Australians at War Film Archive

Robert O'Neill - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:42 Melbourne in 1936, I went to Scotch College Melbourne, I went from there to the Royal Military College, Duntroon – not because I necessarily wanted to stay in the army for the rest of my life, but I thought it was an interesting thing to do. I graduated from Duntroon in 1958, the army sent me on to Melbourne University

01:00 to finish off an engineering degree because that was the only sort of degree they would let you do in those days. I then got the Rhodes Scholarship from Melbourne to Oxford in 1960. I went to Oxford in 1961. I then broadened my education by doing a bachelor's degree in philosophy, politics and economics, which brought me to international relations. Then I stayed on for another two years and did a doctorate of philosophy, in which my topic was the relationship between

01:30 the German army and the Nazi party. Then the Vietnam War was going and the army needed me back, so I came back, I was sent to Vietnam with the 5th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment in April of 1966. Did a year there – we'll talk a lot more about that. While I was in Vietnam I decided that I definitely did not want to do this for the rest of my life, and so I began the process of moving out of the army. Because of my academic qualifications

02:00 and the build-up of Duntroon in an academic sense, I was able to slide sideways from being a major on the military staff to being a senior lecturer on the academic staff. By the time I'd been there I'd published another couple of books, my doctoral thesis was published while I was in Vietnam and that was reasonable successful. So the Australian National University offered me a senior fellowship in International Relations, and I moved there in the end of '69.

02:30 In early '71 I became head of the Strategic and Defence at the ANU, and I did that for twelve years, during which time I became more active internationally. I was elected to the council of the International Institute for Strategic Studies based in London, in 1977. In 1982 I was elected to be the fourth director of the institute, so I went there with my family in

03:00 '82. I did five years there; after I'd been there for three years, Oxford University wanted someone to be the next Professor of the History of War, and I said, "Well, I can't do it now, I've only been at the IISS for three years, so count me out." Well, they came back six months later and said, "If we put it off until 1987 would you be able to come then?" and I said, "Yes." So that fell into place and I went to All Souls College

03:30 at Oxford where I was a fellow as well as being the Professor of the History of War for fourteen years. During that time I continued activity on a lot of other fronts, and I was a member of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for ten years during the '90s. I was a trustee of the Imperial War Museum and I ultimately became the Chairman of Trustees of the museum. I returned to being a council member at the

04:00 International Institute for Strategic Studies, and I became chairman of that council in 1996. I was also Chairman of the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies in London in the early '90s. I was also chairman of a research centre that the British Government established at the University of London called the Centre for Defence Studies, from 1990 to 1995.

04:30 So I was very glad to have a complete change of life in 2001, I took retirement a year early and we came back and we now live in a beautiful mountain valley on the western side of the Blue Mountains, alongside my wife's sister and her husband – they moved to this area quite some time ago, and through staying with them for holidays we decided what a beautiful part of the world this is, and this is where we'll retire. But I haven't quite retired,

05:00 the Australian Government decided to establish the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and I was asked to be its first chairman in 1999. The Institute got up and running properly in 2001, and as I told you I'm off there tonight for a meeting with the council tomorrow. I'm also a member of the board of the Lowy Institute for International Policy here in Sydney, and I'm Deputy Chairman of the Council

05:30 of the Graduate School of Government at the University of Sydney. And I'm on quite a few boards in America.

I can't imagine how many business cards you must have had in your lifetime.

Yeah, it's been a few.

All right, well, thankyou for the summary, we'll start back now to your childhood. This is a bit of a Freudian type of thing, but I believe that you had a grandfather who'd had military service?

Both grandfathers

06:00 had military service. Let me start with my father's father. He joined the navy of the colony of Victoria in I think it was 1888, his name was Michael John O'Neill and he served for the best part of forty years. Of course in that time it became first the Australian Commonwealth Naval Force in 1901, and then the Royal Australian Navy in 1911. He went abroad to serve in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in China

06:30 in 1900 and 1901. While he was there the Royal Horse Artillery was running out of horsemen because the plague had struck the regiment, so a call was put around the fleet to see if there were sailors who could ride a horse with sufficient proficiency. See, grandfather was a very good horseman and so he was accepted and he served for several months with the first of the

07:00 Royal Horse Artillery in China in 1901. He then came back, was an instructor, and because he was a good instructor he was not allowed to leave Australia during the First World War, so he had a fairly quiet war. But there's one family story that I'll tell you about. He was in on the firing of the first shot by the British Empire at the start of the First World War. You may or may not know that that took place

07:30 across the heads of Port Phillip Bay, and a German merchantman called the Pfalz was still in harbour when war was declared. And grandfather was down on Point Nepean at a battery there and the ship was trying to slip out of the heads, so they put one shot across its bows and one shot across its stern, and the implication was that the next one goes through the middle, so the German captain decided that discretion was the better part

08:00 of valour and he turned around and came back and they boarded the ship, and they captured the German mercantile code. That was of some significance for the war effort. My other grandfather was in the army. He joined the army I think around 1910, and his name was John Swanson Grant. He was a wonderfully impressive-looking man, very interesting, engaging.

