Australians at War Film Archive

Alwyn Shilton (Bluey) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 28th May 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/243

Tape 1

00:47 **Ok Alwyn, when and where were you born?**

I was born in Heath Hill, Victoria, which is in Gippsland just behind Drouin

01:00 on my grandfather's dairy farm in September 1918. My mother, 'a course she was the daughter of my grandfather naturally and my father was, had volunteered for World War I and was in the 22nd Battalion but he got double pneumonia and pleurisy and he was discharged on medical grounds.

01:30 But frankly he didn't have the physique to take it. Then I, well 'a course there were three boys went up there for holidays when we were growing up and at one stage I did attend the Heath Hill State School when I was a kid. I had to walk three miles or something. And then of course with

02:00 Dad, he wasn't allowed to go back to the Board of Works where he was working you know for some period, so he volunteered to go and work for the Victoria Stevedoring Company as a cabinet maker. And he was a beautiful cabinet maker just by hobby. We came naturally down to Melbourne and at the age of two and I was the only boy, only child at the time we went to

02:30 Vanuatu or the New Hebrides in those days. The old chap had obtained a contract with the other friend to build the first cargo shed for Burns Philp in Villa, so I don't know how long we were over there but my wife and I were there a few years ago and the shed is still standing. So when he built something it remained built.

Could you remember anything about?

Not a thing.

Vanuatu?

Not a thing.

03:00 I was only two. And we came back here and eventually we lived in Alphington. I went to the Fairfield State School to sixth grade and then my father wanted me to go to the University High School. To get there you had to do an examination, so I went to live with an uncle up

03:30 in the country for he was a school teacher and he coached me for 12 months and I was sleepwalking in the finish 'cause you know it was very intense. Any rate, I passed the exam all right and I got into University High School. I went there to intermediate certificate. I wasn't a dedicated student, let's put it that way and there were no jobs around and my father said to me, "Look, I think you better get a job."

04:00 So I did and I went to the Stock Exchange of Melbourne for six months. Just running around on the trading floor. At the end of the six months, a small firm offered me a job which I took and I remained with them for about four years. And in the mean time I did my leaving certificate at night school and I started Accountancy.

04:30 In May 1938 with Hitler running all over Europe business just went down the plughole and the firm told all the staff and there weren't, there were six or eight of us they could only give us one week's work in three. So a position came up with W Ian Potter and he became Sir Ian Potter, eventually now dead and the same sort

05:00 of job that I was doing in this small firm. So I got the job in May '38 and I walked into the greatest mess I've ever come across. Because the lady that was doing the job in front of me, her idea of recording all the sales in and out and so on was when she run out of a ledger she'd start another one but she'd never bring anything forward. So it took me the best part of 18 months to

05:30 get that up to date and I eventually with the help of the manager of the firm I got a card from this original firm the way they did the job over there, which recorded things very easily and we put that

system in. And actually some of those cards were still in existence when I retired in 1979. They were just going onto computers then. But I had been since July ’35 in the Victorian

06:00 Scottish Regiment. 5th Battalion Victorian Scottish Regiment. One year as a cadet and then three years as an infantry signaller, which I love signals and so on and when the war broke out of course we were called up and I think the funny story is: we, my brother was in the naval reserve and I’d been out to the local hop that night, got home about one o’clock in the morning, ring on the door

06:30 bell, telegram for me on to report to Sturt Street drill hall at 0800 the next morning, dressed and so on. Hour later, another telegram for my brother to report to Lonsdale down at Port Melbourne, so we went off in the morning and we said, “Bye Mum, see you tonight.”

Well look, I’ll just stop you there and I’ll just go back and ask you just a few more things about your family.

Yeah, go for your life.

07:00 **First of all what were your parents’ names?**

Jessie and Lou Shilton and then the three boys were myself, Bill and Jim.

Right.

We only had boys.

Well, you mentioned school, your primary years, did you enjoy school?

Yes, yes. Yes, I didn’t worry, didn’t mind it. We had a lot a [fun] mind you, probably too much fun.

What sort of

07:30 **fun?**

Well different fun to what kids have today. We would amongst our school friends we’d make up hikes, camping, fishing you name it we did it. But there wasn’t so much sport in the schools in those days and certainly next to no coaching. Even when I went to University High School there was no coaching by the masters

08:00 and I could run long distance a bit but I could never beat Bill Gravel in the mile. He was always too good. And Bill used to smoke behind the shelter sheds and do everything. But I still couldn’t beat him.

And did you used to do any running at primary school?

No, no. No, you’d just be out in the playground. No sport there whatsoever.

And what were your teachers like?

Good, very good really.

08:30 I had one teacher I had for years Jessie Drowan and I went to see her before she died and she never got married but she was very, very good. Oh we had you know couple a odd ones. Paddy Malone, who if he lifted his eyebrow he’d whack you sorta thing. But no, they were all right. And at the high school we had very good teachers there, excellent.

And had you shown an interest in accountancy at that stage?

No.

09:00 Look, it’s something you had to do. I never quite finished it. I’ll tell ya why. After the war I was very bad with malaria and I had a bit of a breakdown because of too much work and I still had two subjects to go but I got so busy and I went onto the trading floor and that was the end of any study. I just had to work night and day virtually.

Yeah. That’s perfectly understandable too, isn’t it?

But look I can keep a set a books now,

09:30 no trouble.

Well, I was just wondering as a child did you go to church or Sunday school?

Oh God yes, we were hounded off to Sunday school and church oh yes, every Sunday. Didn’t do us any good. Matter of fact we still go to church. I go to keep my wife happy, into Scot’s Church.

And well how did you and your brothers get on with each other?

Oh we used to fight occasionally that’s [natural]. No, we

10:00 got on all right. I was the eldest of the three but no, we didn’t, you know no hassles really.

Well did your father ever talk to you about his World War I experiences?

No, never. Never. I just found out from the, he tried to join the World War I and I found I got the copy of his enlistment papers and I found out from there what had happened to him. No, he never told us

10:30 anything. The only thing he did tell us that one of his cousins had been killed at Passchendaele but and there were many members of the family who were away at World War I but you know they're all scattered you didn't see them.

And can you remember whether Anzac Day was a holiday when you were at school?

Gee that's a good question. No, I just can't recall.

So you don't have any particular

11:00 **memories of celebrating Anzac Day?**

No, not of the a holiday

Or remembering Anzac Day I should say?

I've got a feeling it was, there was always the march of course. But whether it was a holiday I don't know. Probably was I would think.

Well you mentioned in oh, was it in 1935 you joined the, was it the what did you say?

5th Battalion Victorian Scottish Regiment, as a cadet.

Right.

And as soon as you turned 18 you went into the main battalion. And I went into the signal platoon.

11:30 **Well do you know why you - what was your motivation for joining?**

Possibly because most of my pals joined various units, not the one, only one went into the 5th Battalion but some of them went to the artillery and engineers and so on. But there was not a great number of outlets for boys other than scouting and so on and you get you know a bit beyond scouting when you get older.

12:00 I was in the scouts and cubs and scouts and so on. But other than that there wasn't a great deal to do. I did play hockey before the war. I played for about from the time I was 16 I think. And I went from B Grade to A Grade and I still got a few stitch marks and cuts from that.

Yes, I can imagine that.

Oh yes.

I was wondering whether your family

12:30 **was affected in any way by the great Depression?**

No, we were lucky. My father was never out of work. And my mother fed two or three families around us during the Depression. But I can remember it very vividly. These poor fellows, they would get one or days work a week on what is now the Boulevard around from Johnson Street Collingwood around to Kew

13:00 and I think it was Sydney Myer who gave it might a been old Mac Robertson of the chocolate people. One of the two gave a hundred thousand pounds to build that and it was done with a pick and shovel horse and dray and barrows. And the men would apply to get the, get a job and they would get one or two days work a week. They were all issued with army greatcoats, which had been dyed a purpley colour but

13:30 you know people outta work had absolutely nothing. There were soup kitchens. There were, there was a certain amount of sustenance given to them in the way of food. But I know our, one of our neighbours, he went to, he was on a shearing team up in New South Wales. I forget what they call 'em, a roustabout in a shed. That was the only job he could get. He was a hat maker actually. But

14:00 no, look it was very tough and people today have absolutely no idea. I mean today you've got all the social service. You know if you go do this, that or another thing you go and apply and you'd get money for it. Not in those days. But no, it was tough. As I say we were lucky we didn't really feel the affects of it like a lot of other people but things were tight.

14:30 We weren't allowed to go and buy this and buy that and so on. And I remember our first football was newspaper rolled up tightly and tied with string. That's the way things were. But the, no that's, it was a great lesson I think to people of my age to see it. But 'a course and that's why so many when the war broke out joined the forces, to get a job.

15:00 There were many in my battalion who were unemployed when they came in, they came in, they got five shillings a day. Three meals a day and a bed, uniforms, everything. Didn't cost them a cracker.

What do you remember during the 1930s that you did, you were hearing what was happening in Europe?

Oh yes, we heard and but you know I was 21 when the war broke out or 20.

15:30 But the, you didn't take a great deal a notice of it. You knew it was going on and Hitler was bouncing all over the Europe and taking over people but I don't think it really registered until 1938 when business started to go down the gurgler and that's when I think we all realised that there was a war coming. But oh

16:00 I can remember business was terrible on the stock exchange.

Well, you know you were in your militia unit at this stage, weren't you? Well, how often did you go off for training?

We'd go down to the drill hall once a fortnight and we'd have a fortnight's camp every year. Mainly down at the old Portsea barracks. I thoroughly enjoyed frankly. And

16:30 but once the war broke out we were called up and we went to Portsea for a fortnight, home for a fortnight. Back to Portsea for another fortnight and during that fortnight I rang the Ian Potter and I said, "Look, I want to join the army." Will my job be here when I come back? Not for a moment thinking I might have my head blown off. Never thought that, and he said "Of course, of course". But then during the war the government brought in the law that every

17:00 ex-serviceman had to be given back his job, which protected a lot a people. But I came back there and I stayed there till 1979.

That was extraordinary, wasn't it?

Forty one years I had, really less the six years of the war.

Well, can you remember where you were when the declaration of war came?

Yes. I was, well I'd just come home actually from the dance and old Bob Menzies said over the thing that,

17:30 "My melancholy duty to tell you that so-and-so Britain's at war and so are we." And then we got the telegrams.

So is that, see the announcement came on the 3rd September, are you virtually saying that you got the telegram the next day?

That's right, 'bout one o'clock in the morning, yes.

And well what was your reaction to that?

Oh don't think we even thought about it, you know. We were used to

18:00 be doing what you were told and we went down to the drill hall and to, Bill to the naval depot.

Can you tell us exactly what happened that day?

Well, I just got up in the morning as usual, got into my uniform and I had to be there by eight o'clock in the morning, 0800 in army terms and just went down there and they processed us and we mucked around for

18:30 good part of the day.

When they process you, what are they actually doing?

Checking all your equipment, and seeing that you've got everything, and the following morning we had to be back again and we went down to Portsea for the fortnight.

How were you transported down there?

Now that's a good question. I think musta been by truck. Musta been by army truck. There was no other way of getting down there. No, I just can't remember but there was no railway line down there.

19:00 **And what equipment did you have at this stage?**

We, well as a signaller we, well most of them, everybody's equipped with a rifle, 303 rifle and you had your, what you were wearing pack and all the rest of it. And that was about it.

And you're a signaller already, are you? Had you been doing signalling work in the militia?

Just – yes. I'd just got into the signal platoon. Because I'd turned 21, I'd turned 18.

19:30 Sorry I'd turn 18 in 1936, so I'd been a signaller for three years. Course I was a cadet for 12 months but when you turned 18, you went into the main battalion. But I enjoyed that. I liked the dit-dah-dit and all the rest of it. Good fun.

And so what training did you do when you were down at Portsea?

Route marches. Firing practice.

20:00 And ‘a course as a signal platoon we did a lot a work on heliographs and lamps and semaphore flags and all that sorta jazz, which was World War I training. Which I tell you was out when we got over to the Middle East because I never used any of those things over there.

Well, tell me what were your living conditions like down at Portsea?

Oh - good - we had a tent with ‘bout eight of us in a tent.

20:30 Big messes where you went for your meals and oh no, we lived quite well.

Well, did you join up with mates? Were you called up with mates or were this, was these a new group of men?

Well in the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]?

No, down at Portsea, you haven’t, you’re not in the AIF yet, no?

Oh no, Portsea? Well, see those chaps had been in for some time. Some men had been in for years - older men. No, you went into your platoon and every year you’d get an

21:00 influx of few, you know a few reinforcements and there was four of us joined the AIF out of that platoon. One who became a sig [signals] officer, a sergeant, another man and myself. Now out of the whole battalion of about 800 men, only about 35 wanted to join the 2/5th Battalion because they thought

21:30 they’d all be taken away as a group as the 5th Battalion but it didn’t happen. No - the - as I say only four of us went from that platoon but about 35 altogether out of the battalion but they went out to other companies.

And why did you decide to volunteer for the AIF?

Oh a bit a fun I think. Bit of adventure. We were pretty naïve boys you know.

22:00 No, I think that’s all it was. I’m pretty sure we weren’t very patriotic.

Well I was wondering whether God, king and country came into the equation?

I don’t think that worried us.

Well, did you think that you were going off to defend Australian or defend Britain or?

Well, we knew we were going to do something but you know we, our contribution at that time was pretty small. Was only one division and then they had three

22:30 more divisions.

Well, could you tell me when you actually, could you tell me what you had to do to transfer from the militia to the AIF?

It was very simple. You had to go through the medical test and if you were passed they swore you in - into the AIF.

And okay where did they do this? Was this back in Melbourne?

Sturt Street drill hall, yes.

So

Captain Michell swore me in. He had one arm, lost it in World War I. That should ‘a taught me a lesson.

23:00 **Okay, so when you made, you were sworn in, what happened next?**

Well, we went to the showgrounds for a few days and there was a, you know thousands of fellows there and we were given giggle suits. Which were khaki blouse sorta thing and khaki trousers and we called them giggle suits because that’s what they looked like. And before we got the correct uniforms, and we didn’t get the correct uniforms till we’d been at

23:30 Puckapunyal for a month I suppose.

Did that bother you?

No, not at all, we all got hats, all got slouch hats, and no that never worried anybody.

Well, did you get any different equipment?

We got, no we didn’t. We still had the, we still had World War I pouches and everything. Webbing equipment and I don’t think we got the new equipment until

24:00 we got to the Middle East, which consisted of two - a big pouch on each side which was much easier to handle. I'm sure, yes we didn't get that till we got to the Middle East.

Look, what I'm wondering about is you know when you when you transferred or I don't know whether that's the correct term to use

That's it.

Did you have to then give up the equipment that you had when you were in the militia and so you had to be issued with new equipment?

I think yes we did because

24:30 I remember marching to Puckapunyal and I didn't have anything. No, didn't have anything, it all had to go back. We might have got that equipment at [Puckapunyal], I can't, look I can't remember really. But I went in, I marched out from the Seymour Station. I was in my uniform, not the kilt just the trousers and the putties and so on that you wore,

25:00 the Scotch little cap. Can't remember what they call it Glengarry. And there were bout thirty or forty of us came off the train and we were met by a Lieutenant Rowell who'd been in the Victorian Scotties and he'd been taken into the 2/5th as an officer. Very young, he was younger than I was actually and another man called Fred Ray. Funnily enough,

25:30 three weeks ago we were all at lunch together. We'd just marched out and I remember one fella, he'd got into the beer somewhere or other and he jumped into the Goulbourn River and we had a bit of trouble getting him out. But we had to march to Puckapunyal, no truck to pick us up.

Well that's a fair distance?

I think it was probably four to five miles. I don't know but we were fit any rate because we'd been marching around Portsea for a month. So that

26:00 didn't worry us and then we get out there and we're allocated to our huts and so on and they were pretty basic at the time. Bare boards and nothing else, galvanised iron and it was pretty cold.

And what time of year is this?

This was the first week of November '39. It was still pretty cold. Because I think the wind starts up there. No, very cold. Cold showers, which never worried us,

26:30 latrines, you know there'd be about 15 in a line, all this sorta thing. There was no privacy whatsoever, but.

Was that a shock to you?

No, not at all, I'd had it at the, you know in the militia. No, that didn't worry me.

Well, what about the food? I have to ask you about the food.

Well, we had cooks and they had those ovens where they stoked the oven, then pulled it all out then put the food in and cooked it like a baker's oven.

27:00 No, we were pretty well fed. A lot a bully beef and stew, and all that sort of stuff but I put on weight, so that said something about it. I was only eight stone six when I went to Puckapunyal.

Very slight?

Very light. So much so the doctor when he examined me, he said, "Do you think you can take it, you're very light?" I said, "Look, I've never been sick in my life so." Which was quite true comment. He said, "Okay." Away, I went.

27:30 **Well, I was wondering if you could tell us about the different types of people who enlisted in the 6th Division?**

Well, you had criminals. You wouldn't know. We had a man called Red Maloney, he was a boxer and he was a criminal, they picked him out very quickly. We had various other fellas who were picked out. There were out-a-work people.

28:00 I remember one man Arthur Kellett, he was a tram driver, he'd been put off and he had a wife family and he said, "I've gotta have a job." So he joined. There were men running away from their wives. Wouldn't have to pay them alimony but of course they caught up with them. Because if they found they were married they'd deduct a certain amount from their pay and that'd be sent to the wife. Oh look there was a great

28:30 mixture of people and they all came together and for the first month, you know you thought, "God what a rag-tag mob." But after a month of training and discipline they welded into a very good battalion and once they got their uniforms and colour patches you know, don't you hit us or we'll kill you. That was the feeling.

So can you tell me what training you did do in that first month?

Oh,

29:00 lots of route marches. Lots of rifle shooting and machine gun shooting and in signals we did a tremendous amount of heliograph and semaphore work and Morse code work and so on. Laying out cables for a couple a miles, all this sort of thing. But it was mainly to get you fit and to do what you were told when you were told. That was the basis of the original training.

So how did they get you to do what you

29:30 **were told when you were told?**

Well, if you didn't do it, if you didn't do it they'd put you on what they called pack drill. And they'd have three or four sergeants and at say four o'clock when parade was, everything was over they'd put a forty pound pack on these fellas backs and they would march them round continuously for an hour making them slope arms, change arms, do everything, about turn, all sorts of things. And they'd have these half a dozen sergeants and they'd take it in turns and they just belted hell out of them for an hour. And there were very few went back for a

30:00 second go because if they went back for a second go, they did it at the double. Now today there'd be a tremendous outcry. Bastardry they'd [call] it but boy it got results. And we, you know there were some bad eggs amongst that crowd. I remember the first day we sat down in the new mess halls they built for us and they had these big mess tables. Oh they musta been thirty

30:30 odd feet long, a lot a men sitting on either side of the mess hall, at the end they'd dish out the meals and they'd get spun down on the plates down the table. And we had a man Ritchie. Bernie Ritchie, I think his name was. The first morning he sat down, pulled a great sheath knife out. Slammed it into the top of the table. Quivered there like that. Any rate, when his meal came down, he didn't think it was enough, so he spun it back and he said, "I want more." So the mess, this is the way fellas went on see.

31:00 He, the mess orderly filled it all up and he personally delivered it but tipped it over his head. And Bernie Ritchie never touched that knife. And everybody's waiting for him to grab the knife but he went to water. So there were a lot of fellas who just you know were bluffers really. But I - look after a month you didn't see much of that at all.

Well, did any not last the month?

Some of them yeah, very few, very few. If they were weeded out, they were

31:30 weeded out by the officers because they were not good enough or something. See today to get into the army you've got to be just 100 percent fit and you've gotta have a brain and so on. Why you'd join the army I don't know if you had a brain but these days but any rate. But they were weeded out anybody who was bad - we didn't, I don't think we lost any out of the platoon. But 'cause mind

32:00 you in headquarter company, which was where the specialist platoons were. The signals, the mortars, the machine-gun, and anti-tank, the transport and one other, can't think of it. We always considered we were a little bit better than the rifle company so. Got a few more brains. But that's just the pride you get in being in the unit.

32:30 And we had pride there was no doubt about it, absolute pride in being a member of that battalion.

Well, after your month's training, what happened to you then?

What up in Pucka? Well, we had more than a month.

Oh right, yes.

Oh yes, we went through to the battalion, sailed to the Middle East, I think it was April 1940. But in December having been one of the few who knew anything about signals I was made a

33:00 corporal. And then March 1940, we did exercises and this particular time we were on a three day exercise and you know all the platoons use their expertise and

Well, in your platoon what are the different jobs that people had? You're a signaller in a?

We're all signallers.

Oh so you're all signallers in the one?

In the signal platoon.

Oh okay.

Yes, all signallers.

So that's - what thirty of you?

Yeah about thirty, thirty-three or something.

Yeah right, yes.

And

33:30 there you had an officer, a sergeant and there was two corporals I think it was. But no, we trained, we did these exercises. Sometimes they were day exercises and this particular three-day exercise I happened to be on the switchboard and this message came through about midnight that corporals, sergeants so-and-so from all the companies, there's fifteen names, report

34:00 to the CO's [Commanding Officer] tent immediately. CO's tent was about a mile back, so I signal, you know just put the message through to all the companies but my name was amongst them. So we all went back and old Tom Cook, the CO was a rough old fellow from World War I, he told us we were being sent to an officers' training school. And we said, "No, we don't want to go." We, the units were sailing in a few weeks. So he told us in no uncertain terms what ungrateful [bastards] we were

34:30 and he said "At 0800 in the morning you will be on parade, ready to go" and we were. So we spent six weeks at the, over Seymour at this training unit. Didn't learn

And could you, oh I was

Go on, go on.

Sorry, no you go ahead, I was just going to ask you what you actually did at this training camp?

Well, they trained us again on World War I lines. But they didn't train, they didn't teach you anything about leading a platoon in action. That was my, what I got out of it.

Really?

35:00 Yes. You learned all the, what to do if Vary lights when up you stood still and all this sorta thing and you learned what to do under shell fire and how to disperse your troops and all that sorta thing but you, they never were able to tell you how you got on with men. And how you led them and you only learn that by experience. You really do. I found that out. That you only,

35:30 well my theory was you led from the front. You never asked men to do anything you wouldn't do yourself. And you had to show them you had just as much guts as they had. If you didn't do that you were dead. And some you know, some officers didn't measure up. And they were bundled out of course.

Well, after the six weeks officer training were there any people who didn't make it?

Only

36:00 one. Only one and he never went back with the battalion, they made sure of that. Well, he might 'a been ridiculed back there. But we of course, in the meantime while we were doing that training, the battalion sailed for the Middle East.

Yeah, well what were you thinking of that, you know when you said you weren't told taught how to lead, I mean were they your thoughts at the time? I mean what did you think of your training at the time?

No, I didn't think of that part of it

36:30 but the, I only found this out later on, that they hadn't taught us that. But the training they gave us was quite good. But it was, you know it was World War I. World War II moved a hell of a lot quickly, more quickly than World War I. But there you are, there's a note for you. At the end of the six weeks we weren't commissioned straight away.

37:00 We were shunted to the Caulfield Racecourse, the Williamstown Racecourse and then eventually we went to Balcombe camp and we got our commissions there in the June and we sailed from there.

When you say you got your commissions, what actually happened?

They came through, we just got the word through we'd been commissioned and I've got my commission paper there actually. Which said I'm a [PMF], a member of the Permanent Military Force of Australia. Now one of my

37:30 friends who was also commissioned, he tried to get the Permanent Military Force's pension and they wiped that.

Well, how did you feel now about being an officer?

Well, I suppose I felt pleased that I'd got there. I did not have any idea that I may get there. I thought if I got to signal sergeant, I would've been doing very well and I could of,

38:00 if I hadn't gone to the 2/5th Battalion, I know I would've been offered the signal sergeant's job in another battalion but another division but - any rate I, the fellow who was offered he knocked it back. I couldn't work it out. Any rate I, no look I felt quite good about it. I was getting more money of course. I was getting a few more privileges but I think when I finished up as a captain I was getting twenty-one

and sixpence a day for the privilege of having my head blown off.

38:30 If you look at it that way.

Well, when you were commissioned, were you commissioned as a second lieutenant or as a lieutenant?

A lieutenant.

A lieutenant, right.

Yeah, there were no second lieutenants. I think this Frank Rowell, who eventually became my company commander in Syria, I think he came in as a second lieutenant in '39 but they were all upgraded to lieutenants. But a few of those officers fell by the wayside. The originals,

39:00 they just weren't up to it - I don't know.

Tape 2

00:31 **Alwyn, we were talking about the officers, some of them who fell by the wayside.**

Well they, just you know it's up to the CO whether he gets rid of them or not. But then if he doesn't think an officer's doing his job or he's not a good leader he pushes him aside somehow. And they go back to base jobs and that sorta thing.

01:00 Doesn't happen very often. But to be quite frank with you, until anybody gets into action, they've got no idea how they'll perform, absolutely no idea. It's just one of those things, you've got it or you haven't got it. And I used to feel before any action I felt very tense - couldn't show it of course. Soon as the shooting started I was cool as a cucumber.

01:30 Now that was me and yet other fellas I've seen them. They're like that and just your make up.

Yeah it's amazing isn't it, really? Well listen, what happened to you after you finished your officer training?

Well, we were shunted around as I said.

Oh that's right, yes.

Caulfield Williamstown, Balcombe [camps] and I lived under the Members Bar at Caulfield. Very comfortable place and then we

02:00 went to Balcombe and we were commissioned at Balcombe.

That's right, yes.

Then, we all had a room each and we were looked after pretty well. But the, then we sailed in September 1940.

Well, when did you get your orders to sail?

Well, I don't think we were told till about the fortnight before 'cause we were given a week's leave.

And how did you spend that leave?

Well, I came home I was

02:30 engaged to Dot here and we just used to go to shows and that sort of thing. 'Cause the family,

Well, had you become engaged before you enlisted?

No, no I was engaged after I was commissioned. That's right, I was trying to think when. In a way it was probably the wrong thing to do because then she had the worry. And jumping

03:00 ahead a little bit I came home in August '44. I made the mistake of getting her pregnant and 'a course I went back into action and she had all that worry all the time. And Wendy was born while I was still in action, which didn't help her at all. Any rate just, that's by the by. Something you'd, if I thought about it you know wouldn't have happened.

03:30 **Well, these things happen when you're young, don't they?**

Oh yes, of course.

Yes, now well what ship did you sail on?

The New Holland.

And did you leave secretly?

No, everybody could see us going. They were all down along the railway line in Port Melbourne and everything. Dot was there I know, with I think with my mother and so on. And I saw them as we flashed through the Port Melbourne station but no they

04:00 all [knew]. Later on during the war the people in Sollum told us when we were leaving three weeks before. And I was a signal officer I didn't know then.

Well look, can you tell us a little about the voyage on the ship?

Well, it was the New Holland's first trip as a trooper [ship] and we had, I think there were four of us or three of

04:30 us in the cabin, which was a cabin for one and they'd put a couple of extra bunks.

Well, were you all mates in?

Oh yes, we well we'd got our commissions together, so we and one of the chaps in the cabin with me, he had been in the signal platoon as well. He'd got his commission. No, we had a great time. The Dutch officers, they thought Queen Wilhelmina had a birthday every day. 'Cause you'd have a slap up

05:00 meal and all the grog you could drink. Bowles gin, oh God. But the – no, they were good fellows and the troops of course were housed below decks and they had tarpaulins over the, there'd be whatever was in the hold and dunnage over that and then the tarpaulins. And they had their mess tables down there and so on and there was an officer put in charge of the mess there, so he

05:30 controlled what went on. But unfortunately for those fellas the ship was carrying a load of beer for the Middle East and of course there were ex-wharfies amongst the troops and they thought we'll have a look what's under here and they found the beer. Well, it was all right for a couple a weeks and then they had a big blue down there one night and of course that blew it for them. They were never able to get at the beer again, but if they'd kept quiet they would have had it all the way.

06:00 No, they lived pretty well and they were 'a course up on deck, we did physical jerks and all that sorta thing. We pulled into Fremantle and they were given the day's leave and the majority of them got drunk of course. A few of them didn't come back when we sailed.

Really?

Oh yes, well those that didn't really, good riddance really. And I can tell you a funny thing as we

06:30 went in by train from Fremantle from Perth you go along Rose Street, that's the street of the brothels and all the girls are up on the balconies there and they're lifting their skirts up. Which rather amused me. It didn't amuse my mother when I told her. Oh she said, "That's disgusting."

Do you know whether any of the soldiers took up their offers though?

Oh yes there'd be a lot of them. A lot of them'd do that. 'Cause

07:00 soon after we left Perth they had what they call a short arm inspection, to make sure that they hadn't got VD [venereal disease]. We went to Colombo then. And have you ever been to Colombo?

No, I haven't.

Well you know, imagine this room with about ten ships in it. That's what Colombo harbour's like. It's all enclosed and there's four ships and what they called the bum boats, the native boats they'd come out to the ships

07:30 with goods, we'd haul them up on a rope and throw the money back if you thought they were good enough. We all got a pay there before we left. The pay officer who was a friend of mine, he said, "Oh come with me." He said, "I've gotta go to the Hong Kong and Shanghai bank and get the money." So he went and got the money came back to the ship and he paid everybody and they went off. And by the time we left the next

08:00 morning the rickshaw boys, they were dead in their tracks just flat out among the, between the shafts they worked so hard.

