommended me and I just felt

12:30 that he didn't want me to be further exposed at that point in time.

And how did you travel back home?

On the Sydney, yeah and that was fun. A lot of booze, a lot of fun and a lot of sport. Volleyball and all that sort of stuff and winding down and then we arrived in Sydney and marched through the city of Sydney and apparently the reception was far different to the time that they left

13:00 because of the politics.

Well what sort of difficulties did you experience because of the change in the mood of the public opinion?

Ah first hand I mean I went to the Bankstown RSL [Returned and Services League] Club once and there was some ceremony and I was wearing, no I was in my uniform actually and I was wearing my medals and at this stage all I had was just the two, just the Vietnam Service Medal and

13:30 the freedom fighters' medal and some guys came up to me in the RSL Club and said, "What's that?" and I said, "Well, Vietnam service medals." "That's not a war, that's a police action," you know. I walked out of the club and I never went back into it. In fact I've hardly ever gone back into an RSL Club because of that. Now I know it's changing. A lot of the guys who are now heading up the RSL are Vietnam veterans but I still hold a grudge. I still hold a grudge because they did not treat us right when we

14:00 came back, nor did the government of the day actually. The 1988 march through Sydney was too little too late cause meanwhile a lot a these guys were stuffed in the head.

Well just touching for a moment on a few highlights of the rest of your army career, you then went on to join SAS

Mhm.

And how satisfying was that for you

Oh very.

That had

14:30 **been one of your goals?**

Yeah. Oh very satisfying. I mean from the time I joined the army I wanted to be an SAS trooper or soldier or officer and for me it was just extremely rewarding. It was the penultimate for me and also I managed to do a lot of courses and I was also cadre commander for a year. In other words, I was doing the training of the recruits coming into the unit and the selection of those individuals and I found that very rewarding

15:00 because I could basically do exactly what I did with recce platoon, same thing, where I you know ran a course with some NCOs and then we'd have thirty that would attend and we'd only pick two or three to go into SAS. That's how strict we used to be with our selection in those days and you know you'd get back to doing your parachuting and your diving and my speciality was water. I was very good in the water. So you do all that sort a stuff and you're a bit of an action man and it was fun.

15:30 It was fun. I was playing rugby over there as well, which was good, and I met my then wife over there as well and got married in Perth. So it was a full on time for me basically but then I went to commandos in Melbourne.

So those SAS recruits that you were training, would they then go onto tours in Vietnam?

Yep. Yep. Absolutely. Absolutely and my criteria used to be, "Would I go to war with this

16:00 chap?" and if I wouldn't, I wouldn't select them. Simple as that. So I mean I'd put them through the whole course and I'd talk to my NCOs, who were very experienced soldiers, and I'd say, "Well would you go on patrol with this individual?" and then the guy would say, "No, I wouldn't go on patrol with him." I wouldn't go on patrol with him. I'd say, "Well he fails." So he fails and that was the key you know. To get into the regiment, "Would you take this fellow in your patrol?" and if you were not

16:30 prepared to take him in your patrol he wouldn't pass. For all sorts of reasons. So the selection criteria's very tough.

And what were some of the range of reasons that you wouldn't go on patrol with someone?

Oh just could be they were bumble footed. You know some people have got two left feet and too noisy. Unable to navigate. Not fit. Not prepared to put in the hard yards. I mean our course is very

17:00 strict. It's a very hard course. You know we had a long range patrol course, which is seventy two hours without sleeping with a pack on your back. You try doing that. I mean it's very, very demanding physically and mentally and some guys just tossed it in. Couldn't handle it. So there was all the physical side but there was a mental side as well and you'd balance the physical with the mental because you just don't want a whole bunch of Arnold Schwarzneggers. You know you want a balance but at the end of the day you just say, "Is this a

17:30 person that you would go on patrol with?" And if you said, "No", he would not pass. It's as simple as that. Why should you inflict somebody on somebody else that you're not prepared to go to war with. It's unfair.

And after that period then you went onto commandos?

Yep. Commandos in Port Gellibrand, which is in Melbourne, which was a CMF [Citizens' Military Force] unit but I was doing other

18:00 things there as well. Special operations, which I'd rather not talk about, but yeah it was a highly classified position in terms of security. Same as SAS but principally my position was adjutant/quarter master. So I was the adjutant of the unit in charge of the administration. Quarter master in charge of the logistics but also I was doing other work as well in terms of the special operations field.