08:30 He was probably my favourite among my elderly relatives. He was viewed with some disfavour in the family because every now and then he would go on an alcoholic binge. This was possibly due to the fact that his wife had died when she was around forty, and I think these binges would occur around the anniversary of her death. Anyway, my mother

09:00 was one of a family of four children, and she was the eldest. When her mother died she became responsible for a while for looking after the rest. My grandfather had a reasonable career during the First World War, he ended up as a warrant officer on the Western Front with the 5th Battalion of the 1st AIF [Australian Imperial Forces]. When he came back, of course the army was reduced in size and in 1922

09:30 it was cut quite dramatically. I don't think he had a proper job thereafter, and so there was a lot of pressure on the children to bring in money and so on. That really made my mother conscious of a lot of responsibility, and although she responded to it, she always felt like she had to take charge of situations for the rest of her life, and that complicated

10:00 life somewhat. But I won't go on into that. My mother died about two months ago, just short of ninety-four. But my two grandfathers lived on, they both had part-time service in the Second World War, so war service was part of the family. My father did not serve in the Second World War because he was regarded as being in a reserved occupation.

10:30 He had wanted to volunteer but they wouldn't let him, he was in the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways and as such tramways were regarded as part of the war effort and he had to stay there. I had a couple of uncles who were in the Middle East and in New Guinea, so again the war was very much part of the family

11:00 dinner table conversation, and military service was regarded as a fairly natural thing to do.

Where exactly in Melbourne was your family home?

We lived mainly in the Camberwell/Burwood area. The first home that my parents owned was 2 Elfin Grove, Camberwell – near Camberwell High School and the swimming pool. But they lived there from 1935 to

11:30 1939. Then they bought a house which was then number 400 Toorak Road, Burwood. The Toorak Road has since been renumbered but it was on the corner of Yeovil Road and Toorak Road. They owned that house until 1956, so that's really the house that I grew up, went to school from, that's where I left to

join the army in 1955 from.

Do you have any memories of

12:00 **growing up in Melbourne at war?**

Yes, I do, because I began primary school at the beginning of 1942, and of course a lot of the games that we played with each other at school were war games. The unlucky people were chosen to be the Japs [Japanese] or the Germans and we were the Aussies.

12:30 For hobbies we built model aircraft and those sorts of military aircraft. It was very much a part of the culture of the times. And I can remember mother's friends who had husbands serving abroad; I remember them sharing experiences of what the war was like and so on. Of course we

13:00 had rationing to deal with, rationing was there for quite a long time and made quite an impact on us, particularly petrol rationing, the general lack of choice in things you could buy when there weren't a lot of toys around for kids, the clothing styles were pretty simple, you couldn't build houses and so on. You had the feeling that everything had been put on hold. And

13:30 everything gradually was released in 1946, '7, '8 and so on, and life got back to a sort of cornucopia, it was wonderful.

So as a young boy what do you think you went without because of rationing and austerity?

Well, I don't think I went without anything important. I certainly went without the variety of toys that surely we would have had. As a boy I loved playing with Dinky cars [brand of miniature model cars]

14:00 and the only things we had available were things from the '30s. Of course toys not being particularly well-made began to fall apart not very far into the 1940s, so our stock began to run down. There were things like paint for playing with or for making toys and things; there was the constant shortage of petrol.

14:30 My parents had a little Austin 10 which did thirty miles to the gallon, fortunately, but we only had two gallons a month. My father's parents lived four miles away in Malvern, and my mother's father was in Caulfield, which was seven miles away, so we had just enough petrol I think to do two visits to my father's parents and one to my mother's. Many is the time when I can remember our

15:00 car getting to the foot of the hill in Toorak Road just below where we lived and it ran out of petrol, and Dad's recipe for that situation was to quickly walk home where he had a tomato sauce bottle full of petrol hidden in the garage. He would bring that back and that would be just what we needed to get up the hill. How he refilled the tomato sauce bottle I don't know, but it got us out of trouble.