So you'd only had a day and a night there?

That's all mm.

Well, what was your reaction to Colombo?

Well having never seen things like that before it was a bit of an eye-opener I must admit. But no, I quite enjoyed looking around. I went to the

08:30 big hotel there. The only hotel can't think of it. And I went back at night with the pay officer, and we were entertained by the manager of the bank in his flat. And funnily enough his wife was a cousin of people we knew in Melbourne. But oh, he turned on a supper for us and everything and we went back to

the ship eventually.

Was he British, was he?

British, yes

09:00 British. Yes he lived very well, I can assure you. Yes, Frieda Kimpton [?] her name was ‘cause we knew her but, no, I look it was it was interesting to see it. We went down to Mount Lavinia which was a sort of holiday area there, beaches and so on and we went around the various wog shops and bartered with them for various things but

09:30 when you’ve only got a day it goes pretty quickly. But then we didn’t land until we got to El Kantara in the Suez Canal.

That must have been a fair stretch of time at sea?

Couple of weeks I think to get there. ‘Cause the ship wasn’t fast, but we just continued doing you know physical training to keep ourselves fit, that was

10:00 all and submarine watch. There’d be a detail for submarine watch 24-hours a day. And you just were given a pair of binoculars and set the rail with your eyes glued to the binoculars.

Were you travelling in convoy?

Yes, we were.

Right.

Yes there were several other ships in the convoy. And we were escorted by you know, I think they were British ships mainly. British warships. But one

10:30 thing I did see as we were going, I saw the [HMS] Queen Mary coming out of Australia for you know for its first load of troops. And was it going like crazy you know. No, the escorts couldn’t keep up. But by gee it was a big ship. It - I forget - it used to take about three thousand troops I think.

Well, how many troops would have been on your ship?

Best part of six or seven hundred I suppose.

11:00 I wouldn’t think there’d be any more.

And you mentioned that a fight broke out on one occasion, was there evidence of much tension?

No, it was just that they got too drunk down below. They got into the beer under the dunnage. That was the only reason.

So there wasn’t a problem with boredom then?

No, no they were, look they - down at night they’d play cards down there, and all sorts of things. Pontoon, all that jazz you know and they’d bet on it and

11:30 crazy. And during the day they were kept very busy. There was no let up. They’d get lectures from the doctor on VD and what they’re likely to strike in the Middle East and all that sorta thing. No, nobody was bored. I’m sure they weren’t.

Well, can you remember whether there was a sense of anticipation? I mean did you know, were you thinking about the fact that you were going off to a war?

I don’t think at that time.

12:00 No, I don’t think so. I think when we got to Palestine and then we started to do training with the live ammunition and everything I think we probably woke up quick then that we weren’t going to a picnic. But they did a lot of digging of trenches and everything all that sort of thing over in the Middle East. You were trained to do that.

Right - so you arrived at El Kantara?

And then we went up to

12:30 a place called Beit Jirja at Palestine, went up by train and it was a course, Palestine is pretty much all desert if you look at it. And our tents were already there because there’d been groups there before us and there was an officer.

Who had been there before you?

Well the battalion had been there before see and the tents and there’d been various other units go through. But when we got there, there

13:00 was an officer from our battalion, an officer from the 6th and 7th Battalions and the 32nd, I think it was

-they were there as the camp commandants for the various units. We were there from October to December and we had one hell of a party in the mess I remember before we went up to the desert, and then we were farmed out to the battalion. And by then they were just

13:30 up short of Bardia.

All right, well before you get there, can you just give us a few more details about the actual training that you did?

Well, a lot a route marches, a lot of digging of trenches, a lot of grenade practise, shooting practise, everything to prepare you for the front line.

And you mentioned now that you have live ammunition.

Oh yes

Are you saying that you, when you were doing your training in Australia, you didn't have live ammunition?

No, no. Well, we

14:00 used it naturally but we weren't trained under it. See over there you were trained you had to crawl under it and all that sort of thing. But we never had artillery or mortars flying around you at any of the training really. If they were fired, they were fired well ahead of you, so you weren't hit because they'd kill you with a hundred or two hundred yards. But that was basically what

14:30 we did. We got a couple a leaves up to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. Very good. A few of us went down to the Dead Sea one day to have a look at that. One of the chaps tried to swim in it and he couldn't. Just keeps turning around. But you know the, you realised just how lucky we are in this country when you see those people over there. Now they used to build the roads. There'd be a couple a hundred

15:00 wogs, they had a little plaited baskets and they would build the road stone by stone, plenty of stones around. They'd fill the basket, they'd come back and they'd put them into the road and build it that way. Of course there were hundreds and thousands of them, it doesn't matter, they've got plenty of people. But they had good roads because they were hand-built you could say.

Well did you have much to do with the local people?

Oh yes we,

15:30 only when you went on leave and only when they tried to get into the camp and steal anything. And around the Beit Jirja camp there were a few orange groves and they'd hide in these orange groves and when you'd see 'em, you'd just pick up your rifle and go bang see and they'd scatter then for awhile. But they were, they're the greatest thieves ever, well look at Baghdad. Thieves.

16:00 **Well, just for us to get a picture of your time there, could you take us through a routine day?**

Well you'd get up in the morning reveille, there was a roll call.

And what time would reveille be?

Six o'clock and you'd have a roll call you go and do your ablutions and everything and then breakfast'd be on. You'd be, breakfast would be over by

What would they give you for breakfast?

Well, mostly stew.

16:30 And burgue which is porridge that sort of thing. Tea of course. Fruit, well you didn't get fruit like we have it now for breakfast. But you could get oranges, there were plenty of oranges around of course. You got me on the hop there, I'm not quite sure but that's, you know that's basically what we had. And the, then at eight o'clock I think it was you'd be on parade and then

17:00 the day's operations start. Now you didn't know what they were going to be until the officer read out the, well this is what we're going to do today. And it mainly consisted of getting fit. Because you know if you're not fit in the infantry you're dead. You just have to be very fit. Water discipline, we practised because there wasn't much water. Now today they'd say you'd be

17:30 dehydrated, God. Never thought of it.

Well, what did that consist of water discipline?

You had a, you had a water bottle there, an army water bottle which is about that high I suppose and 'bout that wide or 'bout that depth, I suppose you'd call it and the width about that. I don't know what it'd hold, probably about a pint and you'd have to last for the day on that. And I can tell you when we got to Syria sometimes we lasted for two days on that. And it was a hundred and

18:00 ten or hundred and twenty degrees but there just wasn't the water available. The, they you know, you had to practise that. As I say today they'd be horrified. But when we got up into North Africa water was

quite scarce. But that, look it was, let me put it this way, it was basic training we did.

Well, were you still allowed to have showers and?

Oh yes, they had showers,

18:30 yes.

So it was just drinking water that was in short supply, was it?

Drinking water, yes but you weren't, you didn't get the water for the shower for very long. But you had to practice not to drink too much water. See it's, you know wrong by today's theories I know. But that's what we did.

Well, when you'd done your training, were you starting to get a bit bored with your

19:00 **training or you were wondering when you were going into action or?**

No, we knew that we'd be going up within the next you know month or so. Because in any unit there are casualties of people getting sick and so on, so they'd keep the unit up to strength all the time. And I went up at about the end of December, close to the end of December but

So you went up with a platoon or?

19:30 No, no just with a group of reinforcements. See we took over with us the 3rd and 4th reinforcements to the battalion. Now when we got to Beit Jirja, some of those were transferred to the 9th Division reinforcements because one brigade had gone through to England and they formed eventually part of the 9th Division. And so some of the chaps and one of the chaps had been commissioned with us, he went to the 2/32nd Battalion, which was

20:00 unfortunate for him, he was killed but a few of the troops went there but mostly about three of the officers I think. But the rest of us went back to the 6th, the 5th, 6th and 7th Battalions.

So you went back to the 5th?

5th, yes.

And right, so where was it then?

It was then in Egypt getting up towards El Win [?] or Amiriya or something like that.

20:30 And just before they moved up to the, before Bardia.

And well by what means were you transported in?

Truck. Trucks, and if there was a dust storm as you've been hearing about in Iran, Iraq we had dust storms and for couple a days you wouldn't, couldn't move, couldn't see anything. Hardly see your hand in front of your face. And I can remember being in a convoy going up towards Tobruk somewhere

21:00 and the only way we could see the truck in front of us was to drive right on his tail and look at his tail lights and there was a man marching on the, there was one road up a bitumen road, he walked on the road to keep - he was in front of the first truck - keeping 'em going.

And did you wear any protective covering?

No, in those days it was the winter we were in our field service dress. We had balaclavas on because it was so

21:30 cold. Pair of gas goggles if you could get them. Tin hats and army greatcoats because it was so cold. But you know dust got into everything, you just didn't care. Got into your food. Got into your eyes, your ears. One of those things you put up with.

And what were your boots like? I mean you did an awful lot of marching, didn't you?

Yeah good. Army boots were wonderful. And seven

22:00 handsmen, seven fours used to fit me like a glove. No, they were beautiful boots and I used to break mine in by, when you got them they were red of course and you know to get them back to a brown colour. But I used to fill mine with water, put them on, walk around for a couple a hundred yards and they'd mould to your feet. Empty them out, let them dry out and they were as good as gold. Handsmen.

How would a pair of boots - how long would a pair of boots last

22:30 **you?**

Good question. I think I used my boots up in the desert for about three months. A pair of boots. They were solid you know, very solid. And of course when we got to the islands we got brass cleats on them to help you to hold in the mud. No, they were good, very good boots. If you wore a pair out, you went to the quartermaster, got another pair. Not very,

23:00 I've never been hard on shoes or anything like that. But I think it was because I moulded them to my feet in the first place. 'Cause the Queenslanders, most of 'em never wore socks. Just wear boots.

Really, with their boots?

Yes.

Oh well, their feet were probably pretty hard anyway, weren't they?

Oh yes, I think they were.

Well, when did you realise that you were in a war zone?

When we were in the

23:30 falling up area before the attack on Bardia 'cause they started to get a bit of artillery and mortar bombing into the area. Some of our fellas were killed and wounded but it was probably a good introduction but then as I say when you get into it – it's just mayhem really.

Yes, can you describe what it was like for you that first experience?

Mayhem. Well, I suppose in a

24:00 way it's terrifying first up. And then after you've been in it for a while you realise crikey I'm still here. So you think oh that's not so bad. But then you see somebody killed beside ya and think gawd. And I think then it really strikes you. But you've got to remember that there are thousands of pieces of metal flying around, if you just happen to get in front of one you're unlucky, and considering what's

24:30 thrown at you, there were very few people hit. But I found the mortar bombing worst of all. You can't hear them. They're just a bang. They're off. If it's quiet you can hear when they've fired, you can hear this pop, pop as they've fired but if there's a lot of other noise around, you don't hear that. And all of a sudden you find a water bomb lands beside you, and you don't hear it, it's just there. Then the shells are a bit different. You do

25:00 get a bit of a shoosh just before they hit. But they're, it's, I don't know, it must be in everybody's make up how they perform. As I say once the shooting started I felt all right but I worked on the theory it can't happen to me. Which is a stupid theory but.

Well I can assure you it's shared by many.

Oh it probably is,

25:30 yes. Well, you have to be positive in one way and yet I've seen fellows and they were shaking like this. They were scared stiff.

Well, when you were experiencing that first fire, were you actually with your unit then?

Yes, I was in Don Company.

Don, okay.

Rifle company then.

And so what was your role?

Well, I was just leading a platoon.

26:00 You know, you had thirty odd men and that was it. You did what the company commander told you to do. He in turn did what the orders the CO had given him. But of course it's, see chaos unlimited once the fighting starts. The plan might be great but it doesn't often happen. It doesn't pan out 'cause the other crowd are doing their damnedest to stop it happening. But we were fortunate

26:30 in a way that we took on the Italians because they didn't have their heart in it at all. But the, we just came outta the desert, well I was in hospital when they did but the Germans just came in as our battalion came out and they were a different kettle of fish of course. The Italian, he'd give up very quickly. Once you got close to him you showed him a bayonet gamut,

27:00 and they'd come out in their hundreds. They took 40,000 prisoners the first day in Bardia. I hope you're not Italian Zelda [Interviewer]. 40,000 prisoners the first day. And I've got the copy there somewhere of a cartoon in the [Sydney] Herald in '40, January '41 and it showed thousands of Italian prisoners, you can see the line going over the

27:30 desert for miles with one buck Aussie there leading them or beside them and he's saying to them one of them, he said, "Hey Antonio, if you don't stop dragging that rifle in the sand I won't let you carry it for me." And that's exactly what they did. They'd have one Australian leading five or six thousand prisoners back. He'd have one man carrying his rifle, another man carrying his equipment and they were delighted to do it. Delighted to be caught.

28:00 And when I was in hospital in Tobruk, we had an Italian orderly. There were four of us in the tent, the

ward and if he did anything wrong, we'd say, "Giuseppe, we'll send ya back to the front line." "Oh no, Momma Mia not you know the front line for him."

28:30 But in a way they were pathetic, they really were. They killed a lot of our fellas there but. Oh they did.

Yes, I was wondering about see you were at Bardia, weren't you? I mean this is one of the big battles, isn't it?

Yeah, that was the first. Yeah, it was only, look it was over in a day really. With a little bit the next day then they we went onto Tobruk, well we didn't have a great role in Tobruk. Then we went on further to Anial [?]. Gazala, Derna.

29:00 Onto Basik [?], then they did, I was playing around with an Italian handgun and I ruined my hand, so I went back to hospital but they did go on a bit further. But then in the, I think it was about the end of March they were brought back to go to Greece. And the whole division went to Greece with the New Zealanders.

Can you tell me what actually happened at Bardia? What was your role in that action?

Just leading the platoon. We

29:30 had to take various posts. The Italians had posts see and our job was to take these various posts. But then most of the time when you got close to them they'd give up. Put their hands up. One of our sergeants, he walked down into a wadi there the first morning. A wadi is a dried watercourse. I never saw water over there, never saw rain, I can't remember rain in the Middle East, ever. Any rate

30:00 the, this was a dried watercourse and I suppose it would be about as, deeper than the height of this room and an Italian officer came out with his hands up. So he was told in no uncertain terms to get over there. You can imagine the language. But about two hundred mates followed him out with all [with] their hands up. So here's Joe Redding, the Sergeant he's got two hundred and eighty odd prisoners, doesn't know what to do with them. So he just says, "Go that way." But

30:30 they were just glad to get caught.

He just sent them on their way?

Yeah, just sent them on their way. Oh we couldn't handle 'em. Just sent them to the rear.

Well, so you were involved in action on that day?

Yes.

Well, were any of the members of your platoon killed?

Couple wounded, nobody killed. No, a couple wounded. Company commander was wounded and he eventually died of his wounds. Two platoon, two other no, one other platoon commander

31:00 was wounded that's right and then the senior platoon commander had to take over the company.

Well, when you were involved in this attack, I mean were you there, must have been a lot of noise, there must have been a lot of?

Oh noise. Like the Grand Final [football]. Lot a noise, yes. Well, you've got artillery shells going off and machine guns going off all that sorta thing. As I say, it's chaos unlimited, really is. And the,

31:30 as for the plan, rarely works. I mean you get, well we were held up by an Italian battery. And they brought up a couple of Vickers machine guns from the British machine gun unit in charge of a little Cockney sergeant and I can't really use the language that he used but they line these guns up and you'd swear they were on the parade ground. Number one on the gun, number two feeding the belt through and

32:00 three, four and five back with an extra panniers of ammunition. If the gunner was hit they'd push him aside, number two would take over and they'd move up. You know just discipline it was and they fired on this battery and very quickly the Italians gave up and the, I'd love to loosely use the language he used but.

Well you can.

Well you know they describe or pronounce the F word differently to us and his comment was he said, "The fookin

32:30 fookers have gone fookin, well fook themselves." I still remember it.

Oh no.

A real little character, knee high to a grasshopper, you know real character.

So there was always room for humour?

Oh, of course

In the most dreadful situations, isn't there?

Of course always, and the Australians are you know, are really good at it too, really good.

Well you see you were talking earlier about leadership,

33:00 **now here you are, you're the leader of your platoon, yes. So how are you getting your instructions to your troops?**

The runners. Runner from the company commander, you know they'd come up, actually every officer has a batman, he's his runner. It's one of the worst jobs in the world. And the one I had at the end of the war, he was like this. He's scared stiff all the time but he did the job. And the company commander has a coupla runners on to company headquarters. And

33:30 they've got to come along and give you the orders. He's got a telephone at his company headquarters, which the signallers are dragging a cable all the time or I think up there, as a first we had what they call 103 Wireless Sets. If they got a bullet through them they were useless. And if it was too noisy you couldn't hear anything, so I eventually, well certainly up in the islands they just relied on the cable and the telephone.

We'll stay at

34:00 **Bardia where you said you had this plan beforehand and but then it often doesn't work, it descends into chaos, I mean what happened with you that day?**

Well it does really. Well one of the one of the other company commanders, he saw what was happening and he did something about it with his company and that fixed it. But I frankly don't think

34:30 the battalion performed very well that first day. Well it was all new and the things didn't go the way they were supposed to go but you know that's just my impression of it. CO was hit in the backside in the first hour or so, so another man had to come up and take over. Well the 2IC [Second in Command], who hadn't been at the briefing for the battle, so he you know, he was flying blind.

35:00 But he didn't last long and eventually we got a staff corps man put in charge but he lasted a coupla weeks and then another staff corps man put in the fact that he was senior and he got the battalion and he was a first class soldier. Tough as goat's knees but oh boy he was a good soldier and a good tactician.

Well what was the assessment

35:30 **of the performance or what was your assessment of the performance of your platoon then?**

Oh they did all right. They did what they were told and what they had to do. But I mean the odds were against us really. That was the whole trouble. I don't know, look frankly I don't know what went wrong but I know the plan, it didn't go according to plan. See you've got to remember that in a battle of any description, you only see what's going on immediately

36:00 around you. You don't know what's going on a hundred yards away half the time. Particularly New Guinea, you know from here to the door you wouldn't know what was going on. But that's the problem and I don't know how they ever get over it. But of course these days they've got every machine in the world to tell them where they are and what's going on. And the CO's got it on a computer in front of him with a picture and so on. It's

36:30 unbelievable.

Well were there any men in your platoon who didn't hold their nerve?

No, they were all right.

Well when Bardia was taken, that's, this is the next day is it that they decide right it has been taken and you've taken the prisoners ?

Prisoners, yeah. Well there's a bit of mopping up the next day, that was all. And then the fellows found that the Italians had

37:00 thousands of gallons of Chianti dug into the sides of the wadies in big barrels. And I think the second day, the Italians if they'd counted, checked, mighta taken the place back. But they really got into the grog, I tell ya. That was all through the desert. We found these big barrels and they'd dug them into the sides to keep them cool. It was pretty

37:30 good wine too but I'll tell you a funny story about one of my men. He's a terrific drinker and we were just squatting around - it was very hard to dig a hole. You put rocks around you, there was plenty of rocks and then this fella missed his turn on guard at night and arrived back the next morning looking pretty poor. And I said to him "Where the so and so have you been all night? You've missed your

38:00 turn on guard duty." And he told me the story. He'd been down in a wadi all day and he'd been having a pannikin of wine and he'd pass out and he'd wake up and he'd have a few more, pass out, wake up again. And it got towards dusk and he realised he oughta get back to the company. So he got up out of

the wadi and of course as flat as this floor, couldn't find his way. And he staggered around and he came across a lot a fellas in the dusk under blankets, so he crawled in beside 'em in his inebriated

38:30 state and he woke - this was his story - he's told me, he said, "I woke up this morning and I said I found I was sleeping with all the Italian stiffs." He said, "I wondered why none of the buggers would speak to me." Well what could I do with him? Nothing.

Well what happened? Was it just the Italian, the dead were just left there, were they?

They were left ready for burial the next day. You'd get the prisoners to bury them see. They'd just roll 'em in a blanket or cover them up with blankets.

39:00 **And well what happened to your two wounded?**

Oh they were stretchered back to the…

Tape 3

00:30 **So Alwyn, I want to ask a bit more about Bardia. It's your first action in the war and it's been a huge success, so how did you feel?**

Relieved. Relieved to be still alive.

What would you say morale was like in general amongst the 6th Divvy [Division]?

Oh good, good. No, once they got through it was good. You know they regretted the, I think we only had about 17

01:00 killed, a lot of wounded but I, you know they, it sort of welded the battalion together. There was no doubt about that.

And I guess the Chianti helped?

Oh it helped, yes. It helped to deaden the pain. But I didn't drink the stuff myself but a lot of them did of course.

When you say deaden the pain, what do you mean?

Well if they did feel any regrets of anything about what they'd had to do, it didn't worry

01:30 them after a coupla grogs.

So was your experience of this first action, was it what you'd imagined war would be like?

Oh yes, yes. Because I'd seen a lot on films and so on of what went on. But it's an eye opener first time. It really is an eye opener, and I think

02:00 my own feelings that I was glad I got through it, but I was also glad that I found I wasn't a coward. I think that was probably the greatest satisfaction out of it.

So that was the relief for you?

Oh yes. Because there were one or two people who did - not in my company at all but in other companies who did - and one of them was an officer. He just packed up, just couldn't

02:30 do it. But that's a person's make up. I mean it, you can't sorta point a finger at them because that's the way they're made.

No, well I was very interested when you said you just don't know how you will respond until you're in the, until you're there?

That's right, you don't know. You just don't know.

Yeah, so how did those people respond when you say packed up?

One fella had to be put in the platoon truck and sent back, he just wouldn't go any further, he more or less fought them to put

03:00 him, get rid of him out of it. He probably when I look back, he was a bit of a show pony. You know a marvellous parade ground soldier but no good when it come to the nitty gritty. But I don't hold anything against him for that. He's now dead but the, you know it could happen to anybody.

03:30 You've either got the guts or you haven't got it, that's basically what it amounts to.

And what about the officer you mentioned who packed up?

Well he never came back to us. I dunno what they did with him. He was just out somewhere. Probably

finished up in some base unit if he wasn't discharged. See they discharged some people services no longer required. Now I don't know what happened to him frankly.

04:00 **But for yourself, you'd passed your baptism of fire?**

Oh cripes, yes. I felt good about it I must admit. And after that I'm, well not that I worried over much during the time but after that I never worried. I thought I got through all of that. No, the luck is with us.

And how did you feel about shooting at the enemy?

No trouble at all. No trouble, it never worried me in the slightest.

04:30 Later on they used to tell me I was a professional killer on the islands. But that was the only way to be really. You don't get a second chance. You've got to make every shot count.

And were you aware in that first battle, were you aware if you hit anyone or not?

No, well I didn't really fire much because I carried a revolver. See you only lead when you were an officer. But once you got in the islands you never carried a revolver.

05:00 But I did later on, I had to use a revolver up in the Syrian campaign. Useless things, I couldn't hit a cow at ten yards, absolutely useless.

So what were your weapons as the platoon leader?

A revolver, a Webley and Scott 0.45 pistol. As I say, absolutely useless. Unless you get, you know right up like you are, I'd hit them

05:30 then but I would take anybody on with a pistol firing at me 'cause they're very, very inaccurate. You know, you see these American films, they're shooting people like that, that's the greatest lot of nonsense ever. It just doesn't happen. No very, very inaccurate.

Is that right? So you didn't have a 303?

No, not then no.

So what were you firing in Bardia?

Well, I had all me troops firing.

06:00 We had Bren guns and Tommy guns and like Chicago Pianos .45 Tommy guns, very deadly things. And that was what and the rifles a course in the platoon. But an officer's job is really to direct. It's a bit different when you got up to the Pacific Islands. Anything else.

Yes, well we can move on from

06:30 **Bardia I think, so I'm also wondering after that first action you've now got a bit of an idea what it was like. Did that then make it harder or easier going into subsequent actions?**

Easier, much easier. Well, you knew what was in front of you. No, much easier. I was still tense for the whole six years of war, whenever I went into action I was still tense before anything. But once it started no trouble.

Once it started

07:00 **what would happen? What would change in you?**

I just became as cool as a cucumber. I don't know why but it was just me. I was lucky actually when you think of it. But no, I had a man take over from me once later on and he was the company commander and he came up and we were shelled just as he took over and I tell you what - he shook like jelly.

07:30 But see that was that was him, he was a different type altogether. I don't know, it musta been my tough upbringing I think.

But it's very interesting and I think as you say it is a very personal, it's part of your make up, isn't it?

Yeah it certainly is. There's no doubt about that, it must be in your genes, otherwise you'd, you know when you think of it, it is the most stupid thing

08:00 you've ever done to go and walk towards people who are shooting at you. But when you get over that I suppose it's fear, you, it shouldn't worry anybody. But it still did worry a lot of people right throughout their army career.

Well your natural impulse is to run the other way, isn't it?

Well to look after yourself, yes sure. That's right.

08:30 **So after Bardia where to next?**

Well then we just went up to Tobruk but we more or less bypassed Tobruk and another brigade did the attack on Tobruk, which

Did you get any leave?

Sorry?

After Bardia did you get any leave?

No, oh crikey no. No, no leave, not up there. There was nowhere to go any rate. No, we sort of swung around Tobruk, our brigade

09:00 and another brigade did the Tobruk attack but there wasn't much there really. And then we leap frogged to Anial, Gazala, Derna wadi and you know skirmishes here and there and then onto Barce. I think it was from the Derna

09:30 wadi we were - Don Company was in reserve and we had to take the ammunition and cart it up the thing forward companies. But they weren't doing very much, they were just dug in or and sort of holding the position. And I remember I took a, I had a box of .303 on me shoulder and the Derna wadi was very steep. You'd go down, I don't know - five or six hundred feet I suppose up the

10:00 other side and it was quite wide across the bottom of it and I know when I got up to the top there was a shot fired and I don't know [how] I did it but I hit the ground so fast that I beat the box of ammunition to the ground and I thought to myself what a stupid thing to do. Because once you hear a shot it's gone, the bullet's gone, it's faster than the speed of sound. So you know you don't do it. But I suppose it was just the reaction 'cause I wasn't in the fight at the

10:30 time. But I've often thought of that and I thought how stupid.

Well there could have been another one coming?

Well there could have been yes, it was only the one shot. Bullets travel at twenty-eight hundred and fifty feet a second and sound travels at about eighteen hundred feet a second, so once you've heard it, it's gone.

So travelling from Bardia all the way up to Derna, that's a lot of miles?

Yes, I think we did a bit of it

11:00 by truck. We did do a bit of it by truck and after Derna we went across country and our company headquarters with the Sergeant Cook and his field cooker were waiting for us because we were 24 hours late and he'd cooked a stew. Of course it was freezing cold at night up there but reasonably warm during the day unless you got these

11:30 sandstorms and the wind would just, went straight through. But he'd heated the stew up the night before and we didn't arrive, so when he saw us coming across the desert and you could see for miles he heated it up again. Of course we all got there and everybody wanted a meal. Oh I think before that we'd had a meal of macaroni and so on because we'd pushed some Italians out of the way and they'd left their field cookers still cooking, so we got into that.

12:00 But you know these things sort of come back to you. In sequence I may be a little bit out but any rate. Winnie Ridge as he was called, the Sergeant Cook, we arrived and of course the men are all served first and my platoon went through and I was just about to be served and there was an air-raid. So everybody scattered and the air-raid was over and I came back and there was no stew left. Well that was all right, we were loaded onto trucks and we went

12:30 onto Giovanni Berta by truck. I think it was about seventy miles or something and all, the officer always rides with the driver and a convoy never stops and I could hear all this yelling in the back of the truck. 'Cause took no notice of it, you couldn't stop. Got to the other end - nobody in the truck. And as Don Company came through there was nobody in the trucks at all, and they were picked up by the other companies as they came through.

13:00 Now what had happened, the stew had fermented and of course they all got diarrhoea. Boy did I feel lucky that I didn't get any stew. I'd just had a bit a bully beef.

So had they jumped out of the trucks?

They'd just jumped. Well they had to jump out of the truck, yes. You can imagine what it - you can imagine what it'd be like along the track. But

Tell me about the macaroni?

Well we came to this position and the Italians were there

13:30 and as soon as we got near them they disappeared and they left all their field cookers going. And it was full of beautiful macaroni. So the troops just got stuck into it a course.

What kind of sauce?

Don’t ask me. It was just macaroni in my book. Might’ve had something in it, I don’t know. But I remember having a big plate full of it, any rate.

So as you advanced across North Africa, were you coming across you know abandoned

14:00 **Italian equipment supplies?**

Oh yes, everywhere. We had trucks, you know Italian trucks and motor cycles. They’d run them till they ran out of fuel then they’d dump them and pick up another one. But we had a ten ton Fiat truck in the platoon and I think it was, they’d been through some place where there was a brewery and they’d loaded it and poor old Fiat truck could hardy move ’cause of all the beer in it but.

14:30 No, we had all sorts of equipment, it was just abandoned everywhere and there were lots of little settlements we went through, farmer’s settlements. Mussolini had started this you know, sent people out to settle this country and God how they made a living out of it, I don’t know because it was all stony and everything. They scratched a living. But we’d march through or go through these villages and

15:00 after.