18:30 **And you the reason you don't want to talk about those ops is that it was classified?**

Yeah, classified. Yes, my word. Yep.

And then I understand you went back to 5 Battalion for a period, a short period?

Yep. I went back to 5 as the adjutant and I, it was funny to go back as the adj actually, and I had a good time. I had a good time but

19:00 again, you know you get this professional officer and career officer bit and I felt and because by this stage I was communicating with my father on a fairly regular basis and I didn't have confidence any more in terms of what I was doing. I was never a parade ground soldier. Although I can look smart on parade I mean it's not my reason for being. My reason for being was to be a soldier in principally active service.

19:30 More in the active role rather than in a just an administrative role and I just felt it was time to make a move. So I resigned my commission at that time.

And you have told us earlier in the day what you went on to do. So I'm just wondering when you finally resigned

Mhm.

And left the army, did you miss it?

Yes, I did. My word. Oh it was a huge wrench. Huge wrench

20:00 for me. I mean I got out simply because of some of the individuals in the army but I also got out because of family and I had some responsibilities that I had to fulfil and I found it a huge wrench. In fact even today you know I mean Peter Cosgrove, who's now chief of defence, I mean he's a an old friend of mine. I look at Peter, I admire him in terms of what he's achieved now. I mean I would never dream to be anywhere at that level

20:30 but it would have been it's interesting to sort of think back and think, "Well where would I have ended up?" You know, "Would I have been an old passed over major or would I have ended up being a colonel or a brigadier?" You really don't know. I wasn't prepared to take the risk. I really wasn't prepared to take the risk and I decided that I'd achieved everything the army as a young person, at thirty two years of age, that I wanted to achieve and it was time to move on and I'm glad I did when I did to be perfectly frank,

because I've counselled a lot of fellows who've got out much later and they've struggled much more than me. I struggled for two years you know to cope with it all but I was very lucky because I then went overseas and I was overseas for a long time. So you're away from it all. You're divorced from it, whereas a lot of the guys get out and they're still living in the same area and I think a lot of the older guys really struggle and they also struggle to readjust in terms of their professional life

and jobs and family and all that sort of business. So I think I got out at the right time to be honest, for all sorts of reasons.

Were you, as you say, you were on full on active service and saw a lot of high level action and in highly dangerous situations. Did you suffer any nightmares after

Oh absolutely. Flash backs. My word. Yeah. PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]. I didn't realise I had PTSD for years. I had no idea

because, "I'm an officer you know. We're not supposed to get these things. We're supposed to be strong," and I had I've had soldiers ringing me. I mean I'm Dorothy Dix really. I've had soldiers ringing me for years with problems and I've tried to explain to them and explain to them and I'll never forget this. It was about 1990 or '89. We had a staff college come through from Queenscliff, which is the majors seeking promotion to lieutenant colonel,

and at that time I was a director of the Hardy Wine Company and we had them through as, oh wine tasting and a bit of a giggle. Well lo and behold in the group of the instructors coming through as brigadiers and colonels there was about four or five guys that I knew from my time when I was an officer. Well we got stuck into the grog. Seriously got stuck into it. Just to touch base again. I hadn't seen these guys for years and anyway I got home and

I just sat in a chair and I started to cry and my wife at the time she had no idea what was going on and I'd I just kept saying and repeating, "Nobody understands. Nobody understands." I kept repeating myself and she was really worried. You know and she rang Bob Carney, who was my one of my patrol commanders, and Bob hasn't had a drink for thirty years and he came over and he just put his arm around me and said, "What's the matter?" and I said, "Nobody

understands. Nobody understands," and then a very good neighbour down the road, he was a civilian not an army man, he came up and what I'd what I hadn't realised I mean I was having a break down. Basically it was a pent up stress levels I guess from thirty years ago where I was having a break down. So I anyway I got over that you know. I stopped crying. I wasn't crying, "Boo hoo", it was just tears just pouring out of my eyes and I just kept saying, "Nobody f'n understands."