That was the final strategic reserve, was it?

It was the ultimate.

15:30 **What sort of student were you, considering your distinguished academic career these days?**

Yeah, I was a fairly successful student. I wasn't always top of the class; I usually finished in the first three in most things. I enjoyed schoolwork. My parents made it easy for me to study, I always had a room of my own, a desk of my own. We didn't have many books around the house but we joined libraries

16:00 and so on. I can't remember having any very bad teachers; on the whole I was well taught, and I enjoyed school.

You say that your parents made it quite easy for you to study: was there some sort of history of scholarship in the family?

No, not at all. My two parents both left school at the age of fourteen to earn a living, and I think they were both

16:30 driven by their own hunger for education and then transferred that to me, and saw that I really had a clear track ahead to get the best education that they could find for me. Now, that led them to aspirations for me to go to a private school. My father was a revenue clerk in the Tramways, and I think his salary

17:00 in the late 1940s was something like five hundred pounds a year. There was really no spending money in the family, but they made a big effort and I won a couple of scholarships along the way. So I had six very good years at Scotch and had a wonderful education. I had some terrific teachers who opened new horizons to me – I think particularly of RH Clayton who taught

17:30 modern history, and his modern history lessons were half history and half contemporary politics. He was such a good teacher he would [get] through the syllabus in the first half of the period and then open it out into how what we had learnt related to what was going on in the world today, and would ask us for our opinions. I had a wonderful Greek and Roman history teacher, Ron Bond, who had been in the army himself during the

18:00 Second World War. He was a Russian linguist; he was in the Army Intelligence Corps on a part-time basis. He had just been involved in training one of the battalions to go Korea, because the Korean War was on at this stage, and that gave his classes – and he was also in the school cadet corps as a company commander – that gave what he had to impart a real relevance

18:30 and impact that few others had. Those sorts of things led me to become more interested in doing this kind of thing at least for a while once I left school. I was growing up as the Cold War was intensifying and was very aware of things like atomic weapons, the revolution in China, the Korean War in particular.

19:00 It looked for a while, in 1950-'51, as if we were going towards some new conflagration. So I suppose the thing is that excited my interest, and I decided in around 1952 that I would go into the army initially, because this was something I needed to find out about. I did two years' matriculation – the first year I did the

19:30 science and maths, and the second year I did history, geography, German, et cetera. They all confirmed for me that I was about to do something very interesting, and it took me right out of contact with all my school friends because none of them were interested in going into the army.

Can I just ask you, when you were at Scotch, were you in the Cadet Corps?

20:00 I was, yes. That was also a shaping influence, but a fairly marginal one, I'd say.

A cadet corps of that era, what did that involve?

We paraded on the Thursday afternoon. School finished early. The first couple of years were fairly basic training, sort of parade ground drill, learning how to fire

20:30 a rifle, and then you moved onto the other infantry weapons like the Bren gun, the Vickers machine gun and mortar and so on. So you were basically competent as an infantry soldier, in theory. You were too young, too small to carry the weights and things that you had to do on an operation, but you had that sort of beginning. And in the second couple of years I specialised in

21:00 intelligence work. I did a very interesting intelligence course in 1952 and I was commander of the intelligence platoon in 1953. That sort of work really was fascinating; again it continued to confirm me that that's what I wanted to do at that stage.

Were you involved in any sports at all?

21:30 Yeah, I rowed, that was my principal sport. That was a very demanding sport, as you know, having seen various things on television of late. It is the ultimate team sport and you do need to be very fit and it takes a lot of dedication.

You have mentioned your father and his service in the Tramways, but what sort of person was you mother, would you say?

My mother was extremely intelligent. She had a

22:00 nice, sparkling personality which she kept pretty well up to her death. She was very good at relating to people, but she also had quite firm likes and dislikes. She would brush a lot of people off; because she had not come from any background of privilege she sometimes felt that other people were dissing her simply because she hadn't

22:30 been to the right schools or had the right amount of money. She was a pretty feisty lady who would fight back. But for her friends and family she was wonderful, and as I said earlier she liked to control things. She was a pretty firm mother – I was an only child, too, I should have mentioned, which meant I had a lot of attention bearing down on me and that wasn't always welcome. One of the things that I really enjoyed about leaving

23:00 school and going into the army was being away from this continued, well-motivated but sometimes very annoying surveillance from my parents.

Exchanging the domination of the army for the domination of parents?

The domination of the army was not as thorough as the domination of my mother.