Was there any people living in the villages?

Oh yes, oh yes.

Italians or North Africans?

Italians, yes families. Italians mostly yes, with their families, no trouble at all. But we were, I think it was after Giovanni Berta we did a seventy mile forced march. In a coupla days to get somewhere and we were going through this little village and it

15:30 always had a church as you could imagine and a few buildings there, a few houses and then the farm places are out a bit. And this old fella’s standing on the side, he said, “How would you like to be in Bourke Street?” Well you can imagine the chiacking he got from the troops as they went through. But he obviously had been out in Australia. But I felt sorry for those farmers because boy they lived pretty frugally.

Well I was also wondering about all the

16:00 **Italian prisoners that you took. Why do you think they didn’t fight? Why do you think they surrendered?**

No iron in their belly. Just that was the true thing. They just didn’t have it. You know, I would imagine if their officers told them to go and do a job or something, they’d say you go and do it yourself, I might be killed. I’m sure that was their theory. No, they you know, they in a way they were

16:30 useless as troops. Nice fellows you know, good to get on with but no good as fighting troops. They’d fight until you got near them then they’d give up. As long as you, if you faced up to them eyeball to eyeball that was the end of it for them.

Yeah well that’d be me too so.

Have you got Italian blood in you?

No.

No but that’s what they did. French were the same.

So look all that time across the

17:00 **desert where were you sleeping at night?**

Just on the ground.

On the open ground?

Yes, we had a platoon truck which had blankets in but you know it was winter, freezing. You’d often wake up in the morning, you’d be covered in frost. Oh no comforts in the infantry. Some of the officers had the equivalent to what today is a sleeping bag. They called it a valise, which is really only a

17:30 canvas thing you could crawl into. But that didn’t do any good. But the, but no, we had a platoon truck about a one and a half ton truck which carried that sort of equipment. Originally, we had respirators for gas but after the first day they were, we never saw them again. No sign of any gas anywhere. But it would carry,

18:00 oh a bit of the cooking gear. Then we had this field cooker which was pulled behind the truck. It was quite a quite a big thing. And it was just pulled behind a three toner.

So what was the hardest part about the desert warfare?

I think the sand storms. They were terrible.

Could you describe one for me? Could you see them coming or hear them coming?

You could see them coming. They'd sort of roll up like clouds

18:30 and for two or three days sometimes you couldn't see anything. You couldn't do anything 'cause you didn't know where you were, just had to sit tight. The Americans have experienced the same thing in Iraq. It just slows everything down. But the trouble with it is it gets into all your weapons and you know you got to be so very careful that you keep them clean. You can imagine sand in a rifle butt and machine guns and everything.

19:00 Doesn't do any good. No, it was just a, I know we used to stick a bit of cleaning rag, it was called four material, it was flannelette, tie it off and it was about four inches by two inches and we'd stuff a bit of that into the top of the rifle barrel to keep the dust out. But it'd still get into the works where the magazine was and the bolt and so on.

And did you have tents to sleep in?

No

So where would you take shelter from the sand storm?

19:30 Just wherever you were, just have to huddle down under something if you could.

And this would go on?

Two to three days. I've been in one that lasted for nearly three days but I fortunately I was in a truck, so you just didn't get outta the truck. But no, they were dreadful. The khamsin, I think they called them, the desert wind. And it came, oh in from the Sahara or somewhere like that.

20:00 **What was the noise like?**

Oh, no noise, just the wind. Just like you get a fog here, it sorta rolls in on top of you. No noise.

So from Derna where to next - Giovanni Berta?

Giovanni Berta and then we did this forced march up towards Barce.

20:30 No trouble there, you know you'd pass lines of Italian prisoners and you'd pass lines of minefields and the engineers had lifted the mines and you could see them stretching for miles across the desert. And we hardly saw anything or I don't think we saw any Italian forces except prisoners. And I can still see one crowd that went past us - you know Italian leatherwork is very good.

21:00 Well they had beautiful belts and somebody further up had relieved them of their belts and they were all marching along holding up their trousers, which rather amused me. Unfortunately we, you weren't supposed to have cameras and I didn't have any photographs. But Barce, where we were quartered, it was a little like a little township we were quartered in there

21:30 and I had the guard one day, the CO Roy King as I say, he was as tough as goat's knees and a disciplinarian of the first water but a wonderful man, a wonderful CO. He of course came round to inspect the guardhouse, which was in the stables. Huge, bigger than this house and very hard to get it clean you know. He came in, he

22:00 looked around and he said, "Shilton, clean up this bloody brothel." Just like that. So we all got to work and tried to clean it up as best we could but you know. All cobble stones on the floor and you can't get the dirt outta then. But see he was a Duntroon graduate and that's the way they were trained, and he was right too, I mean that was good discipline for everybody. But there, I had a little bit of trouble

22:30 playing around with an Italian hand grenade but.

Now why did you pick up an Italian hand grenade I have to ask?

Well there were three of us in a room in this wog house and this thing had been left on the thing and I took it to bits and was fooling with it, part of it blew up. So there was a bit of, one of them told me, he said, "There's a bit a your thumb up on the ceiling." So I was messed around there for

23:00 a bit. But they carted me up to the field hospital and I'd been pitted all round the face and I had a, piece in the chest went through Dot's photograph. Obliterated that, fortunately on the flat, fetched up on the rib. I've been able to tell her ever since that her face would stop anything. And that's, unfortunately

23:30 they took everything you know, they cut my uniform off and of course I lost that. Woulda been a wonderful souvenir. But they, I had a few days in the field hospital and eventually was ferried down by ambulance to Tobruk with a couple of others and then we got onto the Devonshire I think it was, a hospital ship back to Alexandria and then down to Cairo where I was in hospital for a while. But

24:00 no, it's just you know I was stupid to do it but you know you do these things.

I mean you'd been coming across Italian ammunition?

Oh everywhere, lying everywhere.

And were your normal, were you used to handling it?

Well normally we'd kick it out of the way but if it was a hand grenade you wouldn't. But they had this fellow, one of the chaps that came down in the ambulance with me, he'd picked up what looked like a

24:30 a pen, you know a fountain pen and it was explosive and it had injured him in the leg and so on. But they, a lot of those little things are left around in the very low scrub there, if any been left around there you know and it's the sorta thing that you get used to watching for. Poor old Fred Young, he died a couple a years ago but he

25:00 smashed his leg quite a bit. He was in hospital for ages. So it musta been a pretty powerful bit of explosive. But there was ammunition, and hand grenades. The hand grenades were made sort of an aluminium not like ours, I've got a hand grenade here, it hasn't got any works in it. But ours was cast steel or cast iron and it's very heavy. But theirs was just like a tin on the outside.

25:30 That's what this thing was and they were all coloured red I remember. But Dot'll be able to find that hand grenade if you want to see it. She used to keep it under the bed while I was away.

So is that how you lost the fingers on that hand?

Yes, I was playing around with it see and something went off. But Jimmy Woodcock, our CSM [Company Sergeant Major] commonly known as Splinter Dick, which you know the Australians are great at giving a nickname

26:00 to somebody, he grabbed me and he said, "God." So he whipped me up to the, on to a stretcher and up to the hospital. But I was all right after a while. They used to bathe my hand in methylated spirits every day that used to nearly send me into orbit. But I got used to that and then we were in hospital with three of us in the ward with a chap from the 4th Enniskillen Dragoon Guards, he was a major and

26:30 in the British Army they're known as the foreskins fusiliers and you know you can imagine and they were an armoured regiment. They were in the 7th Armoured Division and he'd been hit in the backside. Well, of course did we give him hell at hospital. Told him he was running away and all that sort of thing and he hated it. But his batman came in the first morning. He used to come in every morning to him but first morning he came in stood at the door of the ward and he said: "Sar." You know just typical

27:00 British and [Sir] took absolutely no notice of him. So he came into the ward and he pulled his dish wash, dish out from under the bed, which had a suede cover over it, it's British Army see. He went out and he got hot water. He came in, he washed him and shaved him and did his hair and when he'd finished, he took the basin out and he came back into the ward and he said: "Sar." Sir still did not recognise him. Well we gave him

27:30 hell. But I mean that was the British Army and that's the way they, that soldier did not know any different. You know if it'd been one of our fellas you woulda thanked him. Not this chap. But I did meet him weeks later down in Cairo, there was a big club there called the Gezira Club and you could play pretty well any known sport there. It was huge complex now ruined now the British have gone and he was playing cricket and he was a wonderful batsman.

28:00 And I was speaking to him after the match. And I said, "Oh, do you remember me up in Barce?" "Yes", he said, "You were one of those Aussie bastards who were getting into me". But he look he didn't worry about it. He was, he knew the Aussie sense of humour.

So was this an AGH [Australian General Hospital] you were in, in Cairo or?

Yes, it was a New Zealand hospital actually.

With New Zealand nurses?

Yes and

28:30 British nurses. The Queen Alexandria's [Royal Army] Nursing [Corps] Service or something was in it.

So how was it to see some, you know women for the first time in a long time, well you know?

Well I'd been in the hospital in Alexandria for a few days and - there were no nurses at the casualty clearing station in Tobruk but they were, well I didn't see any, any rate. They may have been there. But I think they were mainly male orderlies and doctors.

29:00 But of course when you get onto the hospital ship there were nurses. And then in the Alexandria hospital I was only there for a coupla days, there were nurses there. And I remember if I can tell ya this - I was, had a bottle one night in bed see and the matron came in and I've got the bottle under the blankets and I didn't take it out. Because she realised I think what was there. But she was a British woman, quite nice. But then the, a couple a

29:30 days up there and then I was put on a train down to Cairo. Picked up at wherever it was, Cairo and taken out to this hospital at Heliopolis. And they said, yes it was a New Zealand hospital but it had a mixture of staff. The British doctor who looked after me, he thought I'd been hit in the leg and he kept

me in bed. And I said, “What the hell am I in bed for?” He said, “You’ve got a wound in the leg.” I said, “Well have a look.” I said, “There’s no wound in the leg.”

30:00 He hadn’t bothered to read the charts. So after that I was let outta bed. And General or is it Brigadier Herring, an Australian, Sir Edmund Herring, he was out here after the war. I think he was a Lieutenant Governor here in Victoria, he used to come in coupla times to see any Australians. It turned out there were only two of us in the hospital. But he was a nice chap and boy he - you know you’d ‘a never known that he was

30:30 a brigadier talking to a coupla lowly lieutenants. But we had Britishers in there, New Zealanders Air Force fellows, Naval fellows. We had one British pilot who’d been shot down and he’d been burnt and he’d he had his goggles and his helmet and he’s burnt above his goggles and the rest of his face. A course he had a scarf around his neck, so that saved him. And every coupla days they take him down to the theatre

31:00 and they’d nick this very pink skin to make it stretch. Any rate when we were all mobile except Fred Young, he couldn’t get outta bed, there was a big Rhodesian pilot on crutches. He used to skite about crashing a 35,000 pound fighter plane and there was this British pilot, myself, Bill Owen I think, a Britisher who had something wrong with his waterworks. Any rate there were about five of us went

31:30 out to the RAF mess in Heliopolis - course we got full as forty cats as you can imagine and we came back in a taxi and we couldn’t get up the stairs to get up to the ward. And fortunately for us there was a sister Walker on duty and she was an Australian. She was one of these Queen Alexandria Nursing Service girls. And she came, she heard the noise downstairs and she came down fortunately for us and she really ticked us off but she led us each back one at a time up the stairs and put us to

32:00 bed. We woulda been in real trouble if we’d ‘a been caught by anybody else.

I’m wondering Alwyn, I mean that was quite a serious injury. Was that a bit of a blow to your morale? Were you depressed about that?

No, I don’t get depressed. No I, it’d happened. I just accepted it. It got better. Sure I had a long while in hospital in [convalescence].

32:30 I was on the convalescent houseboat on the Nile for about six weeks and you know when I’d finished there I needed a holiday. Course we played up for six weeks. We ate well, was in charge of a Jewish doctor from Geelong and we musta given him a hell of a time. But we had a cabin, there were two bunks in the cabin side by side and a bathroom and then on the other side of the

33:00 houseboat there was another two another two beds and we shared the bathroom. And you’d be out, you know after we got there we used to go out every night and we’d go to the Metropolitan nightclub and I was still - my arm in a sling and other fellas were in various stages of getting over their wounds. And we’d we hired a car and the first night the chap driving Stonewall Jackson, he hit something going up

33:30 beside the Nile and the blackout, it was like the inside of a camera you know it was so dark. And he hit something, any rate the car kept going and we got to the nightclub. Came out about three in the morning and we he drove it home and we went out to have a look at it the next day and he’d sort of flattened one side of the car. He musta hit another one on the side. So we took it back to the wog where we’d hired it in Cairo, told him the car was no good and we gave him a pound, told him to get it fixed and he gave us another one.

34:00 So and that was a beautiful car. It was a 1937 Ford V8 coupe type a thing. Beautiful.

Very flash.

Oh it was. But

So tell me about Cairo?

Well it was, it’s a very sleazy place you know.

Lots of brothels?

Oh full of ‘em. There’s a street of brothels. It was called the Birker [Street] in our day, it was called the Wazza in World War I and they’re just

34:30 multi storey buildings of brothels. Smell like a public toilet. And gee you wouldn’t wanna go, well the troops used to go there and god a lot of them got gonorrhoea, I can tell you and worse.

Were they policed at all?

Oh in a way, in a way. I don’t think the medical staff in Cairo had enough personnel to really police them. ‘Cause how can you control what the girls do and where they go.

35:00 And they’re only kids you know. Up further north in Syria we went, I used to go on brothel picket. The officer would have his platoon with him, thirty odd men and you’d be on for 24 hours picket or 12 hours, any rate over the night and the, you’d go on at six and come off at six in the morning. And you’d have to control the cafés and the brothels and all the rest of it.

What was it like going on

35:30 **picket? What did you have to do?**

Well you had to control everybody, so they didn't get outta hand and fight. I had to one night, I was on picket something happened in the Victory Café in a place called Latakia and it was north of Tripoli and they wrecked the Victory Café - the Australians. Absolutely wrecked. When we got down there, God. You know all these chairs were just smashed everything was smashed. Well the fellas had disappeared,

36:00 so we didn't get any of them. But then you'd go to the brothels at midnight, you had to kick all the Australians out. You'd just go and knock on the doors and say, "Aussie, go home", and after that it was the big black troops who, it was their turn to come in. And the, I think the girls used to groan when they arrived because they were big black fellas from South Africa. Senegalese and Moroccans they were.

So you'd go in shifts?

Yes, you'd do a twelve hour shift on

36:30 the picket

No, I mean the soldiers visiting the brothels would go in shifts?

Well they could go up until midnight. If they had leave to go from camp and then they'd have to get out and these other black troops'd go in.

So you would be the one who would have to police that?

Oh yes, we used to kick all the Aussies out at midnight.

Did you get, I mean did they refuse to go sometimes?

Sometimes. Well you got thirty men there. Just out, throw them out.

And what did the girls, make of that, did they?

I dunno, the girls

37:00 they had no money whatsoever you know. They had to do it to make a living.

And when you say they were just kids like?

Only young kids really. Sixteen maybe up to twenty. And the madam was always older of course. She'd been an ex-prostitute I'd say and you'd always, there was always one on the house for the picket officer if he wanted it. Which I never took but I always had a cup a coffee with her. At this particular one in the Maison, I think it was the name of the brothel and she told me she had a daughter

37:30 and she had her at a private school in Cairo. She said she would not be a prostitute. She was quite a nice woman actually. But they had you know, I often wonder what happened to those girls. There was one girl in the other, the Luna I think was, the other brothel in Latakia, she was pregnant and I tell ya, she was very crooked on it too because she didn't know who the father was.

38:00 **Were the troops given instructions about how to prevent VD and?**

Oh yes. There was the, before you left camp there was a blue light tent where you could get a, what they called a blue light outfit which consisted of condoms and in those days French letters, Condy's crystals they used to put up the old penis and so on when they came back. Anything to sort of clean 'em up. I don't think it worked really. Condoms would

38:30 but the other stuff I don't think worked. But even at Puckapunyal when we left on leave that you got once a fortnight. They'd be a big table and if you wanted them you just took them. I must tell a story against my wife that when the leave train left on a Sunday night the un-ex, what do you call it or the unused portion of the condom ration was blown up by

39:00 the troops and they'd tie them all together and they floated it outta the trains like balloons. And Dot could never work out why they were all, the one colour. Till I let her into the secret. So there was a lot a funny things went on you know.

Tape 4

00:30 **So what was this leave story?**

Well the leave trains were pretty wild things and there was a hotel at East Kilmore, I think it was right on the railway line. Of course in those days you pulled the chain on the train if you wanted to stop it. So they'd get to East Kilmore and they'd pull the chain, all the drinkers pile out and the publican musta made a fortune out of it and 'a course if the chaps'd

01:00 keep pulling the chain to stop the driver going off, and you'd finally get back to after leaving at say four o'clock or five o'clock in the afternoon, you'd get back well after midnight to Seymour. But the final leave train, we'd left at about four in the afternoon, well it was hilarious. I think it took us about two hours to get out to the Essendon station and everywhere they were pulling the chain and stopping the

01:30 train and the Essendon station, they got off, they took the chocolate machine off the train, they put it on the cow catcher on the engine, you know they were steam engines in those days, and they pinched the station master's cap, the bell off the platform and 'a course the train eventually took off and we got to East Kilmore and oh God, shemozzle. We got back to Seymour about four in the morning. Any rate, we were all lined up

02:00 the next day. There'd been a complaint from the railways a course and it cost, all cost us 10 shillings each to pay for the damage. But we'd had 10 shillings worth of fun I can tell you. We weren't too good the next day though. But they, that was the worst of them but most leave trains were pretty hectic affairs.

Well I suppose that's what happens when you get a bunch of young men together and?

Yes, yes they're, they were

02:30 out to have any fun they could.

So look back to the Middle East, you weren't short of the company of women but you had to pay for it, is that?

Had to pay for it, yes.

Is that about the?

There was a brothel, an officers' brothel in Alexandria called Mary's House and it was staffed by mostly French officers' wives because they were on the ships, which were incarcerated in the harbour or they were

03:00 in Syria, the troops and it was a very, very classy affair but you got the cheapest drinks in Alexandria up there, so that's where everybody went. And one of my friends, he used to keep the books and when a girl'd take somebody off, he'd put a tick against the names. But look, you ran a hell of a risk with even any of the women and they were supposedly clean but how

03:30 did you know. That was the, it was just a risk if you went with them.

So did you ever take the risk yourself?

No. No, I was engaged no, no. Didn't do it. And they were beautiful looking women some of them. But the, it was a very classy establishment. You know beautiful furnishings and I can't think of the madam's name now but boy she must have been making a fortune. But these women had to do something because

04:00 they were mostly Vichy French officers' wives and the Vichy Navy, there were three or four ships held in Alexandria harbour and they stayed there, once the Vichy went separate to France, they were just kept there. The officers never got off the ship. None of the crew did. And they were there till the end of the war. Now I think there was three or four ships - waste of warships really.

04:30 **So these women would've been stuck in Alexandria with no income?**

No income, that's why they had to work, do something, 'cause there's nothing else to do. The only people making money as far as I could see were the wogs down in the market places where they'd sell stuff to the troops. And they had cafes 'a course, there were various cafes there. There was in Cairo, there was one called Groppi's, well it was a terrace sorta thing and you could sit up on a table,

05:00 have your meal and look at the film at the same time. It was very good. There were other you know little cafes around about. You probably ran a bit of a risk eating in some of them but I never once had a stomach upset and I've eaten in lots a places. Never once had it. You'd have these what they call Gulli-Gulli men with three peas and the half a coconut sorta

05:30 thing and they'd be shuffling them around and you had to, you can say right you put the pea under there. Lift it up, it's not there. Then he'd put it back, lift it up again and it was there again. And Dot and I were back there in '69 and I tried to find one of these fellows - they'd gone out of existence. But they were terrific on the table pushing these things around. And a course you'd have to pay them.

06:00 But there were exhibitions in some of the attached to the brothels where you could go and pay if you wanted to see the act going on and all sorts of things like that. As I say a pretty sleazy sort of city. But we went out to the pyramids of course and to Sir Ladden's [?] tomb out at the, oh big mosque. Went to the museum there,

06:30 had a look at that. I didn't get up to Luxor, which is up in the Valley of the Kings. I never got the chance. And I didn't get to Petra, I think is the other place where you walk through a chasm like that between the cliffs just enough to virtually to get through. I think they can take a horse through it and there's a

city built into the rock behind it. And I didn't get the chance to go there. But

07:00 I've seen it since on television.

Still it sounds like you saw some marvellous sights?

Oh crikey, yes. Well it's the old world you know, really the old world.

And did you have a sense, I mean you were in the same part of Africa that the First World War troops had fought in. Did you get any kinda sense that here we are doing this again? We're following in their footsteps?

Oh not really. There was no fighting in Egypt where the

07:30 World War I troops only fought in Palestine at Beersheba. They were the Light Horse, I've been to Beersheba but the no, there was no actual fighting in Egypt itself. And they didn't get up into Libya like we did. And I don't know if they got into Syria, oh they must have to get up to Beersheba.

But they did see the pyramids?

Oh yes.

And the brothels in Cairo?

They were camped, oh God yes. They were camped around the pyramid area.

08:00 Actually

No, I was just wondering whether you kind of thought about them while you were there?

Oh I suppose we thought about it but I can't you know, really can't remember whether I gave it much thought.

So from here then after you've recovered, you're sent to join your unit?

Yes, I was sent back to the training battalion in Cairo in [Kilo] 89.

08:30 It was a camp in Palestine over the other side of the Suez Canal. Not very far from where we were in the first place and I got there one day and the CO of the camp said to me the next day, he said, "Tomorrow, you're taking a draught of reinforcements and sickies outta hospital and escapees from Greece up to the battalion up in Syria." He said, "They're just about to go into [battle] against the Vichy French." So I said, "Okay", so.

09:00 **Had you known that your battalion were off in Greece while?**

No, oh yes I'd knew they'd gone to Greece. Oh yes.

And had you, did you have any opinions about that campaign?

Well it was one of Churchill's mistakes, one of his many mistakes. They didn't really get into actual hand to hand combat with the Germans. They arrived there toward the end of the time and they mainly suffered from the Stuka dive-bombers.

09:30 And they got off Greece and onto the Costa Rica I think it was a ship and a Stuka sunk it. And a lot of them jumped onto a destroyer, which pulled in alongside but a lot of them got ashore to Crete and they were taken prisoner. Because they were you know one of the last company or battalions to get out.

So the 2/5th lost quite a lot of prisoners, a lot of people?

I think we lost

10:00 about 150 probably more. At least a company, any rate about 150. Actually, it's up there in the book, I can give you the actual numbers I think but.

So Alwyn, I'm wondering while you were convalescing and you're aware they, they're fighting this campaign, what were your feelings about that?

Didn't worry about it. I was drinking John Collins and beer and all the rest of it. Eating good meals. No, I don't think we worried too much about it. Actually while I was still

10:30 convalescent, the troops came back and the chap who got his commission with me, old Jack MacLean, he'd been wounded over there and he'd came back and he was convalescent with me and we shared a cabin. And it was not very good for your health I assure you. The two of us, 'cause you'd be out every night and you'd press the bell behind you your bed about midday when you woke up and this wog steward on board, he gloried in the name of

11:00 F-u-q. And a course he was given the treatment by the Australians. You'd press the button, he'd come along and you'd order a bottle of beer to start the day. Then you'd get up and have a shower and go down for lunch. So that was our day and after that you'd go to the Gezira Club. Those who could swim who weren't bandaged up, they'd swim and the rest of us would sit beside the pool and just drink John

Collins or beer, whatever was on. And I learnt to play bowls

11:30 there. I met a couple of old ladies there who their husbands were British brigadiers and they were up with the forces somewhere. And they said to me, “Have you ever played bowls?” I said, “No.” And I still had my left arm in a sling. They said, “Oh come over to the bowling green.” So I went over there and I learned to play bowls. I used to play with these old ladies for ‘bout three weeks I think, three or four weeks.

Not what you expected to go to North Africa?

Not really

To do?

Not really but they were nice old

12:00 ladies, they’d be you know twenty years or thirty or

So by the time you were posted to Syria the remnants of the 2/5th had returned?

They’d returned, yes. And that’s, I took at lot of them back with me and we went up to Haifa by cattle truck, you know steel cattle trucks on the train. And we lit a fire to heat our billy in the middle of the floor. ‘Cause you couldn’t burn them down, they were all

12:30 steel and we got to Cairo to Haifa and we were quartered up at Mount Carmel. There was a staging camp and in three days I drew three days’ pay for the troops down at the British pay office in Haifa. ‘Cause Mount Carmel was up above the town and I’d get their pay books and I’d get them to sign some sort of a form and I’d go down and draw all the money come back and give it to them and ‘a course they’d go down to the town, they’d drink it and

13:00 go to the brothels and so on. And the last night, the second last night we were there, the British provo martial [provosts: Military Police] rang me up at the camp and he said, “I got one of your fellows down here.” Mickey, somebody or other, can’t think of his other name now”. He said, “He tried to sell a Beretta pistol to one of my military police.” I said, “God, he musta been drunk to even speak to one of your fellows.” Oh he nearly went into orbit ‘a course. ‘Cause the military police were hated, the British ones

13:30 particularly. Any rate this Mickey somebody or other, he’d try to sell this to get some more money. Any rate, he said, “I want him court martialled.” I said, “Well look tomorrow night, we’re going up to the battalion,” I said, “We, he might have his head blown off the following day.” I said, “Forget it.” I said, “I’ll come down and get him.” I said, “Forget it. It’s not worth your trouble.” So I went down and I got him and I ticked him off and he was a little fellow, he used to drive a tram here in Melbourne.

14:00 And any rate the following night we did go up to the battalion. We went to a place called Habeesh [?] and I went out, fortunately the platoon I had up in North Africa and we went by truck from Habeesh [?] during the night to just behind the front line, behind the 2/16th Battalion, who were to do an attack at dawn the next morning across the Damour River

14:30 into the banana groves. So we settled in with them but in the middle of the night ‘a course they left us. But I was walking back to company headquarters just along quite a well defined track and all of a sudden bang, bang, bang all around me about ten mortar bombs. Now I had my tin hat on and most troops had a hessian covering over it to protect them from the heat – course it was like having a barbeque on your head. Hundred and ten to a hundred and twenty every day up there. And I had this moonlight, it must have

15:00 reflected on the steel hat. And all of a sudden bang, so I hit the deck and rolled into the ditch and I crawled along the ditch for a while before I got out again. But the French troops up there, they’d been there for quite a long while and they had everything, all their targets registered. And we’d these cans of white stones everywhere and they were their aiming marks and they’d have them numbered say R-2 or R-3 and so whenever you showed up somewhere they’d look

15:30 at the map reference and put a spot on it. That’s obviously what had happened with this. But the troops were, you know when I got back to the battalion they were sent out to various companies. And I got one fellow, a reinforcement, and he said to me “Sir”, he said, “I’ve never fired a rifle.” I said, “Jesus,” I did say that too. So I said to my Sergeant Les Reed, I said, “You’d better give him a lesson on how to fire the damn thing.” We couldn’t

16:00 fire them and make a noise where we were. So he put him through all the rudiments of firing there. They’re two pressures on the trigger, you take the first pressure and if you fired straight away like that, it throws the rifle off line. Take the first pressure and then you, it’s just a squeeze for the second one and the rifle stays true. And this Alec Farquhar, I’ll never forget him and I said to him, “God, you better learn fast boy because at five o’clock in the morning you’re going to be into it.” Any rate, he got

16:30 a great baptism of fire. But

Do they kick back a lot those rifles?

Oh a little bit, a little bit of a push on you, yes. But that's something you got used to. There was, we had a Boys, what they call a Boys anti-tank rifle. Fired a point 5 bullet, pretty well useless against tanks, but it used to get a butt on it with a rubber, a rubber butt 'bout that thick. Boy that gave you, got a bruise outta that when you fired that.

17:00 But I, the one we had in the platoon we crossed - the 2/16th moved off and the following night we went off and we followed the same track down to the Damour River. We had to climb, we had to turn right there and go up a feature called El Boom [?]. And we went up under fire artillery shells and mortars and so on and I thought well there's no way a self respecting tanker'll come up into this country.

17:30 It was like this. Very up and down. Rocks everywhere, very little vegetation. And the shell'd you know, there were ricochets flying everywhere. Fire cracker night was nothing compared to that. And so I got half way up El Boom [?] and I thought geez there's no good carrying this damn Boys rifle, so I told the chap carrying it, I said, "Look, just leave it on the side of the track and let the quartermaster pick it up as he comes through."

18:00 And a course a few days later we coulda used it 'cause we went down to the coast. But that was by the by, that was and we'd get up the top of El Boom [?], am I going right for you?

Yeah, you're fine.