You know I was really getting quite angry and the next day Bob rang me and he said, "Look I think you'd better go and see Tony Smith," and Tony Smith was a platoon commander in 1 Battalion. He's a psychologist and I said, "Yeah. I'll have to go and see him cause I've never experienced this in my life." So anyway what I discovered was that subconsciously what I'd said to myself is, "Nobody understands and I've got no one to talk to." Everybody else had me to talk to. I had nobody to talk to because my civilian friends, I couldn't talk to

them about Vietnam. Even my wife and kids, I couldn't talk to them about Vietnam. I mean I didn't want to disturb them and also they wouldn't understand and that's what I kept saying, "Nobody understands. Nobody understands." So I went and had treatment and they got into my head and then I suddenly realised and I read some books on PTSD and I just I realised really that I'd had this all along but had just

chosen to ignore it and there were certain symptoms there that I'd chosen to ignore for some reason. So that whole, if you like that whole PTSD stress level, was terrible but I didn't realise I had it. Now that I realise I've got it, I can manage it much better but I do have flash backs and I do have trouble sleeping and I do have dreams. Yeah, it's not pleasant.

Well without trying to cause a trigger or

Mhm.

I'm just wondering if I can ask you what the core of those dreams are about.

Um principally contact situations and quite often helplessness. Again, I don't know whether it gets back to the Nui Thi Vai and Normie Womal. You know like quite often, I'd turn that down, quite often when you're having a dream and you know like you're falling off a cliff or something you never seem to hit the bottom or you're chasing

someone and you can't catch them or someone's chasing after you and they can't catch you and it goes on and on and on and on. So they're a sort of yeah, they're invariably dreams about a contact situation where things are really bad and I can't do anything about it and that's when I wake up in a cold sweat and my whole bed's just been absolutely wet with sweat, when I've had a bad case of stress.

So how are you these days? Is has that talking about it helped

Oh it's helped. I mean I I've got a gold card. You know I've got a hundred per cent pension. I'm not a

TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated pensioner] though. I've got a hundred per cent pension and I get a service pension and I think it has helped enormously. I had a very, very good psychiatrist who helped me enormously I gotta say and because I don't open up I never used to open up to people. Even what I'm saying to you now I would never say to anybody in the past but now I don't

27:00 care because it's me and also it's a condition that I think you have to talk about. You can't just ignore it. So in opening up to this particular psychiatrist I mean he just basically got into my head and told me you know the problems that I had and why I had it and it had a lot to do with me suppressing these feelings for such a long period of time because A you're an officer, you've gotta be strong. You can't be weak. Now hang on. You know we're all the same

27:30 whether we're carrying something on our shoulder or not. We've all got the same emotions, the same moods, the same condition. Why shouldn't I get stress like some of my soldiers and I'd say there's something like oh a good sixty, seventy per cent of my soldiers are TPIs. You know they're buggered and that's sad but you know and they've had someone to talk to all along, which is me, which I really appreciate because I find it's therapy as well when they talk to me. It helps

28:00 me but after a period of time and in terms of talking to someone else about the issue, I couldn't talk to anybody else and I think that's when I was totally suppressed. So when I got drunk with these ex old army buddies of mine I think it just loosened me up and I think that's when I kept saying, "Nobody understands. Nobody understands."

And is there anything today that you've talked about that you haven't talked with anybody else about or have you

Oh no, most

28:30 of the things we've discussed today I've spoken to other people. Not publicly but quietly you know. I don't talk about Vietnam a lot to people generally because they don't understand. You see, that's the issue. They don't understand and I think that was a frustration that was in me at the time where I felt that I had to tell my story. I felt I had to tell someone and I think that's where Bob Carney has done just an outstanding job by writing Crossfire because it's

29:00 put a few things in perspective in terms of us and personalities and what we did and it got it into the public arena where I don't have to talk about it if you know what I mean. It's all there for people to read and it's all factual. So it helped, that book helped me enormously in terms of if you like getting me to relax a bit more because, as I say, nobody understands and that's the problem. Very hard to get people to understand and realise

29:30 what some of our guys went through.

Well I hope this will go some way to helping people understand.