You mentioned as a teenager this burgeoning interest in politics and history and military. What other things were

23:30 **you reading that were influences on you at that point?**

Biography, I was interested in what made people's careers take off. I was also interested in the sort of structural aspects of society, I was interested in how aircraft developed, how trains were on systems

24:00 and all that kind of thing. I was interested in finding out how the basic idea of new inventions were made and worked and that kind of thing.

Specifically in a military sense, or civil as well?

No, it was much more civil than military.

What sort of biography were you reading?

Well, Churchill's "Marlborough" and I read quite a bit on Churchill himself.

24:30 I became really fascinated with Churchill, and I suppose reading about the breadth of his life was another thing which made me feel that I was going to do what I was about to do, because he had gone into the army from school first of all and been involved in a couple of wars fairly early in his career. That gave his

25:00 leadership during two world wars a lot more credibility. He had been at the front, he'd been shot at, he knew what men could and could not do from the basis of his own experience, he was not just listening to other people and taking guesses. So that was another thing that said to me, "Yeah, you should go into the army for a bit and then see what happens."

25:30 Other things, I read quite a bit of English literature. My mother started reading Dickens to me when I was about eight; before I could actually cope with a three or four hundred-page novel myself, she would sit and read it. I had lots of good books while I was at school, they were childs' reads, "The Cloister and the Hearth",

26:00 "Pride and Prejudice", the Brontë sisters and so on. I enjoyed all that stuff.

What about Kipling?

Yeah, I read of course "Kim" and "The Jungle Book" and quite a bit of Kipling's poetry. I won't say that it made a big impact on me, but of course I was in the Cubs and then in the Scouts, and anyone that goes through the Cubs

26:30 has a certain amount of Kipling thrust at him.

As you came towards the end of your high schooling you obviously had this ambition to join the military: what were the criteria for entering the Royal Military College in those days?

It was a reasonable but not necessarily outstanding academic record. I suppose leadership was the first requirement, they looked at you

27:00 and said, "Has this guy got the capacity to lead a bunch of fairly ordinary Australians into action as a platoon commander? Has he got what it takes to then go on and lead a hundred and twenty as a company commander, or eight hundred as a battalion commander?" These sorts of things are the simple things that come first, but there were a lot of other aspects, criteria that you had to satisfy. The army is a very close-

27:30 knit organisation, you need to be the sort of person that has reasonable social skills and be a team player rather than a cranky individualist going their own way. Of course physical fitness was very important then, as it is now.

Did you ever have other ambitions or was the military a fixation?

Well, for a while I did think about engineering.

28:00 Where we lived in Burwood we were two houses away from a man who was a very successful engineer who became the general manager of Thomas Borthwick's, who were a big meat firm headquartered in Melbourne and I think in Britain ultimately, George Robertson, and he was a certain inspiration to me, and that was I suppose my alternative model.

28:30 My family didn't have any professional connections so I never felt that it would have been natural for me to go into law or medicine. So they just sort of came and went in my mind very quickly. Writing was another thing I thought about, but I thought there would be time enough for that, "Let's get some experience first."

29:00 **When did you enter Royal Military College?**

In January of 1955.

How did you take to the life?

Well, it was a complex story, of course, you rightly said. The army does have its own way of shaping a large part of your life. Basically I enjoyed Duntroon but, you know,

29:30 you had to accept a lot of rubbish from senior class men when you're in your first year. That didn't go on forever and there were ways of handling it. If you reacted strongly against it, it only became worse. If you didn't fuss too much and you had a bit of a sense of humour you could deflect things and they didn't try and pick on you. It was a

30:00 fairly harsh society in that sense. It was very much those that could handle it had a much easier time

than those who couldn't.

What sort of examples of this rubbish from senior cadets could you…?

Well, as a fourth class cadet you went to a meal, you would usually be bombarded with questions from the first class cadets who were at the other end of the table.

30:30 You would be asked for your summary of the news; they would ask you historically-based questions that had to do with the Australian Army or with Duntroon particularly. You were given a long, it wasn't quite a manual, it was simply a set of roneoed sheets on the history of the college and the corps and staff cadets, and what graduates had done and so on. It was called "the screed" and you were

31:00 meant to know them. I was a fairly quick study and I was interested, and I had collateral knowledge so it was easier. I knew it and when people asked me questions I'd be able to give them the right answers and that was the end of the matter. But for the poor devils that could not give the right answer, they were kept at the table for long after the rest of us could disappear and do things that we had to do. Guys caught like that sort of went downhill, it went from bad to worse.