Get up to the top of El Boom [?], which is quite a climb and I saw a fellow sitting in the light of dawn there up there and I thought gee I know you. So I got up to him and I realised that I'd been in the 2/5th, the 5th Battalion VSA [VSR: Victorian Scottish Regiment] with him and he'd gone to the

18:30 2/14th Battalion and I said, "What the bloody hell are you doing here McAllister?" Hadn't seen him since '39. And he says, "I'm here to show you silly buggers where to go." Because we were relieving the2/14th. He was the intelligence officer but he was just sitting on the rock with all this stuff flying around - still alive, lives down in Brighton. But we sort of re-grouped on that feature

19:00 and then we moved off into the attack and Don Company was on the left of the battalion there, I think there were two, yes there were two companies across the front and one company in the rear. We were on the left in Don Company and my platoon was on the left of Don Company, so there was nobody here other than the enemy. And we started off across this rocky sort of plateau at the time

19:30 and about six to eight hundred yards away there was a French battery firing at us. You could see the shells being loaded, you could virtually them coming out of the barrel. So they were just a bit out of range of our weapons and the CO had a, as far as I know, he had a naval bombardment officer travelling with him because the navy was supporting us up the coast. And there were about six or eight of these

20:00 cruisers and destroyers. There was the [HMAS] Hobart and [HMAS] Perth from the Australian Navy and several British things, and we were getting plastered by these batteries and they were 155mm, which is six inches. And boy when they went off around you, they really rattled you, your head. And we copped a few of these and any rate, all of a sudden these ships they were all lined up ahead, they erupted in clouds of black

20:30 smoke and they hit this battery and we never had another shot fired from it. They just wiped them out. But the, you know the range was probably half a mile which was nothing too. Of course we were within, I would say five hundred or suppose half a mile in from the coast and the battery was another six or eight hundred yards further to the coast. The navy didn't have very far to fire at all. But the

21:00 whole lot of them all opened up at once and it just, they disappeared in clouds of black smoke. I've never actually seen a salvo fired before but boy it was very effective.

Sounds like a really impressive sight?

Oh it was, it really was. Well we were happy about it. But I know

Well I'm glad they didn't hit you instead.

Well, we got a few shots and they were too far away from us, they had the range. See it's very easy on a naval ship to get the range. And they just had the range and

21:30 oh it was you know a gift from heaven, the naval gunners.

And had the French artillery caused many casualties?

Oh yes, yes. They were dynamite with their artillery and their mortars. Their mortars were - I hated mortars, I still do and I did through the war because in a lot of noise you don't hear them. See all they do when they go off they - they're fired by a ballistic cartridge and the charge in the barrel and when they go off it just sounds like

22:00 pop pop pop. And then depending on the range they are, it takes a certain time to get to the target. But you don't hear them. The only thing you hear is just at the final fraction of a second, pshht. And they're gone off. But the, you know to me they're daisy cutters, they kill anything around them. So I've never liked them and I never will. I'm very sorry when I hear the troops are facing mortar fire. Artillery's not so

22:30 bad ‘cause you’re all spread out and they can’t sorta pin point you. But you know they landed all amongst you but your troops are spread out in artillery formation, so that you get very few casualties. But the, after this shooting from this battery we were all a bit shaken up. We got a big shell right amongst ‘bout half a dozen of us and really rattled us and threw stuff everywhere and we were amongst rocks of course and we were thrown.

23:00 **Sorry, go on.**

Go on. We were thrown into the rocks and I had a tin hat on and I had a bruise where I’d hit the rocks with the tin hat and I had a bruise across here from the, you know the harness inside me tin hat, it was there for three weeks. I was cut on the nose, the chin, the knees, the hands where I’d been thrown forward.

And what about the people who copped it with that shell, what happened to them?

Well none of us were, I don’t know how it happened. None of us were wounded. We

23:30 all got cuts from rocks but I suppose the rocks saved us. ‘Cause we were thrown by the blast into the rocks and the ricochets went all around us and over us and nobody was actually wounded.

But you said there were a lot of casualties from that barrage?

In the French.

From the?

The French, oh they’re French casualties. But we were, the whole battalion was being fired at. Now I don’t know what happened in other companies. Like as I say, said to you before,

24:00 you can only see what goes on in your immediate vicinity. You can’t see anything else.

So were there any wounded in your?

No, not in my platoon. And as far as I know not in Don Company until the following day. Now

That’s incredible.

I was called back, my platoon and the, this lunch we had ‘bout three weeks ago was one officer there who heard the order given to me and he told it at the lunch. He said, “I heard this come up the valley. “Tell Mr

24:30 Shilton not to go any further.” And we were called back into a wadi and we then did the rest of the trip up a wadi and we’d, oh God we got to a placed called Araya and ‘a course outta water it was so hot and there was a well there and we were the last company in and I can still see the bucket coming up outta the well and it was just black with mud but we still drank it. And that we had

25:00 to dump all our equipment except our actual fighting equipment. Our haversack, ammunition tin, a bully beef and a packet of biscuits each, and as much ammunition as you could carry. And we started off at about dusk ‘bout seven o’clock and the CO was, thought we’d have a rest there. He was going to give us a rest because we’re absolutely exhausted. Well I was, having been completely unfit for weeks and any rate the

25:30 signal officer reported to me, he said, “I’ve just got two through to brigade headquarters, sir.” He said, “Mac, you are a bloody fool.” He said, “Now we get more orders.” Which we did and Brigadier - God can’t think of his name. Stan Savige, he said, “No”, he told the CO, “No, you had to carry on.” So at dusk we started the descent of the wadi Dacoon [?], which was a thousand feet deep.

26:00 Now we went down on goat tracks. You held on to little stunted bushes and rocks and went across the bottom and up the other side on the goat tracks and so on, very precarious because it was very steep. We got to the other end other side of the thing and we were completely neutered. I’m sure the whole battalion just lay down. Because it was the hardest work I’d done for years. Any rate they gave us a breather there and then

26:30 it was still dark of course then we started our march across or advance, across this plateau to a monastery called Deerma Georgie Georgus. And that was our objective and we got to the monastery just before dawn and we were waiting and we were still, Don Company was still there, A Company on our right, B Company was at the behind us and we

27:00 were waiting there for the order to attack and it was just a fairly shallow wadi across to the monastery and the French had been using this as a lookout for their artillery and so on. Any rate, before we were given the order to move one of my men was hit right between they eyes. Now, obviously a stray bullet because A Company had already engaged some French troops and it musta been a stray bullet from there somewhere. Hit him right between the eyes and of course he was dead

27:30 as a door nail and I had a medical orderly with me, who was incorrigible really, he was a, he’d come out of an orphanage and so on very good medical orderly but he spoke his, you know what he thought. And

I, when I was given the order to attack, I said, “Righto 16 Platoon, move off.” I said, “C’mon Bull.” He said, “No B tells me how to do my B job and everything.” I said, “Bull don’t waste your time, the man’s as dead as a doornail.” Oh nobody tells me how to do his job. Any

28:00 rate, we got to the other side and we did the attack and we didn’t lose any more men. And when I looked around Bull was at the right beside me. But he was an excellent medical orderly and he got a Military Medal and the Silver Star from the Americans up in the Islands. No, he was good but you know discipline. Didn’t matter two hoots to him who it was.

And was that your last battle in the Syria campaign?

No, no oh no.

28:30 No, we settled in around the monastery and

Where were the monks?

I don’t know, never saw them. Never got into the monastery, they were, they musta been there. But the A Company on our right, they’d taken some French artillery all manned by black troops and two or three French officers and they’d lost a couple a men. And I dunno whether they were killed or wounded but they’d had some casualties but

29:00 no, we settled down and we were facing down towards the main road and the sea. And in the middle of the morning we fed ourselves and so on, had a cup a tea. Middle of the morning we were given orders to move down and form a road block on the main road, which we could see down there and we moved down through the end, Narmay [?] village, which was just below us. It was full of WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s and we started to be mortared as we got there we musta been seen but that didn’t

29:30 phase the troops. Chooks, we hadn’t seen fresh food for ages. Grabbed the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, off with their heads and strapped them onto their haversacks and we moved off and we got down to the main road and we had a bit of a fight down there and from the road block ran into a coupla tanks, ran into a heap a troops under the bridge over the road and I didn’t have to do that attack. Jimmy Lees had to do it with his platoon. And he got a few of them. I don’t know how many.

30:00 And he had to go through and then I had to go up on the right to lead my boys up the right of the wadi and out on the right fan out there. And we ran into a tank there and there was a tank on the bridge, which Jimmy Lee’s boys knocked out. The crew were out of it, so he was able to knock them off. The tank that we ran into was only twenty-five to thirty yards away, the crew were in the tank and of course once the shooting started they were in business. And they killed one of my chaps Jack Morris

30:30 and they started to fire at us with the tank gun. Was a 75mm thing you, it was like being under the Sydney Express [highway]. They couldn’t, you can’t depress a tank gun, well I dunno whether you can now but in those day they fired like that, you couldn’t depress it. And if they wanted to fire down, they’d have to get on a bit of a slope down. If they wanted to fire up, they’d have to get on a slope up. And this stuff was going over our heads and boy we high tailed it very quickly to a bit of a

31:00 sunken road beside an orange grove and it was down about three feet I suppose. The wogs had built it up, so you’d get the soil there for the oranges. So we sheltered there and eventually Bill Taylor’s platoon had gone up through and he’d gone up the left of the road and he obviously outflanked them and they pulled out and got outta the way. But Jack Morris, they killed him with machine gun fire. But, so we had to bury him.

And was he a mate?

31:30 Oh well, he was in the platoon. He wasn’t exactly a mate. I had to write to his mother of course. She only lived out here in Mitcham. She wrote back to me. Anybody who was killed, you wrote to their family and told them what had happened. I never pulled any punches. I said, “Look, he was killed instantly”, and that’s the best thing they could hear ‘cause some fellas weren’t you know and you had to say that they were. But

32:00 we were counter-attacked in the afternoon, that’s right and by black troops. The CO who was still up at the monastery, he saw what was happening and he called down the artillery on top of these fellows. I must admit we were called back from our position where we were into the wadi to, you know to fend off this counter attack. And I looked up over the rim and I saw these great big black, they looked like the Harlem Globetrotters coming towards you and I was very glad to see the

32:30 artillery get amongst them. But they got around, some of them got around behind where we were, then went back to our positions and some got around my platoon position. And I heard my Bren guns start up in that section and a couple of the rifles and any rate nothing else happened. And a few minutes later a couple of the villagers came down, it was right on the edge of the village and they intimated that there was up there wounded, so

33:00 Don, dunno the corporal any rate, Don and I went up, he had a Bren gun, I had still had me peashooter and we went up and there was this black fellow. He was a big fellow but he’d been very badly wounded and the villagers were around him and we said out of the way and we had to, we scouted around to see there was nobody else around, so we came back to him and he’d,

33:30 I think the Bren gun must have given him a full burst across that part of his anatomy above his hip, it had just torn it out and you know it's nasty to say it but his inside was just hanging out. And he was a gonna like we could do nothing for him. You couldn't a lifted him up to put him on a stretcher, he would've fallen in half. Any rate, I bent over him to have a look at his wound and I had my pistol out and his eyes went into the back of his head like Bob Hawke used to put his eyes

34:00 back. He thought, I suppose he thought I was going to shoot him. Probably the kindest thing I shoulda done. But I was only having a look at him and I said to Don, Don Lorry his name was. I said to Don "We can't do anything for this fellow" and we intimidated the villagers you know like that. And Don lit a cigarette and put it in his mouth and I'll never forget the look of gratitude on that black face. He really appreciated getting a cigarette.

34:30 But he was a dead man, I mean. Only a short time to go I'd say. To get him he'd have to get to a main hospital and I don't think they could've done anything because he's absolutely torn through there. You know 25 rounds or whatever it was, a Bren gun, it makes a bit of a mess. But we were relieved late in the afternoon by B Company.

Isn't that incredible that a small gesture like

35:00 **a cigarette could mean so much?**

Oh yes, well you know, we knew he was a soldier. He knew we were soldiers and so on and there's a certain amount of respect I suppose between enemies and but I'll never forget that look on his face. I often wonder whether he, oh he woulda died, he couldn'ta lived. But any rate we were relieved later that afternoon and we went back up the wadi and on the way up the French fired an

35:30 air burst artillery at us. It was like being at cracker night with the crackers going off up in the air above your head. And you know stuff was flying all around us. Fortunately, nobody was wounded. They didn't quite get onto us. Say the wadi was there, the shells appeared to be bursting out there and still you'd get a bit of the stuff coming in but nobody was wounded. Fortunately, it was a narrow wadi and that protected us I would think,

36:00 and it took us took us some hours to get back to the battalion up on the hills and we were just told to settle down, settle on the rocks, that's all it was. And we hadn't been there very long and we heard somebody stumbling around in front of us and then one of the sentries challenged him, "Who goes there, where the bloody hell's bloody B Company?" came out of the air. So we said, "Come

36:30 in here, we'll show you where." He was an Australian, he was lost out there and obviously been sent with a message. And

And where were you sheltering?

Oh we were just lying on the ground. There was no shelter, just lying on the ground. Have you got anything there or is that?

No, that's all right.

But during the night somebody came up beside me and a very cultured voice wanted to know where battalion headquarters was and I said, "Quite frankly,

37:00 I don't know." I said, "It's somewhere up the bloody hill", just like that. And one of my troops lying on the ground beside me after he'd gone, he said, "You know, did you see who that was?" I said, "No, didn't have a clue." He said, "Well that was Sir Edmund Herring. Brigadier Herring. That's the chap that used to visit us in Cairo." But he was a gentlemen. He would've known that we were all exhausted and wouldn'ta taken any notice of it. But the following morning we went back to the,

37:30 down to the road block, which by then had been expanded and we took up our former position and then an artillery regiment pulled in right into my position. Well that's the last place you want to be in an artillery position because if they get counter battery fire, you know you cop a bit a flak, plus the noise of the firing our own guns.

So had you worked all this out by this time? Where was the best place to be in the battle?

Oh yes. You never stay

38:00 amongst the artillery because once they start firing and the enemy try and get back onto our guns, it's a very unhealthy place to be. You want to be in front of them if you can be. But we couldn't get any further, so we just went back behind them. Just for temporary. But then there wasn't much after that, it's just we advanced up towards Beirut and so on. Bit of skirmishing, lots of artillery and mortar fire.

38:30 Few wounded actually, my sergeant was killed on the last day. A coupla chaps were wounded but really not a great [deal of] fighting. But in our battalion history you'll see the photograph of some of the troops as they lay down waiting for the artillery fire to finish.

Tape 5

00:31 **I'd like to ask you a little bit about battle stress actually. Could you tell me again about the fellow you saw in North Africa?**

Yes, he'd been in an artillery reconnaissance party and they were obviously shelled and a shell burst and the shell went off and he was right virtually beside where it went off and he was in that vacuum where it sorta goes up and then

01:00 out like that and it sucked it out of his boots, took all of his clothing off and he was black and blue and he was shivering like a leaf. Absolute mess, he was. But as I say I've often wondered how he ever got on after that.

Do you think that people who suffered that kind of shock would recover?

Not entirely. I think they'd jump every time a door shut or something like

01:30 that. I think even I don't worry so much about noise anymore. And yet if I speak to my wife and she doesn't know I'm there she jumps. But I don't and anybody speaks to me like that I just don't.

But what about that mortar sound? That very last, that shsht?

Oh well it's too late then. You don't, haven't got time to think what it's like. No, when it goes off, it's gone off. But they're daisy

02:00 cutters and when we get onto the islands I'll tell you a story about the mortars.

All right. So look towards the end of your campaign in Syria you said your sergeant was killed?

Yeah, on the last day.

How did that happen?

Mortar bomb. Mortar bomb yeah, just virtually cut him to pieces. He took all the blast and the rest of us got out of it. But you know that's just the luck of the draw.

And did you know immediately that?

Oh cripes,

02:30 yes.

Where were you when it happened?

Oh bout eight to ten yards away from him I suppose. You see under artillery and mortar fire you have your troops dispersed. Oh yes, you could see that he was a goner straight away.

What could you see?

Blood and guts everywhere frankly. He was a married man too with a couple a kids and that made me a bit sad to know that. But still as I said before that's the luck of the

03:00 draw. Coulda been anybody. But after that campaign was over as I say the last day or two there wasn't, there was very little other than this artillery and mortar fire. There was no actual you know fighting, the troops they fired at us because they could see us from various vantage points. We went.

Sorry. I just want to ask again about your sergeant. So who then recovers his body and buries

03:30 **it?**

Oh the crew coming behind, the crowds coming behind. Be the quartermaster and his headquarter troops and so on. But when you're in an attack you never stop. If anybody falls you leave them there, you have to, 'cause if everybody stopped to look after a wounded man, you'd never have any attack left and that's why I don't think women would be any good in the front line because they're emotionally fitted

04:00 to stop and help somebody. I've got nothing against women but I don't think they're emotionally fitted for it.

You think they'd stop in an attack to pick up the wounded?

I'm sure they would. Sure they would. It's instinct. But you know

So how were you able to overcome that instinct?

Just by discipline we, that's what we had to do. You just had to leave them.

Was that hard?

Well you can imagine if you had ten people wounded out of thirty and you had another ten fellas stopped to help them -

04:30 no attack. That was the theory.

And was that ever difficult? Was that ever a really difficult thing to press on?

Not for me. No because I, it coulda been me. It's something you just come to expect.

So was there any?

But the medical orderlies are there, they'd come along and they'd patch the fellas up if they can.

So yeah, so you know you're working as a team and that the others and?

Oh yes, it's a team effort, has to be a team effort. You'd never get anywhere

05:00 without teamwork.

So would you hold any kind of a service, was there any kind of ritual that you would go through after a death?

Well depends where you were. We didn't there because we'd moved on, but in the islands you'd, if we buried anybody you couldn't say, you'd say a few words and that was it. But most of the troops if you buried them on the spot the padre would come along

05:30 with his helpers and they'd dig them up and then they'd hold a proper burial service back at the main cemetery. But in the islands, I mean fellas they were just covered up and that was about it. If you could do wounded, oh it was a terrible job to get wounded back. But the Japanese we never worried about them. We buried them because they, if you didn't they'd you know stink the place out.

06:00 But the wounded, we never took any Japanese wounded back, we couldn't get them back. And they never worried about their wounded and that intrigued me a bit. They never worried. I mean we had a fella out in the front of a position one night, he cried out all night and all the next day they never got him, never bothered. And we didn't go out 'cause they mighta booby-trapped him or something. But that's the different psyche - with them life didn't mean anything to them.

06:30 Now where were we?

Oh well we're still in Syria fighting the French. I'm wondering how you felt about fighting the French? I mean you wouldn't have expected to be going to fight French troops?

Not, well of course they, you know the Free French went one way and Vichy French the other in whenever the Germans went in 1940. I think, didn't they go into Paris? And that's when old Petain took his, he took the bottom half of France really and the Germans had the

07:00 top half. No, we didn't, I don't think it worried us. They were treacherous beggars, the French still are in my book. But never happened in our battalion but during the fighting a coupla French officers advanced with a white flag. Well what you'd normally do, you'd send out a few men to escort him in and this was done in a coupla battalions. And they got out towards, near close to him and he'd drop behind a rock and his troops would open fire behind him.

07:30 Well it only happened a coupla times. Anybody that came out with a white flag after that was dropped straight away. But that's why I say they're treacherous. They were mostly white officers, their best troops were the Foreign Legion who were mostly German and they had these Senegalese and Moroccan troops you know, who I suppose were all right but they weren't in the same street as the Foreign Legion.

So did you actually see them come out

08:00 **with a white flag to surrender?**

I didn't, no. Never happened in our battalion. Did happen to a couple of others though. It's reported in the histories.

And did you ever have any, apart from that time with that wounded soldier, did you ever have any other face to face contact with the enemy?

No, not really. No they, we either did them over in plenty of time or if you fronted up to them with a bayonet they'd disappear. Didn't like that.

What do you mean did them over in plenty of time?

Well,

08:30 you shot them before they got close to your position. See we had rifle and Bren guns and Tommy guns.

Oh, so you had a rifle by now?

Oh yes.

Not just your peashooter?

Oh I had my peashooter but I'd picked up a rifle from one of the dead men. You realised pretty quickly that the peashooter's not much good. But I just carried it then but when I went up to look at this wounded Senegalese fella, I just stacked it with

09:00 the section nearby, left it there and just went up with my peashooter. They took those peashooters off us eventually and gave us Smith and Weston 38s, which were not quite as effective.

So I'm just wondering when you're in a rifle platoon and you're all firing on the enemy, can you tell if you hit one?

Sometimes. Sometimes yes. Well, if you

09:30 take a sight on a fellow and he falls over you know you've hit him. You might not know that you're the only one to hit him, 'cause there'd be others firing as well.

Yeah well that's what I'm wondering. How would you know if it was you?

But you never really know. The main thing is that you hit him. Doesn't matter who hits him. There's a, it's the law of the jungle. Kill or be killed, you know that's all it is. And my, I always taught my fellows you fire first

10:00 and ask questions later 'cause you never get a second chance. They used to think I was a bit of a butcher but it was the only way to be. Especially when I went to this militia unit in '43. God poor little kids 18 and 19. Curtin called them up you know in about '42 sometime and he said, "They don't call it conscription." It was a call up of 18 and

10:30 19 year olds. But they musta got a hell of a shock first time because and I suppose we did too but we had a lot of 18 and 19 year olds in our battalion. We had one chap, 14 years old and his voice hadn't quite broken and he wouldn't open his mouth for some months in case they caught him out. But poor old Les, he paid for it because his bones weren't quite set. With all the hard work and you know carrying stuff by the time he died,

11:00 he was bent over right angles. Just ruined his back.

What on earth was he doing there?

Well he volunteered. He musta looked old enough. But yeah

And how did he get caught out?

Well he didn't.

They never found him?

Never found out that he was so young, no. Once his voice broke he was all right. But he had a bit of a squeaky voice at the start.

All right, well look we might leave it there for

11:30 **this morning.**

All right. Okay, we went around Beirut partially through Beirut after the armistice and went up to a place called Latakia, which is up north of Tripoli on the coast and camped there for some weeks. In the, while I was there I was sent back to a signal school in Palestine for 'bout 6 weeks. When I came back they were still at Latakia and I

12:00 went into A Company for three or four weeks and that's when I did my picket duty in the Latakia township. And then one company went up onto the Armenian boarder. Some name starting with Q, which I can't remember. The rest of us stayed around Latakia. That company came back, we then made our way down to Tripoli and up to the Cedars of Lebanon, which is up in the

12:30 mountains. You know half an hour out of Beirut you are in the mountains and it's quite cool. And our battalion headquarters was about 9,000 feet in the hotel and there was one restaurant down the mountain, a little bit called Mont Repo [?]. I was still in A Company and my platoon position was up on the pass over to Baalbek,

13:00 which is full of ruins of course. And that was at 9,850 feet. Another company was up on the ridge above us and they were up over ten thousand. Now when it got toward the end of December we got snow and boy did we get snow, so much so the tents caved in a few times and it musta been, yes I was still in

13:30 A Company for a while, then I was brought back to headquarter company to become the signal officer. And that was late December '41. We stayed around there for a few weeks then we made our way down to Damascus where it was still snow very cold and we were a few miles out of Damascus a place called Dumah

14:00 digging holes and so on.

For what purpose were you digging holes?

Keep us busy I think. Keep us fit. Oh they were supposed to be fortifying. At that time it was thought the Germans might come down through the Caucasus and down through the Bekaa Valley in Syria, so about just after New Year's Eve Frank Rowell who had been my company commander during the Syrian fighting,

14:30 he and I were sent up to the Bekaa Valley to prepare a battalion position in the whole divisional position across the valley in case the Germans did come down. And millions of pounds were spent there. We had tank traps that you know huge tank traps. Barbed wire concrete pill boxes, six foot walls, reinforced areas for mines and all that sorta thing and we had coupla

15:00 hundred wogs working for us and a company of engineers who oversaw everything. And Frank's job and mine was to pick out the company positions. The battalion headquarters and all that sorta thing, which we did and then of course the Germans were defeated at Stalingrad, so that was the finish of it and all those defences were just abandoned. Now the wogs musta got into that later. They woulda taken up every steel picket,

15:30 every bit of barbed wire, anything they could move they would've moved.

So you just left it all there?

Oh well, we couldn't do anything with it. Just left it and walked away. We weren't the only ones, we were only doing one battalion position, there were other groups doing other positions.

What Australians or other nationalities?

Australians, yes. We returned to the Damascus camp and we got a new brigade commander while we were there and then we made

16:00 our way down to Jericho where we stayed for few three or four weeks I think it was. The walls didn't fall down when we walked in. I said that to a parson once. I said, "They didn't fall down when I walked in the place." And we had quite a pleasant time there, we were reviewed by the head wog of Jordan, Amir Abdullah or something. Battalion parade,

16:30 this little runt went past in his Rolls Royce's with all his harem in Rolls Royces and they just went past the parade and blew dust everywhere all over us. And you can imagine the remarks of the troops. But from there we went down to I think it was Hill 89 in Palestine and by then it was February '42. And we were reinforced there.

17:00 First reinforcements we'd really had, you know good reinforcements for a long while. And we prepared there for about oh I suppose about a month and then we were ordered to go to Egypt ready for embarkation to Australia.

Right. Well had you known what had happened, had you known about Pearl Harbour and?

Oh yes. We knew all that. We knew what was happening in the Pacific, oh yes we knew that.

Well how did you know that?

I get

17:30 all the news, signal platoon gets all the news

Yes, well I, yeah

Through the Reuters news you get

Well I guessed that. But I was wondering whether you got any new via letters from home?

Oh well, we probably did but you know it took a month or so for letters to get there. No but we heard all the news. There was no black out on news. And any rate, we went to Port Tewfik, which is on the Suez Canal and we camped there for week or two. And the officers had the run of the

18:00 Kings Own Royal Rifles Mess and you'd go down there every night and have a few beers and you'd go home with a slab of beer under your arm. But it's so damn hot of course you'd never, it affected you. Any rate we were in this mess one night with British officers of course very pukka. Always dressed up for mess in their uniforms and white table clothes, damask

18:30 table clothes and silver service, everything like that.

In the middle of a war zone?

But they were all like that. And we had one man, one officer from the 2/6th Battalion who was a huge fellow. He was known as Bully because he was so big. Bully Hayes and this night Bully got a few too many drinks into him. One of the British majors ticked him off and he said, "I'll show you what to do with your so and so mess." And pulled out his revolver and he went bang, bang, bang through the roof

of the

19:00 tent, this big huge tent. And of course unfortunately for me it was going past my nose. So we had to grab him and take him out and take him back to camp. But he did a good job back here, after the war he became Western District President of the RSL [Returned and Services League]. But he was a big fella. Took a few of us to handle him. But we had quite a pleasant time there really. It was dusty and pretty dirty and then we got onto the

19:30 the [Otranto] for the trip as we were being a signal officer, I'd heard that we were going to Java, 'cause the signal officer saw all the communications really. Any rate we got part way on the trip, I think we were the only battalion on board, I can't quite remember but the man who eventually was our best man, he had been in the merchant marine pre-war and he knew

20:00 the fourth or fifth engineer on board. So before dinner at night we'd go down to his cabin and we'd drink gin and water. Then we'd go up for dinner, which was very nice of course, then after dinner we

Can you remember what you ate?

No. But I can remember after dinner we'd go into the lounge area we'd put in two shillings and for two shillings we'd get sixteen pink gins. So by the time we got to bed we wouldn'ta cared if the ship had been torpedoed. In our cabins

20:30 the CO had said to us before we left "Every officer must take a case of whisky", 'cause he liked whisky. So we took a case and we had I think four of us in the cabin and we had four cases of that cheap stuff now. Starts with A - can't remember. It was only, it's cheap whisky today at about eighteen shillings a bottle and so we got part way on this, we thought to Java. And Java fell.

21:00 The ships, coupla ships in front of us, one of them had the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion on board, they berthed in Java and they virtually went from the ship into the bag. And 'course they finished up on the Burma Railway and all places. And I still know a man who was on the trip and went to the Burma Railway. But the rest of the convoy was diverted to Ceylon. And we had four glorious months

21:30 in Ceylon. Couple of air-raids, nothing to worry us. Actually, before everything was unloaded off our ship there was an air-raid and there was a British warship beside us or near us and they dropped a bomb straight down the funnel and sent it to the bottom. Royal Sovereign, I think it was. And any rate we were taken by truck down to the southern part of Galle, Ceylon, what is it now Sri Lanka

22:00 to Galle, which was the old Portuguese headquarters because they'd been very big in Ceylon and they'd had this huge fort and some of us were quartered in the fort. I wasn't. But there were companies spread around and I was with battalion headquarters on the other side of the bay sorta thing and we dug pits down the tracks from the beach. Filled them with sharpened bamboo spikes and

22:30 camouflaged them and frankly I wouldn't dare walk down there in the dark. And we had a, as we were going down the planes from a raid on Colombo were going back. There was all these bombers up there with the Zeros in and out of them and so on. It was a nice sight but they didn't drop anything on us fortunately. Because they'd dropped all their load any rate. But I didn't see it but I met a man some years

23:00 ago who was there in Ceylon at the time in Colombo and he said a Hurricane fighter, a British fighter had been hit and it was outside the big hotel. Some name starting with N. It was on the lawn. It'd just come down there.

How extraordinary.