Oh I sincerely hope so. I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't think that perhaps someone will get some benefit out of it. You know you, me, Louise [interviewer] or whatever. People who see it in the future. I mean I think it's important you see because

30:00 we've never experienced these sort of situations in the past. I mean there's been wars and people have had shell shock and all that sort of business but every warrior that's come home has been treated like a hero. We came home and we were shunned and I think that's the tragedy of the Vietnam War, where they were badly treated and I think the government of the day has a lot to answer for.

And do you think that some of that

30:30 **has been now redeemed?**

Oh I think the welcome home parade was good. 1988. I think what's amazing now, and I march now every Anzac Day, is to watch the young people who are there. I have work mates that actually get out you know in their old, I march with my old SAS guys and you know you're wearing your medals and all that sort a stuff and smartly dressed and you're marching in step and

31:00 you know and there's all the guys, "G'day Mick." "G'day Mike. How are you?" you know. Now that would have never happened but now all of a sudden you know my grandson comes out and watches with my daughter and I think that is a bit of the pain going. I mean it's a bit of, "Hey, okay it was worthwhile and people do care," and maybe now people do understand, whereas in the past they haven't. Or people now are trying to understand, whereas in the past they haven't.

31:30 **And when you stop and spend time like today you have done today and look back on your time in Vietnam, how do you think it changed you?**

Oh it made me a far better person, no question about it. By that I mean I'm tougher. I'm tougher for it but it also made me realise that no matter how bad things get here you know the old saying you know, "Don't give me a hard time because I've

32:00 been to hell and back," and even today in life or in business or circumstance you know something's not going quite right and you know a lot of people throw their hands in the air and it's just too hard. I just think, "Hang on, I've been through worse than this. This is easy. This is not a problem. I can handle

this." So I think it's made me much tougher. I think also what it's done it's made me realise how good we've got it in Australia in terms of

32:30 if you like the poverty and the lack of medicine and the lack of proper conditions right throughout South East Asia but in particular in Vietnam and I think what we've got is worth fighting for basically. I think we've just got a wonderful society and I think we've got to protect it.

And this might be difficult question to answer but if you were to think about your proudest moment or memory.

Mhm.

Or even your strongest memory from Vietnam.

33:00 **What do you think that might be?**

Oh look, I think getting Bluey Twaites out and not losing another corporal, cause I'd already lost one you know.

Well as we come to

33:30 **the end of our session today people are going to look back on this interview. What sort of message would you like to put down for future generations?**

Oh look, I think enjoy life. Do what you think is right and protect our way of life.

And relation

34:00 **in relation in or in the context of your war experience?**

Um, oh look I'd never wish anybody to go to war to be honest. I'd wish no war at all. Now you know I'm still right I'm now I used to be slightly left of centre but since September 11 I'm just so far right now that it's scary to be honest but that doesn't mean I'm a warmonger. I'm just still very hostile and angry in terms of what's happening to the world today and in particular in terms of Al Qaeda

34:30 and terrorism and whatever but I just wish that we could all live in peace and harmony.

Well it has been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today. Is there any last words that you'd like to say either about 5 Battalion or the recon platoon

Oh

That you'd like to put down on record?

Yeah. Oh look, I think I mean we're all very, if you like, very proud

35:00 and parochial as to our respective units but I'd have to say I mean the officers and men of 5 Battalion were just outstanding and the diggers in recce platoon were fantastic. My first diggers, which was 2 Platoon, were terrific and I was sorry to leave them and of course anti-tank platoon in the short period of time that I commanded them they were just absolutely exemplary in that fairly major contact up in the

35:30 hills. So I was really lucky where I had exposure to three platoons. Unfortunately the one that I think I achieved most as a platoon commander was recce platoon and they were a terrific bunch of blokes.

So if you were to put on record something about how you would like recce platoon to be remembered, what would that be?

Oh trail blazers, pioneers. Having a go and doing something

36:00 different, which you know an infantry platoon was not trained to do. They really were ground breakers at that time. Now of course it's a par for the course but in those days they really and we were trained in country. I mean it's not as if we had twelve months' training here before we then did what we did over there. I mean it was a short crash two week course, a ten day course, and you know with all that well with that short training and with the input from SAS that we had, for them to perform the

36:30 way that they did was just outstanding. I mean really quite outstanding.

Well thank you very much for speaking with us today.

Thank you.

It's been a pleasure.

Fantastic. We're now off camera. INTERVIEW ENDS