Yeah, it was still, he said it was there for sometime before it was, well they had no facilities to fix it any rate. Wish I could think of that hotel.

23:30 **I'm sorry, I can't help you.**

The Galle Face. Galle Face Hotel. It was the only hotel there and all the British went there of course, very expensive. Any rate we, as I say we were around the Galle area for about four months.

So how did you spend the time?

Well I was a signal officer. I had a company at Akuressa, which was about 40 miles out of the area and I used to go on one of the motorcycles, the

24:00 dispatch riders bikes and I'd ride up to see them and I'd ride round to all the companies because they weren't all together, they were spread out a bit. And of course we ran the switchboard to all the companies and you just had to keep an eye on everything to see it was in order.

So you were actually at company headquarters?

At battalion headquarters.

Battalion headquarters, sorry.

Yes, yes that's where we had our switchboard.

Right.

And you'd have some signallers there, others out with the other companies.

Right.

24:30 Place was pretty alive with snakes, things that jumped at you, jumping snakes and the

Are they venomous?

Very. And I was walking up the track to battalion headquarters one day and I saw this snake out in front of me. Looked around for something to kill it with. And it's only a little thing about that long and one of the natives saw me and he said, "No Master no, no." It was one of these jumping snakes. They'd jump at your shadow and that sorta thing.

Oh

But I forget,

25:00 tic-polonga or something they were called but very, very dangerous but that was the closest encounter I ever had with one. But when we first got there, there were no women to be seen. Absolutely no women, except the old women. And I met an engineer officer there, Allan McQueen whose house we rented for a few months back in the '60s. He was going to Queensland

25:30 a geologist he was and I said to him, "Where are all the women?" He said, "Well they've heard the Australian division is coming here and they've sent them all out of town. They'd been told that you're rapists and murderers and God knows what." Any rate we were there a month and they were all back. And they opened up restaurants everywhere or cafes and we were entertained royally. And the planters used to entertain the officers, they were mostly British, the planters. A lot of them with

26:00 Burgher wives. They were a mixture of Portuguese and Selinese or Senegalese or whatever you call them and they were beautiful looking women magnificent. 'Cause you know your most Eurasian women are, and they'd invite you out for lunch, you'd have a beautiful lunch, be shown upstairs to a bedroom, shower and everything, have a siesta, get up and have a shower and come down for afternoon tea. And we did that, I went to three or four

26:30 of these in me time and then we'd have, transport was there, they'd drive us back to camp. But they lived very well those planters. But with our companies, when we realised there was no great danger there a company would go off for two or three days and they'd drive up to Newrailya [?] and all those areas up in the tea areas. Two or three days trip at a time. We went over tea factories of course and I tell ya what used to

27:00 really, not worry me but you'd see these native women sitting down crossed legged with a huge mound of tea on a concrete floor in front of them and they were going like that picking out the stalks. They had a huge mound of tea. And that's the way it was cleaned. I think they got the equivalent of what four pence a day or something. And of course you went out and saw the tea plantations and they supposedly only picked the new leaves but they don't.

27:30 My wife doesn't drink tea and I'd forgotten that, so I sent a box of tea home to her. Everybody else liked it but she didn't. But tea was as scarce as hens teeth here in Australia.

Well that's right it was rationed, wasn't it?

Rationed, yes. Any rate we did that for, as I say we were there for four months 'bout the middle of March to, I think it was the 25th July we left there.

Did you get any sense of the attitude of

28:00 **say the British planters to say the local [Ceylonese] population?**

Just ignored them, typical you know upper crust British. They ignored them. They were their servants. Now the Tamils who'd been kicking up all the fuss recently, they were the rubber they used to tap the rubber trees and they were the labourers. But the, no the British planters I mean they, I doubt if they knew any of the locals. But I, one of our officers

28:30 was very taken with one of the daughters of one of these planters and she was a glorious looking girl. She was about I'd say a quarter caste by then, probably a bit maybe eighth, and she was a glorious looking girl. Well the CO had to tell him too when we were leaving, he said you know, "Just get rid of this." He came home and he married his girlfriend any rate. But I must admit she was magnificent. But the natives told us now as a sig officer,

29:00 I used to see all the signals but the natives told us before I'd even seen the signal what day we were leaving. And boy that was a day. Just shows you what the grape vine is like. Now they would've got it from the shipping in Colombo and we got on we went up there by truck. Went onto Athlone Castle it was the castle line, which used to run from England to South Africa.

Well had you wondered

29:30 **what was going on were you spending four months here, when there's a war on I mean?**

They couldn't get the transport to take us home. They just couldn't get the transport. See the ships are sort of, it's arranged that once they'd got one battalion, they pick up something else. And the ships brought the 7th Division home from the Middle East and they were the first into New Guinea and they were the ones who went over the Kokoda Track. Not the trail, the track.

30:00 **Not entering into that. That's fine.**

But it is the track. It's the Americans put trail on it but it's known as the track. So we were taken onboard the Athlone Castle, which was about a 25,000 toner. Beautiful ship. And I got friendly with the wireless officer because I was sig officer. I went up to the wireless cabin and he said, "Oh I got a spare cabin up here, use that", which I did but no, that was a lovely trip home and we were

30:30 met.

Were you in convoy again?

Oh yes. Yes, we had the [HMAS] Shropshire was one of the ships in the convoy but when we got two or three days out of Fremantle, the [HMAS] Kanimbla joined us. Now that was my brother's ship and they were a merchant cruiser and any rate I thought oh that's Kanimbla. We'd unloaded several fellows into

31:00 a little motor boat from the ship and they were to go to the Kanimbla. And I can still see the little boat was going up and down with the swell and these blokes had to judge when they left our ship when the boat came up, they had to jump, very scary for them. Any rate, we got home in August, we didn't stop anywhere. We came straight to Melbourne.

So you actually saw your brother?

No, I didn't see him. No, I only saw his ship.

31:30 And we got home about the 8th August '42. I rang Dot from Nagambie where we'd gone. We're only there overnight then we were given ten days' leave, and I said, "What day do we get married?" She said, "Wednesday, my arm comes, Thursday, my arm comes out of a sling on Wednesday." Something like that.

Well had you discussed this?

She'd broken her collar bone. No, no

Had you, hadn't discussed this idea of marriage?

We were engaged.

Yes, yes.

32:00 But my mother, she was horrified. She said "You might be killed". I said, "Well Mum, you know you might be too. I've lasted nearly three years, I think I'm right now." Any rate, we were married.

And where were you married?

St Andrews Church, I think it was in Fairfield. I think it was St Andrews. And funnily enough my son rang me some years ago and he said, "Dad, who married you?" I said, "I wouldn't have a clue Peter." And said, "Ask your mother." And she said,

32:30 "Oh Mr Reed." So he said, "Well hold on, I'll put John Reed on to you." That was his son and he'd been going through the church records and he'd seen the name Shilton, and because Peter was very friendly with him. He's the Vet in Bacchus Marsh, Peter and he knew John Reed. He was an ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] reader. Still is actually on the news, and any rate I had a talk with him. But I wouldn't have a clue who married us. But this John Brown, who was the chap, he'd been in the merchant navy, he was our best

33:00 man and he was best man to about three lots because he was the only one not getting married. And we went to Lorne about the only place you could go to that was reasonably warm in August. And we got off you had to go down by train and coach down to Lorne and we got off the coach, and there's two other couples to meet us. "Oh, we heard you were coming." They'd been married a day or two before. And they said, "Fred's down here, he's got a house, he only came down

33:30 yesterday." He's got a house down in around the corner somewhere. So we checked into where we were going, Kalimna I think it was and next morning they all turned up to go for a walk. And they said, "Wait we'll go around and get Fred." So we went around and knocked on the door. Fred came to the door wiping his eyes. Fortunately, he had his pyjamas on. But any rate we said, "C'mon, have a shower, c'mon we're going for a walk", and we did that every morning. And at night we'd go down to the Lorne Hotel where a couple, two

34:00 couples were staying and we'd have dinner there. And the publican must have loved us there. He sold more grog than he knew what to do with.

Well what a great honeymoon you know to be, yeah.

It was. We had a lotta fun. And any rate in the middle of it I was called back to go in the advance party to New Guinea because as signal officer I was always on the advance party because

Look, I'm just intrigued

No go on.

Oh sorry, I didn't want to interrupt you there

No, it's all right.

The wedding, I mean Dorothy did she have

34:30 **a traditional wedding dress?**

She did and she had about three in the house the next day when they found out she was being married. Friend who's still alive, she made her own frock for her own wedding at Scot's College and it was a beautiful frock. And it fitted her like a glove and she also made her a going away outfit. She was a wonderful seamstress. And she's now gone completely blind, she can't see a thing. But so that was there and they had three or four bridesmaid dresses there in no

35:00 time. It was only, her younger sister was her bridesmaid. No it was all woe to go in about five days.

Well that's fascinating, isn't it, in light of the fact that some people take 12 to 18 months to prepare for their wedding?

Saved a hell of a lot of trouble. Saved a lot of trouble. I wouldn'ta cared. I woulda just, she could have come in a frock as far as I was concerned. But we had a good time down there at Lorne and I came, was called back. I went back to Nagambie and they said, "In the morning you're on the train to Singleton."

Well what was Dorothy's reaction to this?

She had to take it. There's no -

35:30 she had no say and any rate I got to Singleton and I sent her a telegram which was quite you know, wrong you know to send telegrams. And I said, "C'mon, come up to Singleton." And I put her into one of the hotels there, it was right on the corner of the main street and she had a room on the corner and the armoured division decided they'd go to Western Australia a couple of days later and for 24 hours they went around this corner. And if you've never known tanks,

36:00 changing gear and trucks and everything, terrible noise. And we were there for few days then we got orders to move to Greta, which is a you know coal mining area. So we had several trucks and no drivers. So Jack Brown who was the best man, I said, "I can't drive a truck, I can ride a motorcycle." He said, "I'll give you a crash course." So he gave me a crash course. The gearbox on that three toner was never the same after that I'll bet.

36:30 But we drove all the trucks to Greta. Got there, set up our camp.

How long did it take you to get to Greta?

Oh only a couple of hours, I think. It wasn't far. And we got there. Of course there was the basis of a camp there and we just had to decide where each company went. And we got a signal to say the battalion was arriving say on a Tuesday night. So I went down as 2IC

37:00 of the advance party, I went down to the AACC [Australian Army Catering Corps] and I said to the officer there, I said, "Look, we've got eight hundred odd men coming in Tuesday night and we want some rations." Well he said, "I'll send you up some mutton carcasses", see. And there were no refrigerators, just the old cool safe method without the water over it, just hessian around the shack. So the meat was put in there and the battalion didn't arrive. By the next

37:30 afternoon it was starting to get a little bit high. So I took a truck and I went down and I said, "Look this meat's going off." I said, "They haven't arrived." I said, "There's [no] signal to say that they're coming." He said, "Well right, we'll come and collect and give it to somebody else." And he said, "Give me a buzz as soon as you hear or know that they're there", and he said, "I'll have a supply of meat. And that's what we did. We waited till they got there and the supply was brought up and of course once the cook set up, they got into it.

38:00 **Do you know what the delay had been?**

No. I know that they went the round about way. They didn't come straight up as you do now to go to Sydney, they went out right out into New South Wales somewhere. I think that was probably the trouble. But you know you never worry 'bout that, it was par for the course. Situation normal, all buggered up that's it really. We were at Greta for about a

38:30 week or so, I suppose and we did exercises out through the hills and so on and we got the women up from Singleton and we put them into the Greta Hotel. I had to scrub the bath out before they could get a bath because it was covered in coal dust and all this sorta thing. The loo was about thee hundred

yards down in the back paddock and they all went down together because you had all these rough miners there and by the look of them they hadn't had a wash in six months. They were just coal

39:00 in-grained you know. Any rate one morning the orders came over through the signals that we were to move to Brisbane that night by train. So I picked up all the gear I knew I couldn't take and I took it into Dot and I said, "Ta-ta, we're off." So we did the train trip to Brisbane. Went to the Ascot Racecourse up there. Got another batch of

39:30 reinforcements and then we, 'bout two days later we marched down to Hamilton Wharf, I think it was, it's on the Brisbane River and we were the first troops in camouflage uniforms, which we'd done ourselves. They had these great big vats of green dye and you'd roll your khaki stuff up, tie it up, throw it into the vat and it'd come out all motley.

Tape 6

00:30 Right, we left Ascot Racecourse and marched down to Hamilton Wharf, which wasn't very far but I can still remember going through the crowds of people on either side of the road and there was not a sound from them. Because I'm sure we were the first troops they'd ever seen in these camouflage uniforms and they realised that you know something was well, they knew it was going on up in New Guinea. That was,

01:00 when was it, October, September '42? And things were getting pretty grim and of course we were armed to the teeth as well.

Right, when you say armed to the teeth what arms were you carrying here?

Everything we had everything. Our mortars. The mortars were carried by a barrel on one man's shoulder. What do they call the thing? The platform it fires from. The base plate was carried on another man's back and the bombs were carried,

01:30 and of course our Bren gunners had a Bren gun and they had magazines and they had number two on the Bren gun with more magazines. The riflemen had their own equipment and we were still armed with or were we? Yes, I think we were still armed with Tommy guns at that time. It wasn't until a bit later on we got the Owen guns. Tommy gun was too heavy. Fired a point 45 bullet and the ammunition was

02:00 just dynamite to carry. And they had a tendency when you fired them to pull to one side. I think it was to the right. I can't quite remember but you had to allow for that when you fired them. They were the drum. Chicago Pianos they called them. And the gangsters used them. But it was after we got up there we got the Owen guns, which were very light you'd throw them in the mud, pick them up and fire them. That's how good they were.

Well who made the Owen guns?

Well, a man called Owen out here designed it. And the

02:30 government they made it in their arms factories by then and he got a thousand pounds. That's all he got out of it. And they were wonderful guns. They looked like a bit of bit of pipe, that's all it was, very poor mechanism on it for safety - safety mechanism very poor. If you put the safety catch on and you happened to stop when you were tired and you dropped it on its butt it'd go brrrrrr. And several fellows were wounded up the legs

03:00 because of that because after one or two things like that you didn't do that. But they were marvellous guns. I could hit a jam tin at thirty yards without looking at it virtually. That's how accurate they were. But over that distance you know they sprayed a bit. They're ideal in the jungle where you didn't get much more of a look than twenty or thirty yards. But any rate we got onto this ship the Maetsuycker, which was a Dutch ship and I was one of the troop deck

03:30 officers and the troops were down.

Well what did that involve being a troop deck [officer]?

Well you had to you control one deck where the troops were. And they were either in hammocks or they'd lay on the mess tables and all that sorta thing. Very, very poor conditions really. And we were only on it for about three or four days. You went up to Milne Bay and I can still [remember] that trip through the Whitsundays. I've never forgotten it. It was beautiful. Magnificent. Well I'd never seen anything like it before.

Can you describe it for us?

Well all these

04:00 beautiful little jewels of islands. Beautiful sunshine and it was warm up there compared to down south. And we wended our way up the Whitsunday passage and eventually went across to Milne Bay and the

entrance to Milne Bay is Samurai Island. And it was just really magnificent. It was you know a jewel in the sea. It really was. And they had a, and I met him

04:30 some years ago, they had a representative, government representative on it. Not a patrol officer, he was something above a patrol officer. Can't think of the term. But we went up then, went up the bay and were unloaded there and we were camped beside a, some American labour battalion I think it was and the first night there a few planes went over and you know in the jungle you can't put

05:00 lights out, you'd see 'em but these Americans they could see our lights, bang no trouble. Get your lights out. Very, very emotional and very jittery people.

Really?

Oh yes. But we didn't, even the company commander said to me, "Do you think we should get 'em into the slit trenches?" I said, "No Harry, don't worry." I said, "The planes are gone." Any rate we didn't.

Well you've come into Milne Bay then after that major

Fight

battle that the

05:30 **Australians had had with the Japanese?**

That's right.

Right.

There were still a few odd Japs out you know in the outskirts but we patrolled out everywhere. We didn't come across any of 'em. The only thing we came across were snakes and things like that. But we, what we did, we worked six hours on and twelve hours off. Either unloading ships, making corduroy roads, unloading the ammunition when it came in by

06:00 truck from the ship and something else we did. Maybe they were the only three things.

Can you tell us a little about how you made corduroy roads?

Just cut down the trees and lay them one beside like that and peg them into the mud with you know wooden pegs every so often. Well you couldn't get around, it was just so muddy. Trucks you know, they'd just bog up above the axels. I didn't have to do any of that fortunately. I

06:30 was never on the corduroying but I was on the road making, normal road making. And you'd take your platoon out and they'd - you'd work and at night you'd have flares, 44 gallon drums full of sand and they'd just pour petrol in them and you'd light them and they'd burn for hours. And you'd be picked up and taken back to camp after 6 hours and you'd be fed of course and you'd have the 12 hours off and then you'd be back. You mightn't go back onto road making.

07:00 You either go down to the ship to unload or you'd go out to the ammunition dump. Now the wharfies in Australia wouldn't load ammunition unless they got danger money. And there was nothing dangerous about ammunition until you armed it of course but you couldn't tell those donkeys. We used to just - 3.7 anti-aircraft shells you'd throw them onto the dump. They were two in a steel box, but all sorts of ammunition. Mortar bombs,

07:30 303 artillery stuff.

So you were supplying troops that were already there or?

No, no this was building up the base. But the 6th Divvy people there eventually left the area. In about December '42, we were told that we were to attack and take Goodenough Island which is sorta north of New Guinea.

But

08:00 **how did you adjust to this climate? I mean you've spent quite a long period in the Middle East?**

You adjust. You had to adjust and it was hot, it was wet and wherever you walked, you virtually walked in mud but you just got used to it. Look it gets back to discipline. You do what you're told. That's what it was.

But you know when you're after six hours working hard making roads, I mean you must have been exhausted?

Well we were but you'd

08:30 go back and have a meal and go to sleep. But reveille at six in the morning didn't matter whether you had been on from midnight or something, still reveille. But I think it was early December we were told we were going to capture Goodenough Island and there was a lot of preparation. As signal officer I had to make sure all the communications would be right. Had to work out you know what you'd do when you got onto the island because it was gonna be a beach landing. Any rate we did all those

09:00 preparations and all of a sudden they said, “No, you’re not going to do it, the 2/12th Battalion’s going to do it, and you will be going to Wau to do an airborne landing at Wau.” Well I didn’t go on that because General Blamey at the end of ’42, he ordered the three AIF Divisions who’d got home 6th, 7th, and 9th. The 8th of course was captured in Malaya.

09:30 He ordered them to divest themselves of the senior officers in every rank, so they took about I suppose eight to ten senior lieutenants from our battalions. This happened in all battalions. They took a couple of captains and a major and we were all promoted one rank.

And what where you, what rank are you at this stage?

I was a lieutenant then.

Right.

So I went up to captain.

Right.

And we were posted to these

10:00 militia battalions of John Curtin’s conscripts and they were all kids of 18 and 19. I was 24 at the time. And I went there and as I say I, we all went onto a ship called the Sharron [?] and taken back to Cairns, then we went on, went down to Brisbane that’s right.

But I suppose you’re going to say that you just accepted this?

Well you had to.

What was your reaction?

I didn’t - none of us wanted to leave our original unit.

10:30 But I mean you just had to do it and the idea was that we’d give them some battle experience because they had absolutely no battle experience at all. And it was about, it must have been just after Christmas I got to this crowd, the 31st Battalion and I know my first bed was under a mango tree and I was cursing these things falling on me all night. ‘Cause they’re lovely things but, and then the most of the Battalion, 31st had been up to Cape York and they

11:00 came back just a day or two after I arrived. So I was introduced to the CO and showed him where his tent was and picked out where the – I had to sort of lay out the camp for them. Which wasn’t, it’s not difficult. You put the battalion headquarters here and the companies all around and I showed him where his tent was and he asked me a few questions. Where I’d been and what I’d done and so on and I hadn’t been there very long

11:30 and I was sent off too. I became 2IC of the company there and the company commander was the, had been the stationmaster at Charters Towers. Everybody knew him as Bob. Absolutely no discipline whatsoever. And of course, they’d got me and I realised after a coupla days the fellas were trickling back into [camp] after reveille. So I thought well, I’ll fix that and we had a company sergeant

12:00 major. I didn’t like him and he didn’t like me. He was an old, older fella and I said to him at ten o’clock one night. I said, “Sar Major, I want a roll call at reveille in the morning.” Well, he went as white as a sheet. ‘Cause he knew they’d all gone home to their wives and girlfriends. And of course we had roll call in the morning and only half the company was there. So they were given a dressing down. Next morning they were all on parade. And that was the end of their

12:30 little holidays at night see. But eventually we got rid of all those older fellows. They were just too old and the older officers who were in the battalion they were

Well when you say older, how old were they?

Middle thirties.

Right.

You were no good in the infantry unless you were young. Let’s face it, your nerves had gone. And yes they’d kept a couple and I know

13:00 Clyde Downs, he was killed in ’45, he was 34 and he was the, I think he was the oldest of them. The rest of us were all you know 24, 25 some younger even. They took a lot of the sergeants out of the AIF and commissioned them and also sent them out. They came a bit later. So I would say in our battalion it was amalgamated with another battalion, the 31st - 51st Battalion it became. I would

13:30 say that 80 percent of the officers came from the 6th 7th and 9th Divisions. Well it had to be, you know to give them the experience. These kids, they’d never been used to any discipline. They’d come, they’d been sent to Canungra for five or six weeks you know, jumping over creeks and up ropes and everything but they’d never been really given any discipline. And I lined these

14:00 fellas up and I said, “Look, when I say I want you to jump, you ask me how high.” I said, “That’s the sort of discipline I want,” and they called me Simon Le Gree. Do you know who Simon Lee Gree was? There’s a thing over there, it shows ya. One of my chaps was an artist there. He’s got this thing Shilton Circus. Simon Le Gree, ringmaster with the whip. Any rate, I got on with

14:30 them very well. They appreciated the fact they knew where they stood with me and they knew if I told them to do something they had to do it.

They’d respect you too because you’d seen action?

Oh a course they did. Yeah they respected and when we got into action you had to show them that you know that you had plenty of guts and you didn’t worry about the enemy even though some times you, as I say before any action I felt like this but once it started I was all right. But

15:00 I had a company commander, he came out of the 9th Division and he was a disgrace to the Division. After old Bob Honeycombe had gone, the stationmaster, and this is when they amalgamated the battalions in April ’43. In the meantime I’d been to the Company Commanders Tactical School and been on leave for about six or eight weeks and when I came I came home I’d a bit a leave of course, up my sleeve. Came home and I got a telegram.

15:30 “Report to the unit at once.” And I didn’t like the adjutant, any rate the fella called Rickard. And I ignored it and I got a telegram a few days later. No reply to my telegram. “Return to unit at once”. Claim priority. So I went into Spencer Street to the Railway Transport Officer, fronted up to him and I knew him. John, I think his name was. I said, “John, you can’t get me back to Cairns yet, can you?” And he said, “No, not for another week.” He said, “I got to get the 9th Division up there.” I

16:00 showed him the telegram and I knew see, so I had another week off. I just cabled back, “Unable to get passage for one week.” So that was that. And I got back, there was no hurry. They’d amalgamated the two battalions and the - I had this chap from the 9th Division who was the company commander and I was the 2IC and he had a girlfriend in a house near the camp. He was never in camp. And if anything happened at night the CO might want to

16:30 see the company commander I’d have to dispatch some coot down to get him outta bed too. He always fortunately took his clothes with him, so he could get dressed and go down. But it was only just outside the camp. Any rate this went on for some weeks and we trained. We did a lot of amphibious training. We’d march into Cairns, get on the American barges and they’d run us out to sea

17:00 during the night and they’d let ya slop around out there to let the young fellas get used to being seasick and before dawn they’d run you into the beach. Half the time they’d drop their barge or what’d they call it? The ramp, they’d drop it you know in four or five feet of water, so you had to jump off and you’d be wet through. They were very itchy these Yanks. They didn’t like getting stuck on the beach because sometimes with the heavy seas the barge would breach.

17:30 It’d go sideways and they’d never get it off, so they were always a bit cautious. Any rate, we did this exercise two or three times, it was a 24 hour exercise and you got off at Trinity Beach, I think it was and you crossed. It was only swamp behind there. Now you know there are resorts everywhere. But you crossed the swamps then you’d climb up the hills. Falling Smiths Lookout very, very steep

18:00 and you’d go across the range to Kuranda and then when you’re given breakfast there by which ever battalion was up there and then we’d go down to the Kamerunga Crossing on the Barron River and march back to Cairns. And the first time I did it, out of 150 troops there was only myself, one platoon commander and 12 troops left. Well they really copped it next morning of course on parade. The second

18:30 time we did a lot better. The third time we just about had a full compliment. But the first man to fall out on the first exercise was the company commander. I don’t think he even made the barges frankly. Oh he had a yellow streak down his back the width of the door. But he went away with us to Dutch New Guinea but we had an air-raid there. He was gone the next morning. He must have had friends back in Australia because I met him when I was down on leave one

19:00 time and he had a very cushy job on one of the headquarters, so he knew somebody and we

So he could just be taken out like that could just?

Well he shouldn’ta gone, he went AWL. And he came back to the company position to me and he said “I’m going back to Australia, Blue” and I said, “Lucky you.” He said, “Yes, I’m getting a lift with the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]. ‘Cause there was an airstrip there and fighter squadron and so on. And we were in a

19:30 static position around the airfield and it was bombed a couple a times and this happened the day before. This is what set him off. He was yellow. So that night we had a bit of a mess going there, a hut had been put up, I said to the acting CO, I said, “Whose taking over C Company, sir?” He said, “Where’s Captain Peak?” I said, “He went back to Australia this morning.” He nearly had a heart attack. And now I left it at that see.

20:00 He rang me the next morning and he said, “You take over the company.” I had it from about August ’45. August ’43 until October ’45. But that fellow, he really shoulda been stood up against the wall and shot.

But after the war he got a job in one of these equipment handling pools and boy if he didn't get some you know

20:30 pocket money outta that because everybody wanted machinery. And he was selling it, he woulda done well. I don't know what's happened to him now, he's probably dead. But any rate, we went to Dutch New Guinea see and

So you'd done that training up in the Cairns area?

Oh yes, oh we trained

Yeah. So how long did you train these young recruits for?

In the Cairns area it must have been about

21:00 three months when they amalgamated the two battalions, 'bout three months.

What was your view, I mean you had volunteered in the AIF and these were young conscripts. I mean did you hold any views about conscription?

Not really. You know we used to call the militia chocos and all that sorta thing but no, these were only kids. They really hadn't had the opportunity

21:30 to do anything. They were mostly Queenslanders. We did get reinforcements from all around Australia eventually, mostly Queenslanders and I got on quite well with them actually. 'Cause I say at 24, I felt like a grandfather after a lot of training, and we trained in Dutch New Guinea quite a lot and it was very, very swampy there. Terrible country.

Well before you got to Dutch New Guinea, I mean did you know

22:00 **that your wife was pregnant? When did you hear about?**

No, no that wasn't till '44.

Oh right, okay.

No '44. Oh no, I was a bit careful before. I think we'd gone out to went to Healesville for a week when I was home on leave once, I think we had a bit too much to drink one night.

Sorry, you're going to Dutch New Guinea. Now how did you get to Dutch New Guinea?

We went on the [HMAS] Canberra from Cairns, which was one of our coastal

22:30 ships and it was about a two to three day trip to Horn Island and the old, the acting CO, he was an old World War I veteran, he wouldn't allow us to use the bar. So we slipped a pound each to the barman and the bar was always open for us. But when the door was open you had to cut a piece outta the smoke to get in, that's what it was like - passive smoking, my God.

23:00 And I didn't smoke, never did. And any rate we had a good trip up there and we were off-loaded at Horn Island and we spent three or four days there catching mud crabs and fishing and so on. Had you know wonderful meals and then we got onto the Maetsuycker again, which we'd been on the battalion, the old battalion had been on and we were taken to Merauke in Dutch New Guinea. That was about a three or four day trip. And we were in Merauke from

23:30 'bout end of June or early July '43 to August '44. And as I say there were one or two air-raids on the airstrip and we patrolled everywhere. We built roads, we built bridges because it was all rice paddies. Terrible country. The only thing was it was full of magpie, geese and the fellas'd go out and they'd shoot the geese and come back and

24:00 they weren't bad eating. And I remember Christmas '43, old Frank Ford who was the Minister for the Army, the government used to send up turkeys and WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s and all that sorta stuff, Christmas puddings and if you weren't in action you had all these things. And this particular day I sent a few of them out to the rice paddies and I said, "Get a few geese", and the boys had put a coupla

24:30 potatoes out in the scrub. There were wild pigs around, put a detonator into them you see, they blow the snout off a pig and they got a seventy pound pig. So that was brought in and the cooks butchered it and we had these geese. CO on the telephone, "Captain Shilton sir, I hear that your company's shot a lot of geese." I said, "We've shot a few, sir." He said, "I want some for the officers' mess tonight." So I, we had plenty of geese. I sent down about a dozen.

25:00 But you know we, that was good except when the cooks got full they'd make jungle juice out of the dried apple and all that sorta stuff.

Well see there was only the one battalion up on Burma?

Now was there another one? Merauke.

Merauke sorry.

I think the 26th Battalion was there too. I

25:30 can't quite remember that. But as I say again you know we had one company across the Merauke River, which was half a mile wide and other companies around. You don't sorta know who's around you. I know that my company was right beside the airstrip. And it was on the platform between the rice paddies where we pitched our tents. And during one air-raid we got a little bit of shrapnel through the tents and I can still

26:00 see there was an American labour battalion there, [SeaBees: US Naval Construction Force], I think they called them. And they were all Negroes and I can still see this big Negro when the bombs are going off and they all went through the scrub, you know they disappeared like lightning and this fellow put his foot into the rice paddy in front of me. And I was just standing up there because we were perfectly safe and he put his foot in and he lost his boot. And I said, "You've left your boot behind soldier." Bugger, well he didn't say bugger,

26:30 he said bit more than that, my boot and he kept going into the scrub. He's probably still going. They had absolutely no guts at all. But

So was that your general opinion of American troops?

Well the black ones were not so good. These were labour troops see, later on I did have a bit of experience with them, they didn't impress me. They're too emotional you know in forward areas,

27:00 they talked too much at night. They'd smoke and they had no discipline. Whereas my fellas, they were scared to smoke at night. Well it draws the enemy in because you can smell it everywhere. And talk, God they wouldn't talk either.

Well, did you encounter many of the enemy when you were on Merauke?

No, very few. Actually we have outposts and

27:30 Alec Rudikoff [?], who had been one of my platoon commanders, he went to A Company and he was sent up to an area on the Eilanden River, which was roughly 240 miles west of Merauke. Now it was just swamp. It was huge river, it was over a mile wide and we were 10 miles up stream and Alec took his platoon up there, he didn't have a full platoon and some Japanese barges came down the river one day and they landed in the northern

28:00 most village. They just pulled into the bank. It's all mud of course and I dunno what they did there but Alec took his troops around through the swamps, they were all sago swamps. Ten yards and you were in sago swamp. And he took them around and he positioned them in around close under the native huts and when the Japs had nearly got back on the barges he opened fire. And created absolute chaos,

28:30 and they were instructed the first man to get hit was the coxswain and there were barges, which were driven from the coxswain's area toward the back of the barge but you know a set up there. And they had the Boys anti-tank rifle and they had Bren guns and they created absolute havoc and of course you can imagine on a barge, it's say eight by eight feet wide, fellas trying to scramble in, get outta the fire and there were, there'd be a mass of swirling

29:00 bodies. Any rate, they eventually drifted away from the bank, they got it away, got the four barges away and Alec called up the Kittyhawk squadron and these barges only drifted down the river with the tide and a coupla Kittyhawks came up and finished them off. But I, they don't know how many he killed but if there were thirty on a barge it was well over a hundred he musta killed. Now he only got a mention in dispatches for that which I think was pretty poor

29:30 really. And then I came up with my company in 'bout April '44 and relieved him and I had the whole company. I had, well by then a course they'd realised it was a bit of a hot spot. I had the whole company: two sections of Vickers guns, a section of mortars, a troop of Bofors guns, which were anti-aircraft things, a RAAF radar station,

30:00 couple of engineers, a baker, a doctor with his orderlies. Oh, it was a very well equipped outpost and I think there were about 200 of us on it. And we had enough firepower to you know blast anything off the face of the earth, but the Japanese never visited us after that Alec Rudikoff's [?] effort. They'd come from away up river somewhere. But they were all through that southern part of Dutch New Guinea. But

30:30 it was all mangroves and if you saw, I haven't got a chart of it but just interlaced mangroves swamps everywhere. And we'd patrol, we had two Dutch minesweepers, they'd come up one at a time for about a week at a time and we'd send a patrol out with them and they'd take a couple of native dug out canoes and they'd go up through the mangroves as far as they could go and then the troops would take the canoes and paddle

31:00 around to see what they could find out. Didn't come to any trouble but at one stage another group on a small ship called the Rosemary with one of my troops on board, they ran into a Jap position on the bank and this Angelo Barbutis [?], who was a Greek, he was up on the bow of the boat and he used every weapon he

31:30 could possibly, when he emptied one he'd pick up another one and eventually they killed him of course.

But he did a terrific job and the Rosemary was able to limp back. It had an engineer officer in charge of it who'd done a bit of sailing. But that was really the only other contact with the Japanese. But we had the planes, they supplied us also by planes as well as these

32:00 minesweepers and usually it was a Dutch Mitchell bomber squadron from Merauke. They'd come up with one or two planes at a time and they'd drop torpedoes of food into the mud see and they'd get no damage, you'd just pull em out of the mud. Had mail and tucker on board and when they'd finish they'd go back across the other side of the river and they always flew up one, the other side of the river before they dropped anything to let us see who they were. Any rate, they'd swooped

32:30 back over the river and just over the top of the huts and nearly lift the roof off the huts, they loved it. And I knew one of the squadron, he's up here in the Heroes club till he died last year. But one day there was a warning - we could see a plane a way up the river. This river was so wide you could see up it for ages and it was just across the river just above the trees. So I sounded the alert, everybody stood to their weapons and

33:00 Bofors gunners are there you know all ready to go and I got onto the phone to the radar officer and I said, "Can you work out what he is?" Because every plane had an identification friend or foe, which was a signal and he said, "No, he says he's too low, I can't pick him up at all." And I knew that you couldn't, the radar was useless if a plane was at low levels. So I thought God what'll I do? And I could hear him coming down over the bank see.

33:30 Very, very low over the trees, well this is where experience comes in. I knew if he dropped any bombs he would blow the plane up and if they were delayed action, they'd go into the mud any rate and they'd do very little damage if any. So I took a punt on it and I'm standing there with the Very pistol to fire the red very light which would've started everybody firing and I took the punt. It was the end of my army career if I'd fired on it and down came a

34:00 Lockheed Hudson with RAAF markings on it, and you know you could virtually shake hands with the crew they were so close. So I felt a bit shitty about this I can tell you. So I went into the brigade intelligence sergeant I had with me old Jock Hollingsworth, he was a wonderful fellow. Scotsman. And I said, "Jock, that's really given me the irritates this sorta thing."

Is that what you said irritates?

No, I didn't say that I said, "The shits."

34:30 Any rate, I sat down and I wrote down a signal to RAAF headquarters and I just detailed what went on. This plane went around again and came back, dropped three torpedoes of food and stuff to us then buzzed off. Any rate, I wrote the signal out and I said what had happened and I said the pilot was an idiot. He didn't have enough brains up in Japanese areas to fly up the other side of the river to let us identify him. And I said, "Your own radar station couldn't

35:00 pick him up." And I said, "He's an absolute idiot." And I said, "I risked the lives of 200 men on this outpost." And I said, "Next time you may not be so lucky." And that's the way I finished it. Any rate I'm relieved of course to go home in August and we went back and the CO said to me, oh what was his name, "Air Commodore Healy wants to see you in at RAAF Headquarters". I said, "Oh okay." So I got a jeep and I went in. Fronted up to him, introduced myself and oh

35:30 he said, "Captain Shilton", he said, "What's the meaning of this?" And he put the signal in front of me and I said, "It means exactly what it says." I said, "The pilot was an idiot," I said, "He didn't have enough brains to fly up the other the other side of the river, which is about over a mile wide to let us identify him." I said, "He oughta know that the planes when they're down low can't be picked up by the radar station." He said, "I was in the crew," he said, "I wasn't the pilot."

36:00 So I said, "Well I said you're bloody lucky to be alive." And we parted good friends. Had a cup a tea and parted. But he realised then. But see that pilot had never, never thought about it. Couldn'ta thought about it. Now he might have been a new rookie from Australia and no experience. As I say we coulda shaken hands with them, they were so close. Any rate we were relieved in the August.

And the whole battalion was relieved?

36:30 Yes, we came back to Australia in August '44.

And this is when you came, you had some leave as well?

Oh yes, we got about three weeks' leave. I had plenty of leave up my sleeve but you only got two or three weeks at a time. And

Well how did you spend that leave?

Well we went, as I say we went up to Healesville and up to the local rubbity [pub] for a week. Met my cousin up there who'd just been married and we, oh we

37:00 you know went around the family we went to coupla shows and so on. My wife tells a story, she went into the Tivoli with me, and they put a tank onto the stage and fired the gun. She said she swears to this

day that I finished on the floor. I don't believe it but I said, "Well that's a natural reaction with tank fire, that you get outta the way." Any rate then we went back a course to Strathpine just north of Brisbane and we were there

37:30 from, I think it was about October I got back there. Yes, beginning of October and we trained until about the middle of December. As well a lot of jungle stuff there, a lot of undergrowth that you could do jungle training in and then we were put onto the, God I can't think of the ship we went onto. Any rate we went up to Bougainville.

38:00 Oh I know the Sea Sniper [?], the American liberty ship.

Tape 7

00:31 Go. Well as I say, we went by the Sea Sniper, which was only a short trip from Cairns to [Brisbane], from Brisbane to Bougainville, it's not very far. No comfort on the liberty ship whatsoever. American troops travel in great discomfort. Even the officers are down

01:00 in a hold with three-tiered bunks everywhere and you might have a hundred men in the hold sorta thing. And they were only gonna give us two meals a day. That's all they give the Americans and there was breakfast and there was tea at night. It was tea, it wasn't dinner. So our OC [Officer Commanding] troops, he said "Look, Australians want three meals a day". So we got three meals a day but it consisted of a slice of bread with butter on it and jam, I think it was that was the lunch.

01:30 And we got to Bougainville to Torokina, that's the big American base there.

Had you been given your orders - what was to be your task?

Didn't know. Didn't know a damn thing, we just knew we were going to Bougainville. And any rate, we had to wait 24 hours to get barges to take us ashore because the Americans were loading for the first landing in the Philippines and I looked across the harbour. There must have been at least a hundred ships in the

02:00 harbour, all sorts of ships and I looked across and I could see the [HMAS] Kanimbla there. So I went up to the bridge and there's a Yankee signaller up there. Now you'd never walk onto the bridge of an Australian or a British ship. Never. But I just walked up and I said, "Listen, can you get a message across to the Kanimbla?" He said, "Sure Bud, what do you want to say?" And I thought my God. So I wrote it out for him and he got on the semaphore lamp and he signalled across and when we landed the next morning both

02:30 my brothers were on shore to see me. Because I didn't realise the [HMAS] Manoora was there as well and Bill had got a message to Jim, so they were both there. And the following morning they were loading Yanks you know, they were going up the scramble nets all the time. There were thousands and thousands of them. And the next morning they came out to the camp for a while and we just had a cup a tea and they had to go back, by the end of that day they'd gone. Whole convoy had gone and I think it was the landing at Lingayen Gulf

03:00 they went to. And Bill told me, he said, "You know the batteries pounded the place before they landed", and he said, "The Yanks always pounded every thing." And he said, "They did one at Iwo Jima or one of those places, Okinawa or something. He said, "They pounded and pounded for ages." But he said, "When the troops landed the Japs were still there because they'd gone into their tunnels." And they lost a lota Yanks. But

03:30 we, that was

So the three of you met up?

I met up

Isn't that fantastic?

Well, I hadn't seen Jim. I didn't see him in August '42 when I came home because he was down at Flinders doing his training and they wouldn't allow him out to come to our wedding. Wouldn't allow him. Bill was one of our ushers. His ship came in of course. Mum saw him for the first time since September '39. It was August '42

04:00 and he'd been everywhere. And Jim was the youngest and he had to wait till he was 17 to join. He hated it though, I dunno why he ever joined. But

Peer pressure?

Well I suppose so, I suppose the two of us were away. But he hated it. Any rate they, they'd gone the next day, by that night the ships had all gone and we tidied up our camp and we'd taken over and I think an American infantry

04:30 regiment's area but they were wasteful as always. They'd bulldozed hundred weights of food into big trenches. Just bulldozed it. Tinned food and everything, [covered] them over. They knocked down every building they had there. The only thing they didn't knock over was the big sign at the entrance to the camp. I think it was the 147th Infantry Regiment. Some number like that, Congressional Medals of Honour, six.

05:00 Distinguished Conduct Medal or whatever they were - Distinguished Service Stars or something 50, Silver Stars 200. But the one that intrigued me was the one at the bottom, Purple Hearts about 1,400. There's only 800 odd men in the battalion 1,400 Purple Hearts. So it meant that most of them musta been wounded twice. Any rate, you know 5 or 6 Congressional Medals of Honour that's 5 or 6 VCs [Victoria Cross] to us.

05:30 But that's why they handed them out, and a friend of mine, Bill Mollard, who had a guard up on the Tablelands in the 9th Division, a major's guard for General MacArthur. And I think they have two companies for the generals' guard and he told me this story oh some years ago now. MacArthur said to him at the end of the inspection, he said, "Major, I don't see any decorations on your

06:00 men." And Bill Mollard said, "No, it's very hard to get them in the Australian Army, sir." Oh he said, "We hand them out to encourage our men." And that's it, they hand them out and that's why you know they're from here to the floor. But where were we?

At Bougainville

Bougainville. We tidied up our camp and we were in tents and so on and this Alec Rudikoff [?] was sent off on a reconnaissance

06:30 patrol up the north-west coast and this was after December, early January '45.

Now you'd had Christmas up there, hadn't you?

Christmas dinner, yes.

Yes. Can you tell us what you had for Christmas dinner?

Oh we had turkeys and chickens and ham and everything. All came up see and as long as you were in an area in the rear, you got it. If you were in the front line, forget it. And the officers always served Christmas dinner to the troops. And that's what we did.

07:00 And there was a ration of beer of course and so on. We had a pretty good set up, I tell you it was very good. But then they sent this patrol up the north-west coast, a reconnaissance patrol it was but Alec being the man he was, he was a very good soldier but he was a hot head. He attacked the Japanese. Of course you're not supposed to do it on a reconnaissance patrol. If you're a fighting patrol, okay that's

07:30 what you go out to do - to fight. The other patrol is to get information. The result of it was that his sergeant was killed and he had a coupla others wounded and he was very badly wounded himself. So much so that he went back to Australia and we never saw him again. But you know he had an ANGAU [Australian New Guinea Administration Unit] officer with him that was a patrol officer from New Guinea and they joined this Australian New Guinea Forces and a couple of the Papuan police

08:00 boys and one of the police boys was able to carry him out. But he was a foolish fellow because he didn't need to do that but that was his nature. But about the middle of January they sent Don Company up the north-west coast, oh we moved up that's right we moved out of Torokina up to a forward base Siki, I think it was and we were just bivouacked around there you know just

08:30 under bushes and so on. Don Company was sent forward and they hit a position called Tsimba Ridge and they tried to take it. I don't know whether they tried very hard but they didn't take it and they, I think they only had one man killed in the whole company during that whole campaign. So that's why I say I don't think they tried very hard. They had a couple of officers who turned out to be no good.

09:00 One was sacked and the other came back and told the CO that he couldn't carry on, so he went back too. And then they got a couple a chaps out of the AIF Divisions and it was much better. And they changed the company commander, actually took my 2IC as a company commander and he was all right. But when Tsimba Ridge couldn't be taken first up, it was a ridge, it just came up like that and it was oh

09:30 about three hundred, four hundred yards long I suppose from the - it was high at the sea end and it tapered down to a saddle, then it went up to the pimple at one end. And we got hold of the pimple all right but they couldn't take the rest of it because it was all Japanese bunkers and they all faced down hill, so to attack up hill was very dangerous and particularly difficult. And they bombed it a coupla times and they shelled it but

10:00 you know when you're under cover that doesn't really matter. So then I was ordered to take my company across the Genga River, which was on one side of Tsimba Ridge and form a bridgehead across the river and the track down to the river had been reconnoitred by one of the sergeants and a coupla my fellows and we went down this track and we went to the crossing point. We went across by just a little

10:30 rubber boat sorta thing pulled by ropes on either end and they had to swim, the first fellas had to swim

across to take the boat across the rope. And there were crocodiles in the river that they swam. Probably a bit of the shelling around might have frightened a lot of the crocs, I don't know. Although the old Roman Catholic padre a few weeks later, he went down to have some water for a shave and looked into the mouth of a crocodile. But any rate, we went across, one of

11:00 my platoons under a 7th Division officer, he went across the night before or afternoon before and he'd had contact with the Japanese as soon as he got across and then we came across the next morning, the other two platoons from Company Headquarters and I settled them around with you know two platoons forward and one in reserve type of thing. And I had a section of mortars with me and I think it was two Vickers machine guns I had. Had an artillery officer

11:30 who couldn't see a damn thing. He became the Minister for Defence in the Fraser Government I think later on, but Jim couldn't fire because you couldn't see. We didn't know where the Japs were, a canopy of trees was right over us. Couldn't use the mortars because you know they would've exploded in the perimeter. So we just had to defend it the first night. Well I should say first. The padre came to me, I was very friendly with the padre, can't understand why because I was a bit of a heathen. And he

12:00 came to me and he said, "Blue, I want to come up with you", he said, "You've had some experience." He said, "I want to experience what the troops put up with." And I said, "Oh well Len, I said you're bloody mad, it's dangerous up there." I said, "Clear it with the CO before I say anything." So he cleared it with Colonel Kelly and he came up with his batman and that first night the Japs got stuck into us. They really did. It's just probing little attacks to see what was there.

12:30 And they made a hell of a noise all night. There was a lot of firing went on and so on and I just call out to everybody, just use your hand grenades because if you fire at night you pinpoint your position. And these, we never moved at night but the Japs always did and they were very adept at it. And so I said, "Just use your hand grenades." So they'd toss them out and the next morning I got the signaller with me I said, "Get onto the quartermaster and tell him I want 200 hand grenades up here very quickly." And I got the

13:00 message back that the war establishment said that I was entitled I think to twenty hand grenades per company per day. I said, "Well you tell him if he wants his barbeque store there in the morning, get the hand grenades up here." I got them. And they came up and the fellows in the carrying party brought them up. They were shelled on the other side of the river. And one chap who died just last year, he never let me forget it that he was on that party. But the padre and his

13:30 batman and of course everybody was told not to move at night. And the weapon pits being right beside the river, they had about 18 inches of water in them, the water table was very high, so nobody got into their pits. When the shooting started they all rolled into their pits. Next morning dawn came, the padre and his batmen were about eight or ten yards away from me, and they were still lying on the ground above the weapon pit. Well the troops told me my language was very picturesque.

14:00 And they said I didn't repeat myself once. And look the old padre's eyes were out like organ stops. And I said, "C'mon Len." I said, "Get back." I said, "This isn't any place for you, you're here to bury us, we're not here to bury you. Now get your gear and get outta this." And I think he was very glad to go. But he got on the other side of the river to the pioneer platoon, which was our back up on the other side commanded by a friend outta the 2/5th Battalion and he said to this Kelso, he

14:30 said, oh he said, "I want an escort back to battalion." He said, "I got papers on me." Kelso had all these years experience, he said, "You're not supposed to have any papers." He said, "Look if the Japs get you", he said "Your batman will [?] [ratch] ya, so don't worry." And sent him off the two of them on their own. They got back all right. But I remained friendly with the old padre until he died. But that was you know funny parts. We were attacked night and day. And we

15:00 really didn't get any sleep, I think it was about a fortnight or so we were there, I can't remember. But I always thought it was seventeen days but what I've read since it wasn't quite seventeen days. But we were wet through all the time. We never had our boots and socks off in all that time. We lived on bully beef and biscuits and we had dried potato and dried onions and rice, and you could make up quite a good meal.

15:30 And my batman would say to me, "Skipper, what do you want today? What do you want today? Bully beef and rice or rice and bully beef?" And I'd say, "I'll leave it to you, Doug." And Doug was scared stiff all the time. He was a runner and of course if I had a message to go out to the platoons, he had to crawl out to them, scared him but he did it all right.

Well that's really being brave, isn't it?

Oh yes, well he knew what he had to do. But he just couldn't help being scared. But we got one hot meal sent up to us by the quartermaster and we'd just finished dishing

16:00 it out to everybody and the Japs attacked us and by the time we got back to it, it was all cold. Any rate it was stew, so it was all right to eat. But they got into our position a coupla times and if you read that citation it'll tell you the story of it.

Well yes, I'm wondering, I wanted to hear about the actual, it's the Porton Beach landing?

Oh that's later. That's the last

Oh this is later?

That's later. This is the Genga River

16:30 bridgehead

Okay, the Genga

The Genga River bridgehead and we held that. It had to be held and the CO didn't quite tell me, don't come back if you don't hold it but he more or less inferred it. Because that allowed the battalion then to continue the advance

Now is this when you won your Military Cross?

Yes.

Well, yes. Well I'm wondering if you could tell us what actually happened?

Well they got into us. They got into us one night actually and a

17:00 couple of warrant officers with swords. They carved up some of the fellows with the swords or one fella did, the other warrant officer was shot by one of the best shots in Queensland. Turned out to be a really first class rifle shot. But they carved up one of my Bren gunners across his shoulder and a number two, he'd had his left hand across the barrel the, what do they call it?

17:30 Not the barrel end, the other end of the gun? Stock, had it over the stock of the gun. And we used, there used to be a second handle on a Bren gun to hold it but it wasn't quite steady enough, so they put their hand over it. Now the sword came down and took half his hand off, carved him around the neck and the shoulder. And he's still, you know getting around with his, did something to his arm and he can't bend it properly. Any rate they were all cleaned up but they got in again the next morning and

18:00 they over ran a section on the perimeter and well it looked very dicey for a while because they're you know in quantity. So being the company commander, I sort of took a punt. This is when I say it's absolute stupidity. I ran across to this area. I reformed the position by dragging some troops from the rear. Reformed it and then

18:30 I launched a counter-attack with the rest of that platoon around on the flank and they came in at the back of the Japs and we cleaned up most of them but oh you know it was touch and go. And that's really why I got the MC [Military Cross] but you can read it if you want to and

Well look

CO's embellished it of course.

It'd be really good if you could read out the citation on

I don't like doing that.

Now it starts off, "Bougainville Island, Tie Off Island, one inch to one mile for outstanding courage and devotion to duty in that on the 25th January [1945], C Company 31/51 Australian Infantry Battalion AIF was given the task of establishing a bridgehead across the Genga River. Captain Shilton,

19:30 OC, C Company quickly established the bridgehead with his company across the Genga River at map reference so and so. The enemy reacted violently and attacked the position on several occasions and on the afternoon of the 29th January 1945, the enemy staged a particularly savage and vigorous attack in strength against this company. The fire was severe and a number of our

20:00 troops were wounded and three killed. Where am I? The enemy broke through one portion of the perimeter and sword cut wounds were inflicted on some of our troops by the fanatical leader of the attack. Captain Shilton, without concern for his own safety dashed over to this sector and quickly re-established the position,

20:30 calmly directing our medium machine gun fire up there to Vickers guns onto enemy automatic weapons, which were firing into the perimeter. Captain Shilton launched a flanking attack with a small reserve, which completely surprised and resulted in the destruction of most of the attacking enemy." This is the bit I don't like reading out. "Captain Shilton's personal conduct and leadership

21:00 was a dominating factor in the bridgehead being held even though his men were tired and suffering from lack of sleep due to constant attack of the enemy, both by day and night. The holding of this bridgehead was essential to enable the battalion to continue the advance across the river. Captain Shilton's courage and calmness under fire and capable leadership under extremely difficult jungle conditions was an

21:30 outstanding example to his men." No, I don't like, didn't like reading that.

Well that was the assessment, wasn't it?

It was, yes. Well, if I hadn't done it, we would've been over run.

I was just going to ask you that.

That's what had happened.

You described it as stupidity.

Absolute stupidity.

Now yes, that was my question.

Absolute stupidity really

Why do you say that,

22:00 **otherwise you would've been totally over run?**

We would have been over run but all these things are done on the spur of the moment. Now, I was the company commander and I knew what I had to do, it was my responsibility. Now any of my platoon commanders coulda done it. Anybody coulda done it but I was the boss.

Well that's the point, isn't it?

The buck stops at the top.

You showed leadership at the time that it was required.

Well I suppose you could call it that, yes.

22:30 But you know when I thought about it later and I didn't know this was coming through till oh when did I hear? May, that was January, I didn't hear anything till May. And I thought, God was I that stupid?

Did you really think that? Did you really think it was stupid?

At the time I thought, "Geez this is madness to do this but we just had to do it." But you know it's all done on the spur of the moment. That's the thing.

Okay, it's all done on the spur of

23:00 **the moment but obviously you're thinking you've had a lot of?**

Training

Experience, yes.

Experience and training

You've had your training and you've had your experience yeah, so it

It's experience, it's yeah

all comes together in those, in that split second?

It's like a pilot of a big aircraft. It doesn't matter if he can fly for years but it's when something goes wrong that his expertise comes to the fore.

Well what I mean, how many of your men did you lose in that action?

I think we had

23:30 in that period, we had about nine killed and probably thirty or forty wounded. We had a lot of wounded. We were shelled of course in the position. We weren't mortared though but we were machine gunned a hell of a lot. And I'd forgotten to say with the padre, I pointed out to him the little palm tree he'd had his backside against all night from the ground up, about that high it was riddled with machine gun fire.

24:00 I said to him, "The good Lord's been looking after you." You know that's how lucky he was. Could have just drilled him everywhere.

Well with the wounded, were they evacuated quickly?

Yes, we got them back across the river as quickly as possible. It was a bit dicey to do it at night because the stretcher parties couldn't work at night. But if they weren't too badly wounded we'd keep them at the perimeter until the next morning.

And what about those who died?

We buried them.

So you buried

24:30 **them there?**

Buried them there. And they were picked up later on by the padre and his helpers. They came along and they dug them up and course you always leave one identity disk on them and you'd keep one identity

disk and when you go back you hand those disks in. But the padre, they leave the second one on the body all the time. And they go back and buried officially back at the

25:00 cemetery back at the base. But sometimes, well one of my men was killed out in the scrub they don't know, two of them they don't know where they'd be, no idea. They're still there.

I just want to return to the action for which you were awarded your Military Cross and you talk about acting on the spur of the moment. What do you actually mean by that?

Well when you see a few Japs starting to run into your position you gotta do

25:30 something about it. If they'd got in, in force we would've had one hell of a fight on our hands. But I'll say this for the troops by then, they'd had you know a few days in action and they were quite, you could say experienced in what went on and they were magnificent. They really didn't panic, they just methodically went about the task of getting rid of them. We had a few in

26:00 but they were soon mopped up.

Did you know how many Japanese you killed in the end?

Oh I don't know I, we never counted, we just buried them at one end of the perimeter. We'd stick them all in with two or three at a time sometimes. No, I never bothered to count them. The signaller I think possibly used to report back how many we'd killed. But you're supposed to as a company commander, you're supposed to put in what they called a Situation Report. A Sit Rep.

26:30 Well I've never done one in my life. I used to rely on the signaller with me, a chap called Ken somebody or other and he was only a kid you know. And I said, "Look, report it back to you, the I Officer [Intelligence Officer] what's happened and so on". And he'd do it all. I never wrote any thing out and reported back. Except the CO rang me one day after this effort and he said to me, "What's it like up there?" I said, "Well it's you know a bloody dangerous

27:00 place." But he said, "Don't you get sick." I said, "I've never been sick in my life, the only thing I get up here is lead poisoning." He went into peels of laughter at the other end. So that's where the humour comes into it see.

Well tell me when did you get the title of "Old Blood and Guts?"

Well the regimental sergeant major told me that's what they called me back at battalion headquarters. That's

27:30 where it came from.

Well why do you think they might have called you that?

Because they knew that we killed everything. Anybody. No, it was the only way to be. You know you had to be absolutely ruthless. And the fellas appreciated it, you know the fact that they knew what to do because they knew the skipper wanted it done. Always called me "Skipper".

Well you know you had to be absolutely

28:00 **ruthless, I mean what does that mean really in terms of what?**

Shoot a Japanese wounded because the Japanese never looked after them. They never did a thing for them. As I say, one, I think I said earlier, the first night one of them was obviously wounded and we could hear him crying out all night. And you heard him all the next day and his cries just got weaker and weaker. Now the Japs could have gone out and got him but they didn't. And I dunno he's probably still there.

28:30 But no, they didn't worry about their dead and after the war was over, after the Porton landing, a couple of our officers went back and they found a Japanese field hospital out in the scrub, there was still all the skeletons in the, on the stretchers. That was their culture, they didn't care. It was an honour to them to die. And if you were wounded you were, you know useless.

29:00 I used to tell my fellas, "Look", I said, "If the Japs get you and you're wounded", I said, "They won't kill you, they might, they stick the bayonet through you a couple a times then they leave you for the ants and the flies to get at." That's what they did.

Well were you, when you went out on operations what were your orders in regards to taking prisoners?

Never took prisoners. We took one and when we were later in the story

29:30 Numa Numa Trail, the CO, it was up in the centre of the island after the Genga River area and he rang me one day and he said, "Blue, I want a prisoner." And I said, "We don't take prisoners in C Company, Sir." And he said, "Well you'll bloody well take one this time." So I said, "Yes, Sir." So I sent one of my platoon commanders out who'd been trained in the 6th Division, he was a professional killer and

What do you mean a professional killer?

Oh he'd kill anything that walked,

30:00 he'd been trained by a professional killer in the 6th Battalion. Any rate, Joe went out, and he came back the next morning and [here] was a prisoner - miserable looking runt of a fellow. He turned out to be a lieutenant and after a coupla good feeds and cigarettes he started talking to the interpreters and Joe, I was just asking Joe about the patrol he went on and he said, "I got two of them." I said, "Where's the second one, Joe?" He said, "Jesus Blue, you only told me to get one, I shot the other bastard."

30:30 So that was the, you know the mind set of everybody really.

Well after the operation where you were awarded your Military Cross, where did you go from there?

Yes, we're still there, went back to over the other side of Tsimba Ridge back to a rest area just 200 yards away and in that period B Company did an attack on this big ridge,

31:00 and we acted as stretcher bearers. Instead of having a few days rest, we had 24 hours. Then we carried stretchers all the next day for the attack. And they got carved up as I said attacking up hill with all these bunkers and everything very dangerous and we did that for that day and the following day the ridge fell. The Japs pulled out of it actually and I was ordered to take the company up further up the coast to relieve another

31:30 company, which had relieved us on the Genga River. And they'd gone along a river and up a bit and this was commanded by my former 2IC and I fronted up to him and said, "Off you go, you've got a few days rest", and that was up near the Gildon River [?]. It was the Genga, the Gildon [?]and something else further along. And we got into this position and we patrolled out in front to see what was there and we ran into a few Nips

32:00 up the track a bit and I had one of my men killed and another one wounded. And he turned, he was one of our best rugby league footballers and of course he was sent back with a wound through the calf, and he was sent back and Joe Kelly, the CO rang me, he said, "Blue, you've had Barton wounded." I said, "Well I didn't have him wounded." I said, "He got in the road." And he said, "He's one of our best footballers." And old Joe used to bet on the team, see they were a very good team. So

32:30 I knew why he was worried about that but old Percy Barton, he was back playing within about three weeks. But I had another fella on the Genga, who got a bullet through the calf and he lost his leg. He got gangrene. And I said to him, as I said to most of the, you know what I call minor wounds, I used to say, "Make it a coupla weeks rest." And then I went back finally to Torokina. We went to see

33:00 him and here's poor old Bill Goodall with his leg off. Still I shouted him to lunch earlier this year in Brisbane.

What about your health? Did you get malaria?

Not until I came home. As long as you took Atebrin everyday, you didn't get malaria. It suppressed it and I did not have one case of malaria in that company in two years. Because I was dynamite that the platoon commander saw that

33:30 every man took his Atebrin tablet. Well you can't have fellas falling down with malaria when they're in the front line, it's you know, it's vital. No, I didn't get it for about, I was home three or four weeks before I got it and I stopped taking Atebrin straight away. But saying, after I'd relieved Don Company and we found these few Nips up there and the CO rang me and he said, "I want you to do a flanking attack inland to find B Company and find one of the

34:00 platoon commanders", who'd instead of going that way had gone that way and took us all day to get around to them. We followed their sig wire around and so on, and we found them about four in the afternoon and I reported back to the CO. I said to him, "We're in B Company area now", and I said, "I got a patrol out following Rigby's sig line, we'll have him in very shortly", which they did. And he said, "Oh you're going onto the Gilman [?]." I had to, the

34:30 orders were that I had to get to the mouth of the Gilman River [?] on the north bank and I said, "No, it's getting a bit late in the afternoon. I'll leave it til the morning." He said "Okay". So we did that the next morning. We had to forward the river and put our sig wires up you know in the trees to get them across and we got into this position. We dug our position and I still had a platoon left on the other side of the river. But behind us on the north bank of river there was a little Japanese, I think it was only a listening

35:00 post, a coupla fellows and I reported to CO, I said, "Well they're here in position." I said, "We've got a small position behind us. He said, "I think you'd better attack it." I said, I knew I was going to be relieved in a couple of days, I thought, no, I don't want to get anymore men killed. I said, "Oh leave it to Ed Ebsley [?] in the morning when he brings his platoon through. If they're still there, he'll clean it up." Ed had had a lot of experience too in the Middle East and any rate shortly after

35:30 that, one of these Nips came along the track. One of my fellas shot him. I said, "Why didn't you let him come in?" He said, "He woulda set off me booby trap." And the other fella during the night obviously disappeared 'cause his mate didn't come back. And the following day we were there for the next day and I got the artillery officer to box our position in which they, you know they'd fire and register all around you in case of attack, they could just say fire 10 rounds gun fire and

36:00 on all these targets. And a chap Dick Skews was a FOO [Forward Observation Officer] and one shell got a bit low and it clipped the tree and of course they explode, I forget the touch fuse or something they call it and it exploded and of course it spewed stuff all over the perimeter and he got a lot of comments about his parentage. But we stayed there all that day. We patrolled up in front of us

36:30 and we found quite a big position up in front of us. Far too big for us to handle, so I just reported that back and Ed, the following, that's right the following morning the, or that night with Ed, the 26th Battalion relief party came in the company commander and another officer and a couple of his troops and they stayed with us over night, and the following morning before his company arrived we were probed by a Japanese

37:00 patrol. And the platoon out on the beach side of this position, they came back by whisper, you know patrol on the way, so I just ordered everybody to get down and I said, "Let them come in close", because that's the way we worked. Let them come in close, you killed more. Any rate, we left it just a little bit too late and the forward scout spotted, obviously spotted some of our positions,

37:30 you know they faded into the ground just like that. It was stupid to open fire because it would've alerted them that there were a lot of troops there. So we didn't fire and the 26th Battalion came through and we handed over to them and we went back.

When you say you went back, you just marched back?

We just marched back along the jungle tracks and of course by then there were no Japs behind us, it was just clear. But I didn't mention

38:00 that when we were on the south side of the Gilman River [?], a man, an officer paraded to me and he said, "I'm so and so", and he said, "I've got two 4.2 mortars" and he said, "I've been sent up to be under your command." And I said, "Well, what do they do, I'd never seen one?" Oh he said, "They fire a 16 pound bomb half a mile or some damn thing." He said, "They kill at 200 yards." I said, "Well great, we're just going up to have a look at the Japanese position,

38:30 just up in front of us a bit", and I said, "Get your signaller and drag his cable along and his phone." So we went up and when we were fired on we stopped. And I said, "Well there's your target up there." It was only about thirty or forty yards in front of us see and the Japs used to dig in under the bowels of the trees. And unless you got a direct hit, you were, you know just wasting ammunition really. But this fellow, when I told him, I said "There's your target", he went as white as that sheet.

39:00 And I said "Look, nothing to it. Get behind a tree", I said, "We do it all the time with our own mortars." We only had 3-inch mortars. God, he dropped the first bomb half a mile up I think. Eventually got back onto target and he said, "What do I do now?" I said, "Give 'em ten rounds." I must admit when they went off close, they just sucked all the oxygen out of the air and the stuff flew everywhere. But it was quite okay behind trees. And well I was relieved the following day

39:30 and he went back too. And as I went through the doors, there was the base area there with the company. I was given a hoy from the side of the track and I saw the sign 101 Heavy Mortar Company and here was the chap out of the 2/5th Battalion who'd been the mortar officer and he was the 2IC of the company. So I fell the company [?] out for a bit of a break and I went over and talked to him and I said to him, "I had one of your fellas up a day or so

40:00 ago." I said, "He was a bit dubious about firing." He said, "Yes, he came back here and he said all those buggers up there are mad." And then he said, "It was his first time in action. The poor kid."

Tape 8

00:30 **Back track a little bit Alwyn and just go over in a bit more detail some of the things you've discussed with Rosemary [Interviewer]. And firstly, you spoke of taking this raw kind of recruit, this mortar man up into the forest and pointing him at the Japanese dugout and saying well give it ten rounds. Did he give it ten rounds?**

Oh he did, oh yes.

And what was the result of that?

Nothing. It gave him a headache probably, that's all. It was just, look it was a bit of fun for us to

01:00 blast a bit of stuff away but I knew the Japs dug in under the bowels of the trees. Unless you got a direct hit, you didn't do any damage. 'Cause, mostly the mortar bombs hit the trees any rate and it'd explode in mid air.

Now it was very different sort of warfare wasn't it to what you'd experienced in Syria and in North Africa?

Oh God, yes. That was the gentlemen's war over there. North Africa was quite different to Syria

because North Africa was flat mainly. Syria was up and down like this. And it was

01:30 hard slog all the time and it was very hot 110 to 120 every day. That was the difference. North Africa was cold, we were there in the winter and it got into the, what comes after winter? Spring, got into the spring ‘cause we were leaving see. But at night it was bitterly cold. And the wind, you know the wind would go straight through you and it was these dust storms

02:00 and so on.

So you’ve said that was a gentlemen’s war. So how would you characterise the war in New Guinea and Bougainville?

Oh that was a case of chasing vermin in my book. I regarded the Japs as vermin.

Did you?

Yes, because they had none of the finer thoughts of you know of anything. They were there

02:30 and they, I suppose a lot of them were conscripted. But they were just fighting machines and they didn’t care. They wanted to die, which to me was stupid. And they’d do their damnedest to die, they’d you know pile into you knowing they had no hope of getting out, you just mowed them down, which gave us great satisfaction.

So I’m getting a sense that the jungle warfare had to be quite close range?

Oh

03:00 yes, it was very close, now it never got, in my experience it never got beyond a company’s strength. You never had a battalion against a battalion. Was all company or got down to platoons and sometimes to sections. There were three sections in a platoon. Sometimes got down to that. See you couldn’t see anything. And quite often you were up to your knees in mud. You were wet and oh

03:30 the Japs, you wouldn’t know from here to Rosemary [Interviewer] whether they were there or not, half the time they’d been behind a bush and you just can’t see in the jungle. And when you got into the kunai grass, which was high reedy stuff, you just had no clue whatsoever. They could lace it with machine gun fire you wouldn’t have a clue where the guns were. And in Syria that was done to some extent by the French in the banana groves. ‘Cause you just can’t

04:00 see through a banana grove.

So that must have put a lot of pressure on you and your troops?

Oh yes. I suppose it did but you know I was never really conscious of pressure frankly. I knew what I was supposed to do. Ordered to do. If you did it well and good, if you couldn’t well you pulled back a bit and had another go later.

I’m getting

04:30 **the sense that you’re one of those lucky people in a way who can respond very well under pressure.**

Obviously, yes.

Yeah.

Because I did that in my work after the war.

But not everybody’s like that.

Oh crikey, no. No, not at all

So what did you do to keep the soldiers together because obviously some of them would’ve suffered from a lot of stress?

Well you’ve got to remember that everybody knows that their mates are looking at them.

05:00 So they suppress their feelings of fear. And I think it’s all done by example. If the fella beside you is doing the right thing, you do it. You might be scared stiff but you still do it, and it’s all a matter of cooperation. And a lot gets down to the officers and NCOs, the Non Commissioned Officers and if they’re good. There is no such thing as a bad trooper. But there are bad officers and NCOs. That’s what it

05:30 gets down to and you know if you’re a bad officer, you’ve got a bad company, that’s what it amounts to.

So I’m just wondering what kinds of opportunities soldiers had to defuse that pressure when they’re in the jungle?

Well in the jungle they wouldn’t have anything until they got back to the little base area, where they were more or less safe. And then, boy you didn’t have any comforts. You know no comforts whatsoever.

06:00 You were wet nearly all the time. And you had to put up with mosquitoes and leeches. Now leeches in my book were worse than the Japanese because they'd crawl up everywhere - your backside, everywhere. And you had to know your friends. If you got a leech in your backside, you had to drop your trousers and they'd put a lighted cigarette on it to get rid of it. But oh, they were a curse because you can't pull them off, otherwise you got a sore forever. But

06:30 the lighted cigarette was the way to get them off. But see they'd drop off the jungle onto you and you couldn't stop them. Mosquitoes, they were bad but I suppose you got used to being bitten. The last year of the war, they used to spray the jungle and the swamps in front of us with DDT [dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane] and kerosene. Now they, the army swears black and blue they never used DDT but they did. And which is dangerous

07:00 stuff but that's you know to stop the mosquitoes breeding. And you didn't see many mosquitoes particularly in Bougainville but they were there of course. But you'd be wading through swamps up to your waist sometimes.

I imagine there must have been a lot of jokes about the leeches?

Oh yes, very rude jokes. Oh yes.

Can you recall one?

No, I can't recall any but I do know that I had to bend over in front of somebody and have somebody

07:30 light, have a lighted cigarette on to one.

Look in my time in the tropics, my biggest fear was that I would get a leech somewhere you really didn't want one.

You had to know your friends in other words.

Absolutely yeah, and so would there be a lot of joking around?

Oh yes but if you're fighting in the jungle you never quite knew where the enemy were, so you had to be

08:00 on the alert all the time. You didn't have a great deal of time for joking. No, that was an intensive sort of war. You know it was from here to the door - that was the whole thing. Whereas in North Africa, you could see for miles, that was the big difference. Syria, you could see for miles too but across the ridges.

So look when in the jungle then when you would encounter Japanese and you're firing

08:30 **at each other, I'm assuming you're quite close together?**

Oh yes, you could be ten or twenty yards away. And what I would do with my company and I suppose they all did it when you hit a Japanese position, you'd try and get around behind it because they always pulled out and moved up behind you again. And that's exactly the way we did it up the coast of Bougainville, we wound them up all the way until the disastrous Porton landing, which was a stupid bit of planning. Not on our part on the brigade and divisional staff, stupid, only because General Blamey was in the area.

So what was the rationale of the Porton landing?

Well they were trying to bring at that time when it was thought of, I was the beach master at the main forward supply base. And my company

09:30 was acting as the security guard for the base but I was the beach master, which means I controlled all the water transport. I controlled all the goods coming in, where they went. The ammunition coming in was stored in various dumps, so that it wasn't all together to be blown up together and generally you know keep everything in order. And then in the May, I'd just seen the brigadier - they

10:00 had a film up there one night. They brought some film up and they were showing it back at this base area, which was a fair way from the front line and the brigadier, I was at the film one of the chaps said to me, "The brigadier wants to see you." So I went out the back of the, it was just an outdoor theatre no buildings and he told me then about the MC [Military Cross]. So I said, "Thank you very much, sir." And went back to the film. And a couple

10:30 of days later we were called up to what they call the battle group conference at our battalion headquarters, which was a bit further up the coast, you know within walking distance. And I went up there with couple of others, when I got there the brigadier was there and the CO was there, headquarter company commander from the RAAF, intelligence officer from artillery people and so on and

11:11 they laid out this plan to land at the Porton Plantation. And the idea was that they would move the forward supply base from Freedy Beach [?], which as it was known up to Porton, which was some miles up the coast, but well in front of the forward troops. Now to me it was a bit ridiculous. They didn't know what was there. The idea was that we would land a company in one of my platoons for a start and then

11:30 another of my platoons would land the next night and another company would come through the jungle

and meet up with us. And a course they couldn't get through because it was all swamp. So we were left there really and it got to the stage where we were running out of ammunition. We were there onshore for about

Could you just talk me through the landing, tell me how it happened?

Well we did a couple back at Freedy Beach, we did a couple of

12:00 rehearsals for the landing which could be seen by the Japanese lookouts on some of the offshore islands obviously. So they knew something was happening, they could see troops on barges and so on. And then we were told the landing was to be made on the morning of the 8th June just before dawn. So everything was prepared, every troop had their ammunition

12:30 but the man in charge of the operation, he wasn't a Middle East veteran and he allowed in the operation fifty rounds per man, which to me was stupid. So all my troops took a hundred and fifty rounds. Put another bandolier across their shoulders. Now one of his platoon commanders or two of them were both Middle East veterans, they also took more ammunition. 'Cause you can live without food but you can't live

13:00 without ammunition. So we boarded these barges about midnight and we arrived off the beach before four o'clock in the morning and what had been disclosed at the briefing was the fact that there were coral reefs opposite the landing beach but the native guide landed us a little bit too far north. If we'd landed in the right place, everything would have been okay but we were landed where all these reefs were. So the

13:30 three or four A Company barges that went in first, they didn't have a shot fired at them. And I was to be the beach master of this area. So I was on the big landing barge with the stores and the spare ammunition and all that sorta stuff, mortars and anti-tank gun and so on and we hit the reef 150 yards off shore, so no hope of getting heavy stuff ashore. We did take a bit of small arms ammunition. But when I stepped off the

14:00 ramp off the barge, I stepped into water up to here. Now in coral reefs you didn't know whether you were going down another six feet or not. Well we got ashore, we were fired on from way up the beach there was a machine gun firing on us with tracer bullets. Well you can see the tracers and you know that between every tracer there's five or six others that you don't see. Any rate, we all got ashore without being hit but then I tried to get the stores off. No good. Because every time we ventured to the

14:30 beach machine guns from each end just laced the beach with fire and the fellas woulda never got through it, so we had about three attempts and couldn't get out there because the way to get it ashore was to have a line of men in the water just passing the gear down the line. In the finish there would have been no men and no gear. So I reported to the man in charge of the operation. I said, "Look, I can't get anything ashore, Clyde, we've just gotta put up with what we've got."

15:00 And we were attacked and attacked and attacked. And I think we were on shore from about four in the morning till about two o'clock two days later, two in the afternoon. And we were running out of ammunition. Very, very low. So much so that the few troops I had around me and sort of in the rear of the position, I'd got them to pass all their

15:30 ammunition forward and I kept one round in my rifle. 'Cause I thought, well the Japs are not going to get me 'cause I knew what they'd do, they'd just run the bayonet through you and leave you. So I thought well if they get close, I'd just put the rifle in my mouth and blow my head off. So I kept one round. And I think most of them did that. But we got down to the stage in the finish where the Japs just pressed in closer and closer and closer. And we had a lot of wounded, a lot of them. And they were being

16:00 brought back to near where I was, and we had a doctor with us and a couple of medical orderlies and I'd put the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] in a little depression but it had three or four very stunted trees beside it, just low trees but they were on the southern side, so there was no relief from the sun for these poor beggars. And I had to go over to the medical orderlies and tell them look you've just got to crawl up to them and give them water all the time. And they were stacking up.

16:30 Any rate, the OC of the operation, he wirelessed back or sent messages back, he had, I think our wireless was blown up, machine gun fire. But we had pigeons, and homing pigeons, so they sent a couple of those back with messages. Asking for an airdrop of ammunition.

Now this is the first mention of pigeons I've heard of in World War II.

Yeah, well we had them with us. Homing pigeons they were and a chap called Wilbur Fig, he was in

17:00 charge of them. He was a signaller and Wilbur left a couple in the cage on shore and he's never forgiven himself. But that was the only way we'd get the messages back. And old Clyde asked for an airdrop and the brigade headquarters said, "No airdrop, you've got enough ammunition." Now these are fellas back in the base, wouldn't have a clue, you know what was going on or we'd struck more troops. They'd said there were very few troops there but you know that was the greatest lot of nonsense of all time.

17:30 And they were troops who'd fought in the Rape of Nanking and they were tough. They were professional soldiers. But see these fellows on brigade, they make the plans and the chap, brigade

major who made the plans from what I'd heard, he'd never seen a shot fired. It's all right to make a plan but it doesn't always work. And as I heard later he'd suggested that they get a cape-off bridge to get us out. Now you can imagine a cape-off bridge across

18:00 the water out to the barges. How many would get along a cape-off bridge? The chaps would be popping them off everywhere. And there was one Japanese position at the end of our landing beach. I wanted to take it but the OC said, "No, we'd lose too many men." We would have lost a few men too but boy it woulda saved a lot of men in the finish if we had taken it. Because it fired right along the landing beach and as the ammunition ran out, I think the Vickers gunners were about the only ones

18:30 to have anything left and one gunner Felix Grasso, he fired his gun and if you listen to the tape on the Porton landing he will say that the gun got so bloody hot they couldn't handle it. And they're water cooled guns and a course if you can't refresh the water, they just keeping heating up and heating up.

Are these the Owens or the Tommies?

No, these are Vickers machine guns.

Vickers, sorry.

Oh no, the Owens and the Bren guns are,

19:00 they're just air cooled. The Bren gun can get too hot and it's a gas propelled thing that sends the bolt back and so on and reloads it but if the barrel gets too hot, it just won't do it. I suppose the bullet gets stuck in it, that's what happens, and our fellows, they had two barrels but they only carried one and if it got too hot they'd just dump it in the bottom of the weapon pit and in the water. Didn't do the barrel any good but it cooled it down. But you know it'd got to

19:30 that stage where old Clyde Downs had to say, "Everybody to the barges." We had to get the wounded out. And there were no stretchers, you just had to man handle them out to the barges. And I don't know how many there were but there a lot. But I'd been wounded just before we left the beach. I'd stood up to direct a Vickers gunner, you know there were some Japs coming on one side of him, crack. And I had a mortar man in the hole with me and

20:00 I said, "Here Slim." Slim O'Donoghue, I said, "Stick a field dressing on that Slim." He said, "God", he said, "I've been hit just as you were hit", and the bullet obviously - he's squatting down beside me in the hole and I was standing up and my wrist must have been just near his mouth and that bullet must have gone through, taken the corner off one of his teeth and gone through my wrist, very lucky fellow. And then I obviously got hit again as I went out to the barges but my arm was so numb I didn't feel it.

20:30 But that's still there. But it was a hell of a job to get the wounded out. One barge got away and I was going for that first and I thought not too many getting on there, so I switched to the centre barge and course it got a hole in the bottom and just filled with water, only wooden decks on it. Plywood and the rest of it was armoured all the way round and on the top. Another, the third barge got stuck

21:00 but it didn't get holed and it was in charge of a Middle East veteran and he eventually went at high tide, he got them to pole it off the reef with their rifles and bayonets. But in the meantime the fellas had got outta that barge and we got out of ours to try and push it off but then we found the hole on the barge, we just couldn't move it, so we left it. And got back in but his fellow's got out and I can still see it and I'll never

21:30 forget it. This Japanese position was thirty yards away and they just enfiladed the side of the barges like that with machine gun fire and they were dropping off like flies. And I can, I could see two or three of my men there. I knew them, a course I could recognise them but they were just killed. But out of that action we had close to thirty killed, which wasn't bad when you think of it. But 106 were admitted

22:00 to the advanced dressing station. Out of which there were about 70 wounded I think, pretty heavy casualties out of 190. And the water transport company with the barges, they lost a coupla men. The field ambulance sergeant was killed and it was a debacle - it really was.

Were you angry that you'd been sent?

Yes. We were angry after we found out you know what it was like. Because I'd been

22:30 to the briefing, and we didn't get any of these warnings. We were told there were very few Japanese there. We weren't warned about the reefs in the area. And we were told, yes a company would join you, it'll come across country but they reconnoitred the company to find out if you could get through. Very bad planning, not our battalion commander's fault at all, he was only getting his orders from brigade. But Tom Blamey, General Blamey was in the area and he was out some miles off

23:00 the beach in a big craft or something and he was watching it. Now I've read all the crap he's written about the bravery of this, that and another and of all the troops. He couldn't have seen them. He just could not have seen them. He was so far out and he might have seen a few odd fellas but he wouldn't of seen what went on.

Well if he had, he would've seen what?

Yes, he would have but you know he's a General. The General doesn't get too close.

23:30 Stupid if he does.

Now I'm just wondering how it was for you watching those mates of yours shot down in the water?

Well I'd seen many men killed you know. It did, I was very sorry, you know moved to see it, let's put it that way. But I was so used to seeing people killed, it just doesn't do much to you. So much so I better not put that on the tape,

24:00 no. After we've finished I'll tell you about the Epworth Hospital. But we were, well one barge got away, they rocked it off the reef and they got away. They must have had forty or fifty on board, which was overloaded. There were a lot of wounded on the barge I was on. A few fellas, how, hadn't been wounded and on Bluey Rita's barge which was stuck and eventually got away, he had 27 wounded on board I think

24:30 but he'd lost a lot a men off the sides. And he got back and he really tore into the brigade major. And General Blamey was there and Blamey said to him, "What did you think of it, Mr Rita?" He said, "Well, I've been to the Middle East, Greece, Crete, Milne Bay and a few other places", he named them and he said "I've been in some stuff ups but this is the biggest stuff up I've ever been in." And the

25:00 brigade major said "You can't speak to the general like that". He said, "He asked me the question and I answered it." He was a very forthright fellow. But Blamey I think probably appreciated the fact that he was told. But it was the greatest stuff up of all time and it need not have happened. If they'd done their reconnaissance first and I think the whole thing was that the headquarters of brigade and division were trying to impress General Blamey.

25:30 Because brigadiers and so on and brigade majors and so on, they get their promotion by being successful, brigade major becomes battalion commander. A brigadier becomes a major general but that's the way it is. Doesn't matter about the poor old troops who get shot down below. But no, that really annoyed me that thing to think

What's your perspective though? That's their perspective. What's your perspective?

26:00 Well you know if it had been planned properly, we wouldn'ta worried. I wouldn'ta worried. But it was planned badly and they had no let out. No line of retreat, they only had these barges, which had barges, which had taken part in the Narvik raid and the Dieppe raid and the D-Day. They were British barges, they were worn out. They were marvellous barges but the motors were worn out. And I know the 2IC

26:30 of the landing craft company, he said, "Look, we've really gotta have a mechanic with a spanner beside them all the time there running." But they were beautiful barges. They were very low silhouette. They were armoured all around and they were very quiet. You could sneak into the beach with them. I think they must have had an underwater exhaust or something. Diesels but no, you could get in very quietly.

And oh look, I was also struck by you saying that you kept back one bullet in your gun just in case you were

27:00 **over run?**

Yeah

Is that the first time in the war when you seriously thought you would be killed?

Yes.

What was it like coming to terms with that? I mean I know you're in the middle of the spur of the moment and everything but?

I didn't sort of think of it, I just kept the bullet in case. Because I knew if the Japs over run you, they just run the bayonet through you.

But is it something that actually went through your mind? What did you say to yourself?

Oh it was my sort of

27:30 let out, I suppose that I thought this might happen and I was going to take precautions. I didn't fancy having a bayonet pushed through me and being left there for the flies and the ants, 'cause that's all they'd do.

And what makes you think that other troops did the same thing? Did you talk about it afterwards?

Well I think anybody with a bit of experience woulda done that. No, I didn't talk to them about that. I think most of us had expended our ammunition by then. There was next to nothing left.

And I'm also curious,

28:00 **how do you deal with the wounded when you're under attack like that? When you're under**

constant attack?

Well you've just got to get the medical orderlies to patch them up and make them as comfortable as possible. If they're badly wounded, too bad, you can't do anything about it. If you can't get them out, they've got to stay there. And I had one fellow on the Genga River, a mortar man who blew his thumb off. Just put his hand over the top of his rifle left hand - blew it off see. And I kept him there for two days. I wouldn't send

28:30 him back because I hoped he'd get gangrene and lose his hand. See he was a SIW [self-inflicted wound] I shoulda had him court martialled but it wasn't worth it. He'd never live that down amongst his fellows. He was a Queenslander and they would all know that he tried to [shoot] himself to get out of it. He was a big boof headed fellow too. But I kept him there for two days. Probably wrong but still.

29:00 **Since you mentioned the Genga River, I wanted to go back to that**

Genga River

a little bit because I. Genga

Genga. G-e-n-g-a

Oh Genga

Genga

Genga. Sorry about that. Yeah, I mean firstly I guess before we do that I'll ask you, are you able to make any comparison between working with militia troops and working with AIF troops because on Bougainville you were with militia.

Militia troops,

29:30 yes. Well they were kids and they'd had you know 12 months in Dutch New Guinea. They were trained as far as we could go without going into battle. Never really went into battle until we got into Bougainville but I was very proud to serve with them. They were very good troops. As I said before there's only bad officers and bad NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers],

30:00 there are no bad troops. If you lead them properly, you don't have any trouble. And if you lead from the front and you know you're fair with them. You got to be fair, you got to be hard but you got to be fair and they respect you for that. And I never had any trouble, they would do anything I asked. And I think that you know gets down to it. They were, look they were kids, they were just as good as the AIF when they had a bit of battle experience under their belts.

30:30 'Cause let's face it first time, first month we were in it, we were very green troops. No, I had no regrets serving with them at all.

Did you question the fact that they were deployed overseas?

No. It was Curtin brought that regulation. I think they could only go as far north as the equator. I think that's what it was.

Perhaps not a great consolation when you're in Bougainville.

Well,

31:00 they didn't get north of the equator there.

But you're south of the equator?

Yes, you're still south of the equator. But I think once they got 'em overseas it didn't matter a damn. They woulda popped them anywhere. You can't stop the, you know the army ordering a ship to take you to so and so. They wouldn't report back to Canberra. But it was interesting in a way that Curtin, the Labour Prime Minister brought in this conscription 'cause it's something that's foreign to the Labour Party to

31:30 do. But I, no look I was quite happy to serve with them and they were just as good as the AIF who'd had a lot more experience of course but they were just as good.

Any trouble makers in your?

Odd one. We always made the troublemakers a forward scout because they didn't last long. It was, well I mean somebody had to be the forward scout, so why not make the troublemaker the forward scout. 'Cause usually they were the first one shot.

32:00 But no, not many at all, not many.

And look I'm also wondering, you know because you're killing at much closer range than you have been in the desert, is there any particular incident where you shot Japanese that stuck in your mind?

No. As I told you before Japanese were vermin in my book. It was just like shooting rats. No, I

32:30 didn't, I never worried about them.

Yeah, no I'm not suggesting that it worried you as such, I'm just wondering if you can relate the circumstances of one of these encounters?

Well you gotta remember these little yellow beggars they'd rush at you yelling "Bansai", which I think means 10,000 deaths for the Emperor or something and they'd rush at you yelling "Bansai", so you'd just fire. And you, it was nothing personal, you hit what you could.

33:00 But I had one Bren gunner, Dave Miles who got a Military Medal on the Genga River and Dave, he told me, he said, "I don't like shooting people." I said, "Well Dave you've got to." He said, "I know", and he did a wonderful job. But every time he fired that gun up something must have rung up in his head. But he was a very good Bren gunner.

Why do you say that?

Well he told me that, he said "He didn't like doing the job that he was doing but he knew he had to do it".

But when you say something rung up in his

33:30 **head?**

Well every, I think every time he fired at somebody it, probably his brain told him I shouldn't be doing this. But he did his job all the time. Never queried it.

And did you ever have to use the bayonet on anyone?

Oh just once or twice but they never waited really. Never waited. I didn't have to use one but others did of course. But no, the Japs usually disappeared when you got that close to them.

34:00 Well in our, what happened to me, yes. That's what happened.

Sorry?

I say that's what happened if we got so close to them they'd disappear usually.

And I mean it sounds as though, I mean from what I know of the campaign of Bougainville there were a lot of Japanese fatalities?

Yes, there were something like I think there were 80,000 there altogether when the Americans took them on,

34:30 and I think when we got there, there were about 30,000 fighting troops. Now a lot of them were sick 'cause they had no medicines or anything and they had a lot of them out growing vegetables in the native gardens because they weren't getting any food and there were probably about 20,000 front line troops there.

Well what I was going to ask is, was there any souveniring off the dead?

Oh yes. There's one on the wall up there.

35:00 A flag. That's one taken off a, it's all written up there Warrant Officer Sonamatsu I think he was. And when I searched him, I took it out of his tunic pocket. He was a Naval Warrant Officer. He was in the 7th Special Naval Landing Party attached to this Japanese Infantry Regiment and I searched him of course, as you always did to get anything back for intelligence and I took out of his pocket a photograph of his

35:30 wife and little son and the little boy was about that high and in a little naval uniform see. And I thought, God, you know here's me with a daughter on the way or child on the way. Any rate, I didn't go too well, I went to Japan years after but one of the fellows went back years later and they dug up his wife, found her, and they met the son. But I couldn't have faced up to her frankly. But

Was this someone

36:00 **you had killed?**

Yes. But he was a, you can see that flag above the desk. It's still got his blood on it. My batman washed it out. We nearly got the bloodstains out of it. But you can see it's in blue and it's a naval flag being in blue and I believe the writing on it and I took it to the little Japanese restaurant in Bank Place years and years ago and I said to one of the girls there "What's this mean?" She said, "They guard the sea." Being Marines,

36:30 see they were Japanese Marines. But they were tough, tough boys.

Did you keep the photo of the wife and child?

No, I sent it, I shoulda kept it you know but I sent it back to the intelligence and that's how this Bill Hughes found out about it because he went to the records and they had it all there, see where he'd come from and so on. And that's how he got to Japan and met the wife.

37:00 **So what other sorts of things would people take?**

Oh they'd knock their gold teeth out and all that sorta thing.

How?

Their half of their handle of their bayonet. Knock 'em out of the dead. The gold wasn't very good.

Sounds very messy.

Oh, not after their dead. Nothing flows after they're dead after a while. No, a number of fellas got teeth. But

37:30 the gold, as I say I don't think the gold was very good at all but they souvenired all sorts of things if they could. We captured a lot of machine guns and so on and we kept them in the company, I think I had eleven Bren guns. Should've had nine but somehow or other we lost a couple in actions, told the quartermaster, so we got a couple of new ones so we had eleven. And we had a few light, Japanese light machine guns. There was plenty of ammunition around

38:00 and so we had a pretty powerful force with the machine guns in the company. But we had one where it was loaded, it had a hopper on the side, a Nambu and you just loaded the rounds into it, just loose all facing one way of course and they dropped into the breech as you fired the gun they just dropped in. But it was subject to many stoppages, so we got rid of that eventually. But the other light machine guns they had were very like ours.

Can this particular fellow

38:30 **who you took the flag from, can you describe the encounter in which he was shot?**

Oh well, he was just rushing into the perimeter and he was coming at me with a rifle and bayonet and a sword in the other, so I was just reloading always, counted I think it was ten rounds you put in your magazine. Yes, ten and I was just reloading and outta the corner of my eye I caught sight of movement and I swung around and I slammed the bolt in just as he

39:00 got to within about ten feet of me and I put a 303 into his middle and I tell you once you've hit anybody with a 303 there, they stay hit. And he fell head first into the weapon pit with me with his legs up over the end of the weapon pit and I used his backside as a rifle rest from then on. But he stank so much a course, you know a dead body everything lets go eventually. He stank, so I was very glad to get rid of him in the finish. But no,

39:30 look it was just like shooting rats, I never thought about it, never, never gave it a thought.

Do you now?

No. My daughter in-law said to me, "Don't you ever regret it?" I said, "No, Helen." I said, "The only regret I have, I didn't shoot a lot more."

Tape 9

00:30 **Yeah, I just wanted to go back and ask again about the Genga River confrontation. Yeah, I must have missed a bit when I was sitting back behind the camera and I'm just wondering could you just take me through it just from your point of view, what you can see and what's prompted you to make the decisions you've made?**

Well I suppose, I mean I was given my orders

01:00 to form a bridgehead. Now a bridgehead is something that's out on it's own as you understand and the CO didn't tell me not to come back if I didn't hold it but he more or less inferred it. So I knew it had to be held and I had a company with me and they were all untried troops except one of the platoon commanders. He'd had experience in the Middle East, the other two hadn't.

01:30 None of the troops had any. 'Cause you, the 2IC, he hadn't had any but he's always left back at the base any rate. And I just had my orders to hold the bridgehead and you know I just did it to the best of my ability. And I had to place the platoons in the various areas and when one had been given a good going over by the Japs, I'd bring the reserve platoon up and change over that sort of thing. But it's all

02:00 based on how things happen, what you do and you know that first night we were there, I thought God these kids who've never had any experience. And I thought Jesus, they'd run all over us but they didn't. They were very good. But see once you got a coupla days under your belt you you're pretty right then. You know what's going on. You realise and I think this is probably

02:30 one of the things that chaps realise after a while, not every bullet that's fired hits you. And there were thousands of bits of metal in those battles in the Middle East flying around us but you know very few men were hit. And once you get used to that fact and realise that, you don't worry too much.

So what was the action that you took that later meant that you were awarded the MC?

That's what I read out

03:00 to you.

I know but I want it in your words.

Well as I say, we were we were virtually being over run. And they broke through on this one section of the perimeter and fellows were hacked with the sword and so on. And well I knew something had to be done, so I just did it. I dashed over to it. It was not far away I suppose here to your car and I dragged a few troops from the reserve platoon and put them back in position

03:30 and then with the rest of that platoon I got them to do this flanking movement around to the rear of the Japs and they attacked them from there, that's how we cleaned them up. But it's instinct and training I suppose that makes you do it. I mean you don't do it from any bravado, I can assure you. It's just something that happens like that. As I said absolute stupidity when you look back on it. But I don't know, I can't

04:00 sort of think I can tell you any more about it other than that. But I'll tell you this much. My troops used to worship me after that. Because they realised that Skipper would do anything they had to do. And it, you know I think I had good discipline in the company because of that. Good discipline

04:30 and loyalty. I don't know, it's just one of those things that happens.

So that obviously meant a lot to them?

Oh cripes. The example means a hell of a lot. And it shows them that the Skipper or the boss has plenty of guts and that's it. If he can do it, we can do it. And I'm sure that's the way it works.

And am I right in thinking that action probably saved

05:00 **a lot of lives?**

Oh yes, it would've. It would've. If they'd been able to get into the perimeter there would have been a bit of carnage I'm sure. But you never know these things unless it happened.

Because I'm just imagining that if I was a soldier and my captain you know, I would want him to be looking out for my life.

Oh yeah, well he would expect it too. But I mean you've got to remember every man's fighting for his own life.

05:30 And he would be on his rifle or his Bren gun or Owen gun and he'd be fighting. He'd make sure that as I told them every shot counts. You don't just fire into the air as you see in some of these movies from Africa where they're walking along firing like this. Absolute nonsense. Waste of ammunition. No, you've got to make every bullet count.

Sorry, do you mean movies from Africa?

Yes, you know some of

06:00 these insurgents that are over there, over the last few years and not the North Africa - in South Africa area, Angola and those places. You see them walking through you know just firing into the air making a lot a noise. Now can I tell you any more, I just can't unless you prompt me, I can't tell you.

Well I'm going to ask you where you were when the war ended?

We were back at base after the Porton

06:30 operation, you know two companies had a great number of troops killed and wounded. And what the other companies had in casualties, the other two rifle companies, the battalion was not really a viable fighting force and the Porton operation finished about the 10th of June I think 10th or 11th of June. All the troops got back and at the end of June, the battalion

07:00 was pulled out of the front line. There just weren't enough fellas to fight, they were taken back to the base at Torokina and we were there when the war finished. And I reckon it was more dangerous there the night war finished because the base troops fired every weapon they had. God knows where they were firing them. But our pioneer officer took, I'd been in hospital because I'd been wounded at Porton. I

07:30 didn't get out till nearly the end of the war but we could see, you know it was on the cards, then we heard about the first atom bomb being dropped and I was to take the company out on a exercise with tanks the next morning just after the second one was dropped and we were going down to the south of the island where things weren't too good. And you know I heard the bomb was dropped and the armistice was called,

08:00 so I got on the phone to the CO, I said, "What about the, this exercise sir?" He said, "Stuff the exercise."

So that was the end of it and the troops were taken down to the beach every day and they lazed around, still discipline in the company. They had to keep their tents clean and clean their weapons and everything but they had a relaxed life. Concert parties, picture nights, all that sorta thing.

And what were your responses to those bombs?

08:30 I was hoping they would have dropped a few more quite frankly.

What about when you heard about the Japanese surrender?

Oh well, we were all very happy about it because we knew we weren't going back into it. But I don't think any of us would've worried had they dropped another half dozen. After all there were plenty of Japanese. But we didn't have any

It's seems as though by this stage you had really learnt to hate.

Oh yes, they were vermin.

09:00 But to call 'em animals was to insult the animals. They didn't behave like normal human beings. I mean I suppose we got to the stage where we didn't think two-hoots about them you know. Kill one of them was the best thing in the world to do.

But I'm just struck by you saying that they didn't behave like normal human beings because it seems to me that to be a soldier in war is not to be a normal human being.

Oh no, I wouldn't say that, no I think

09:30 **I mean it's a very unusual circumstance, isn't it?**

It's a good - troops do feel for the enemy. And they look after the wounded, the enemy wounded but not with the Japanese, you wouldn't give them the time of day because you know we heard what was going on with the 8th Division and what they were doing to them and nobody gave them any quarter whatsoever. But as I say, to call them animals was an insult to the animals.

10:00 I called them vermin really. Maybe, look maybe I was too tough, I don't know.

I don't know if those kinds of judgements are useful to make anyway.

No, they're not really. Any rate, I got out of it. I was happy to get out of it.

I'm sure you were yeah.

I'll tell you, I missed it though when I came home.

Did you? How was it when you came home?

I didn't come home till about the first week in October and I could've gone with

10:30 the [British Commonwealth] Occupation Force to Japan but being married and having a child, which I hadn't seen, I thought no, I'd better go home. So, I had been overseas for four years out of the six, I'd so many points I could come home in the first group and the battalion was taken to Rabaul on my brother's ship, actually the Kanimbla and I went down onto the Kanimbla and I saw him of course. We had a couple a drinks up in the canteen and then they went off. He didn't come home till

11:00 about the middle of '46 'cause he stayed on board, he was a, by then a diesel engineer. And they couldn't get people to stay aboard, so he stayed. He had nothing to come home to. So I went home. We came home on the Taroona and we went to Brisbane and we trained it down to Melbourne and I was home for three weeks and I got utterly bored. Absolutely bored stiff 'cause I'd been used to being so active for so long.

11:30 I had nothing to do and we didn't have a house. We lived with my mother and I thought I've got to go back to work. So I went into the office one day and I saw one of the partners and I said "Mr McColl, I'm fed up with being home". I thought I was going to have three months' holiday mind you. Three weeks I had. So I said, "But I haven't got a suit." He said, "I'll get you a suit." So he rang up Snows Menswear in Flinders Street. He knew the secretary and I was sent straight around. They measured me

12:00 for a suit and I had it about a week later. I went back to work. Been back at work for three weeks, flop with malaria and I had that till February '49. I used to get it every coupla months. And then eventually it, they knocked it out of me but oh they gave me some big trouble with pills. Gave me blackouts and all sorts of things. Double dosing and I eventually got rid of it.

Was it quite strange to be home?

It was yes, quite different.

12:30 Especially when you've got a screaming kid there in the room with you.

Was that more stressful than the war?

I think it was yes, ‘cause it’d scream in the middle of the night, something would have to be done for it. No but I got used to it. Wendy was

What were the things that you found odd about being home? What can you talk about that sense of?

Oh I suppose it’s, you know you were living with women and so on and you’re [parents] expected you, my mother fussing over me

13:00 all the time. I said, “Forget about it Mum, I don’t need fussing over.” And you’re seeing all the people you knew beforehand and of course a lot of my friends had been killed. A lot of my school friends, most of them killed in the air force. So you missed those in a way but oh Dot and I used to go out but and my father-in-law sold us a house very cheaply. He was a

13:30 builder but we couldn’t get into it for I suppose about 9 months. But we couldn’t do anything, see there was nothing to do. I used to look after my father’s garden and so on. He had quite a big area but other than that you know, I got fed up with doing nothing.

And what about your little daughter?

Well she grew up. She was only, when I got home she was only five months old. She was a sickly little girl because

14:00 Dot had a pretty bad confinement. I suppose she knew that at that time that I was in action and Wendy was born what, on the 16th of May and she got a telegram about the 10th of June to say I’d been wounded, so you know it effected the milk supply and all you know what happens to woman. And I think that affected the child and she was a sickly girl for quite some time. She’s now married, a farmer and she does

14:30 anything. Good as gold. But she’s fifty eight.

And when did you hear about Wendy’s birth? After Porton or before?

Oh, yes after Porton. Wait a minute, did I? No, I think I heard just before Porton. She was born on the 16th of May, that’s right and Porton didn’t [happen until the] 8th of June. I would’ve heard just before Porton. Telegrams, you know we used to get telegrams.

15:00 **And did that cross you mind as you were sitting there in the dunes thinking you were going to be killed?**

Not really, no that’s negative thinking to do that. Always think you’re going to get out of it. I, you know I would’ve been very sorry if I had been killed and she was left with the child on her own but no, it didn’t sort of worry me. I didn’t think I was going to be killed any rate. That was

15:30 my theory.

Except for that moment on Porton where you left yourself one bullet, that’s what I’m referring to.

Oh well, if we hadn’t, if the barges hadn’t come in at the time they had we were goners. We really were and my old mate Bluey Rita, who was in the action with me, and he came back. He was up in one of the forward platoons and he came back just before we went to the barges and I just held my arm up to him and showed the field dressing. He said, “You B.”

16:00 He said, “I thought you and I were invincible.” He said, “You’ve gone and broken the cycle.” But mind you this man had been wounded five times during the war, so he’d broken the cycle.

And I’m wondering I mean you hadn’t known Dorothy very well when you got married and then suddenly you’d come back and?

I’ve known her since she was about 14.

Oh, had you?

Oh, yes.

Oh it’s just that you spoke of having a very quick?

It was, you know one of these shotgun weddings sorta thing. Five days but the gestation period was about two and a half years.

Oh so you did know her

16:30 **quite well?**

Oh yes, we were at school.

Nevertheless, you’d been apart now for some years and you’d been having this very intense experience?

Two, yes we were apart for two years before we were married. Just over two years.

Were you able to communicate with her about the war?

Oh yes, I didn't tell her very much. That only worried her actually. Worries her now if I talk about it. I'm reminded the war's over. But you can't forget it, let's face it you can't forget it.

So who

17:00 **do you talk to about the war?**

Well I go to lunch every Friday with a group up here at the Toorak RSL, the Hero's Club they call it. And we're all over 80. We've all been air force, navy, army, so we can bash our heads out up there if we want to but if I meet up with any of the old fellows at Anzac Day and at this lunch we had there about a month a go, you know you get talking about things that happened

17:30 while you were together. See Fred Ray who was at that lunch, I marched out to Puckapunyal with him in November '39 and the officer in charge was my company commander in Syria, who was then 21 years of age. He had his birthday during the Syrian campaign. We were all 22, all the three platoon commanders. We used to call him the kid. But he's still alive.

And do you talk about those who didn't come back?

No, not very much, occasionally. No, you

18:00 sort of put that out of your mind and you go to Anzac Day and we have a reunion, we have a stand too for a minute silence but other than that you don't worry. They all knew, I think they all realised what they were going into. But the first time you're in and you see fellas killed beside you that wakes you up a bit.

In what way?

Well you realise that you're there for real. You know

18:30 it's like a film set before that but once you're into it. You know it's on. But it's never worried me, it must be in my psyche or something, it's never worried me. I'm just lucky.

And now I'm also interested to know because the camp, the Bougainville campaign has been called an unnecessary war.

It was quite unnecessary.

Is that what you think?

Yes. It's quite unnecessary. Those

19:00 Japanese couldn't get away from that island if they'd tried. Their supplies, any supplies that they got come in by submarine and one of my lookouts picked a submarine up in the Buka Passage one day. That's the only way they got stuff in. No air planes or anything like that but see it was General MacArthur and you know what the Americans are like? Even though we got an American son-in-law. They are the

19:30 tops and they want to do everything and MacArthur had General Blamey in charge of the Australians and he said, "Right, well the Australian will mop up all the Japanese on these islands while we go on to the Philippines and Japan." Now they coulda left all those troops on those islands till the end of the war then they would of all surrendered. Because when it was over they all surrendered just like that. No trouble whatsoever. But in the meantime a course, we'd lost a lot of men. So that's why

20:00 it was unnecessary.

And has that angered you in retrospect?

Oh in a way yes, but I think it gets back to the fact that you've been trained, you're disciplined and you know the army tells you to go here, you go there. You don't query it. Maybe you think about it later. Well I have thought about it and I've thought well, what a waste of life. And that's all it was really, a waste of life, a waste of time. But you know

20:30 that's war.

Overall did you believe that World War II was a just war?

Yes. Well, you had it started by a maniac. And I tell ya what if he'd, if he had let Rommel go in North Africa and supplied him, it would have been quite different.

21:00 Rommel would've been down into Cairo and Alexandria, he would have swept through everywhere. Up into Syria - the lot. But fortunately the 9th Division stopped him at El Alamein. And that was General Montgomery, he was you know the general in charge and it was his plan and he really sucked the Germans in there. Sucked them into a trap virtually. But if Hitler had supplied him the fuel, food, ammunition

21:30 it would have been quite different. Because he got within forty miles of Cairo I think it was or Alexandria [Alexandria], one of the two. Very close.

Look, actually the other thing I haven't asked you about yet is about the Japanese surrender. You were on Bougainville. So were you taking Japanese POWs [Prisoners of War] there?

My company, I didn't go with them because I shot into hospital, something wrong with my kidneys or something, I was shot in for a few days for a few tests.

22:00 But my company went under my then 2IC to Ocean Island to bring back the Japanese from there and another company went to Nauru to bring them back from there. And Bluey Rita was in charge of the company that went to Nauru. And the fellows tell me that he was tough. He used to line the Japanese up you know and leave enough room just to walk through and he'd walk through with his rifle and bayonet going like that. And if they got in the road -

22:30 too bad. And they brought them back to Bougainville, some from Ocean Island and they put them into POW camps and I had a storeman in the company, Roger Shuttlewood and he was given razor blades and Red Cross comforts to give to the Japanese. He said to me, "Am I going to give these things to these bastards, Skip?" I said, "No, hand them out to our fellows." So you didn't get them. But you know that's the way fellas felt about it.

23:00 **Did soldiers take the opportunity to exact revenge?**

No. No, look they were complacent, the Japanese. They surrendered. Never gave you any trouble at all. Except I believe on the, I think it was the [HMAS] Ballarat, the ship my company went on. It was an old coal hulk and they put them down in the hold for the night and they wouldn't let them up and they had the toilets on each side of the bough and each side of the stern suspended over the water

23:30 and they'd rush up of course to go to the toilets in the morning when the hatches were taken off. Nobody cared whether they suffocated under there or not. And then they were fed given bully beef and biscuits and so on. But we had an interpreter on board and one of my fellas told me this and there was a line drawn on the deck, painted line where they were not to step over. If they stepped on the line they were dead. And one of these poor coots, he tried to speak with the

24:00 interpreter and he put his foot over the line and the Bren gunner went brrrrrrrp. Put his foot under him and just lifted him over the side, see into the water. The skipper thought that was a pretty poor thing to do. But he was told, if you'd been fighting these so and so's for three years you'd think that was just retribution. But they had on the Japanese senior officer, they painted a yellow

24:30 line back and front on his uniform, so they could pick him out and told him he'd be the first shot if anything went wrong. So it was but they didn't give any trouble. No trouble at all in the POW camps, no trouble. And the battalion went to Rabaul after the war was over and they were in charge of Japanese working parties cleaning up the bomb damage, never had the slightest bit of trouble. And they had all the tunnels of course in Rabaul, that's why they didn't get rid of

25:00 them, they were, just went into the tunnels.

So Alwyn now that you know it's many years later and you've had all this time to reflect on your experience, can you say how you think the war changed you?

I think it made me rather hard and not very sympathetic to people if they had anything wrong with them. I think that's probably what it did to me. There's a term for it and

25:30 I can't just pick it. I know one of my old girlfriends asked me this and I said Beryl, I can't think of the term I used to her. But I just became hard and never had much sympathy for people. I suppose that's the way it is. But you know that's really all that happened to me.

26:00 It stood me in good stead. And after the war when I was in the office and I carried the same sort of discipline too into the people I controlled and eventually I did become the managing partner of the firm. And they used to think that I was a real B [bastard] but we got our money in from the clients. Everybody did as they were told. The girls wore uniforms. No mucking around and they knew it. And if they

26:30 stepped out of line I sacked them a course you can't do it today but there were no hassle to do that. When did I retire? Seventy-nine.

And Alywn, have you ever dreamt about your war experience?

No, Dot used to tell me I'd have nightmares early in the peace but I sleep like a log now, no trouble. No worries. I once slept in the Syrian campaign, I slept under an artillery barrage all night,

27:00 never heard a shell go overhead. Never heard it go off. So I'm a good sleeper.

And look, I've just got a couple more questions to round off. And one of them is I'd like to ask if there are any parts of your war experience that you haven't ever told anyone about?

I don't really know. I've never told a lot of the dirty parts with the people, you know I can think back now, I've missed a few things with you

27:30 but well no, not the really bad parts of it, I haven't told.

Well, is there anything you would like to talk about now just to put on the record?

Oh no, I don't think so, I think that whatever I did I was doing my job. Let's put it that way. And if you've got to kill somebody to do it, you know you do it. But I never had any worry about doing it and that's never worried me since the war. I have a grandson whose always asking me when he

28:00 was younger how many Japs did you kill grandpa? And I said, "I lost count, Cameron." But now he's grown up to 17 and he doesn't ask me anymore. He's now flying an aircraft you know. Seventeen, can't get a drivers licence.

So sorry, I'm not quite clear on your answer. Are you saying there are things you've never told anyone about?

Not the really dirty parts of it.

When you say dirty what do you mean?

Well when you've had to bury people that have blown up like balloons and

28:30 all this sorta thing. Dirty, absolute dirty work. I mean your own men and you can't bury them, you just threw a blanket over them and dig a hole beside them and throw the dirt over them. But I mean you can't tell your wife - that puts them off.

It's very gory, isn't it?

Oh 'tis, it really is gory. And you know you see fellas blown to pieces and it's a mess, I can tell you. And you might get a bit of a mess on to yourself but just one of those

29:00 things. You just had to.

So are those the things you've never really talked about?

No, I've never really talked about them, no. I might have told my son a couple of things.

Is it all right to talk about those things now?

Oh yes it doesn't worry me. Look, I'm not worried about it. But I just don't go round telling people. And we have a friend who says, oh you know the Australians were terrible and I say, "How would you know Judy, you weren't there?" But see that's the sort of feeling you

29:30 get out in the community.

So what was the worst or the most horrifying part of the war for you?

Oh God, the most horrifying? I really can't tell you, probably the Porton operation. Where I had to swim off the sunken barge during the night

30:00 and I stripped everything except my underpants and I had two wounds in the arm and within you know forty yards or so of the Japanese position. And it was moonlight, so I swam side stroke all the way and just put my head up every so often until I got out to another barge. But it was a stranded barge, a big stores barge LC [Landing Craft] -15s they called them and I got on there and a few fellas had swum out.

30:30 We got in between the two big motors but you could virtually watch the bullets come in one side and out the other because it wasn't armoured and you were being spattered with little bits of metal. And my batman came, swam onto another barge and I said, "C'mon Doug, this is too hot here. We'll crawl up to the bough to the big ramp." And it had huge girders on the ramp because it could take tanks and all sorts of things. So we crawled up there and we sat up against the girders and we were safe as houses there.

31:00 But no, that was probably the worst because we were fired at with several others as we swam. The place was full of sharks and crocodiles and you know we never even thought of it and then to clamber up over the sides of this barge we were being fired at all the time. I suppose it's the fact that we were getting away. And I don't know, I just never analysed

31:30 anything. I was just lucky to get there, that was it but we were taken off by an armoured barge later in the night. We had to swim across to it and as I dragged myself up onto the deck of the stern, they had a Vickers gun on a dual machine gun, Vickers gun and he was firing at the Japanese position and they hit him and he fell on me and he was a big fellow. He hit my head straight into the steel deck and I slid off

32:00 into the water unconscious and one of the water transport officers, he saw what happened. He leant over the side and he grabbed me by the hair, which I had in those days and pulled me aboard. Otherwise, I was a goner. I would not have known. I would have just been drowned. So you know, I don't know I suppose I had many terrifying moments during the war but once they're over you forget them.

And what was the part of the

32:30 **war that you enjoyed the most?**

Geez, I didn't really enjoy any of it really. But no, I think when we got out on leave and we had a bit of fun and went out together and so on that was pretty good. I had a great time in Cairo when I was convalescent. Marvellous time. Did I expand on that for you?

You did? It sounded very fun.

Oh yes, we had a lot of fun there.

Learned to play bowls and everything?

Oh yes but I didn't tell you when we went to the nightclubs at night.

33:00 We used to go out every night to the Metropolitan nightclub, get as full as forty cats a course, come home all various stages of convalescence and we'd come to the houseboat, you had to get to your cabin and I think I did tell you this, that's right.

Yes, you did tell us yeah. Sounds like you had a ball?

What we did.

And look Allan, are the friendships you made during the war, are they very different from your other friendships you've had?

Yeah, quite different.

33:30 **Could you talk about that difference?**

Well it's, there's no other friendship like it. You all risk your necks together and I think that's what sort of ties everybody together. And that's why every reunion we've got fellas come from all over the countryside to go to the reunion because they risked their necks with all these other chaps. And there's, there is no other friendship like it. There's no other, not even with your wife. Not the same.

34:00 **Well I guess they're the ones who can understand.**

Of course, yes they do. I mean we've been married for 60 years nearly 61 but there's no friendship like those with those fellows. Just not like it, I mean some days I wish I had my 303 and I could you know ping her off but I dunno, they tell me I'm a bit intolerant these days but I'm getting old. Let's face it,

34:30 I'll be 85 in September.

Well, you've run a good wicket so far.

Well, I've had a healthy life. Until I had the heart attack last year I'd had nothing wrong with me other than malaria.

That's fantastic, isn't it? So one last question, Alwyn. I just want to open the floor and just say is there anything else you'd like to say about your war service?

Oh dear.

35:00 Well, I suppose I'd be dishonest if I didn't say I enjoyed the whole experience in a way. Not full enjoyment, enjoyed the experience. And I'm very glad that I had it because coming from a very naïve young fellow, I grew up to be a man and I think that's what it did for all of us. You got to understand people. I realised

35:30 the importance of discipline more so now than you know in those days really. Now when I see these louts around the street now, I feel like kicking them in the backside but that's why we should always have National Service to straighten them up. Make them do the right thing. May not be your thoughts but they're mine and I think most returned servicemen feel that way. Because they're you know,

36:00 they're only louts that's all.

So you feel like war service was good for you in a way?

Oh yes, I'm sure it was. Yeah, it was good.

Well on that note I'd like to say thank you very much.

Pleasure.

It's been a fascinating day sitting here.

I've probably told you a lot of lies you know.

I don't believe you. I believe you did tell us the truth, so we will release you.

INTERVIEW ENDS