31:30 **Were there any less savoury punishments and discipline activities, initiations?**

There was an initiation – well, initiation in a way, pretty well the whole fourth class year, but after we'd been there for a few weeks we were taken out for a run in full kit I think on a Saturday night, it went on for several miles. We discovered that people had put bricks in our pack and so on. We got back

32:00 from that and got fire hosed and sat on a block of ice. It was not anything terribly extreme but it was a tough test, and OK, if you got through that you were accepted as a member of the corps and staff cadets. So there wasn't, as far as I was concerned, anything nasty, but I think nasty things did happen to some people and it came and went in different years. As you know

32:30 there have been a couple of inquiries into what was known as "bastardisation" at Duntroon. The important thing about going through it was first of all you saw how unpleasant it was in terms of human relationships, and you also saw that it was really pretty counter-productive on the people who really needed the most help. So for me it had I think a liberalising influence on me, and when I was a

33:00 senior cadet I never behaved like that.

Interesting. What about hijinks and practical jokes and so forth?

Oh, we had plenty of them. As you can imagine, with a bunch of eighteen to twenty-one year-olds cooped up in Canberra for forty-six or seven weeks of the year. We used to get up to, we

33:30 used to do things to the air station where they had various sacred objects that we used to capture and bring back to our mess, and they would try and capture our old Boer War guns at the gun gates and try and take them over to their place, there were things like that. Then there were the sort of personal scrapes one got into when you were placed on confinement to barracks for a minor

34:00 offence, and people absconded and went off to see their girlfriends in town and got caught. That could land you in a lot of trouble. It's not a big deal, really.

By going to Duntroon what sort of obligation of service were you under to the army?

I think it was five years after graduation, but there was a sort of

34:30 unwritten convention that Duntroon graduates did not leave the army even after five years, that most of them would stay for something like ten to twenty years, and of course all the senior officers came out of the Duntroon classes of thirty years previously. The formal obligation was quite minimal alongside the norm.

35:00 **So entering Duntroon in those days sounds like a vocation?**

It was, yes. But I had decided that I wasn't going to stay more than perhaps ten years or so.

Why did you have that differing thought?

Because I wanted to do other things in my life. I thought the army was fine for young guys but unless you had a very

35:30 lucky set of career choices, it could lead you into, I wouldn't say a blind ally, but an increasingly narrowing path. I was aware of the fact that a lot of senior military people, that I came to know better through being in the army myself as a cadet and as a young officer, had

36:00 fairly limited perspectives. It was not that they were defective people; their life had really narrowed them down and I was interested in broadening up. I particularly wanted to go overseas and get to Europe, so all those things kept me looking wide for different avenues. I was particularly keen to finish off my university degree, and that's why I stayed in the engineering class

36:30 at Duntroon, even though I wasn't as keenly interested in engineering as I was in history and political science and world affairs. But anyway, the stratagem worked and I got to Melbourne University. I did

two years there. I was very lucky in getting the break to go on to Oxford.

So there was some sort of an exchange program

37:00 **with Duntroon and Melbourne University for engineering students?**

There was recognition. You had the first two years of a four-year engineering course recognised if you were a Duntroon graduate, so I went in as a third year.

Does that mean that you'd slipped the army then by going to Melbourne?

No, I still was a member of the army. On one occasion I did time with the

37:30 Melbourne University Regiment and so on. The army connection was useful in that I was being paid as a lieutenant and the army paid for my university fees. It was a very good deal financially.

What was it like being a military student amongst the civilian students?

Yeah, there were some barriers there that had to be broken down, but it didn't take all that long; as long as you didn't

38:00 react as if you were somehow different and special they didn't put you behind a barricade. There were a few people who thought that anyone who'd graduated from Duntroon was some kind of automaton, but the easiest way to break that down was to get onto normal human relations with them. I took up rowing again when I went back to Melbourne, and I was in the

38:30 extra-collegiate; because most of the rowing was done by the collegiates and because I was not living in college, I was living back at home with my parents for these two years, I was an extra-collegiate. Our crew did pretty well and I was selected with the crew to make up the Melbourne inter-varsity eight

39:00 for Penrith in 1959, I think it was. Anyway, I ended up not rowing in the inter-varsity race, I was on the bow side emergency. But anyway I was part of the team and I went along. I think that gave me enough sporting credentials to impress the Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee the following year.

39:30 **What sort of political scene was there at Melbourne Uni in those days?**

Not much of a one. Political protest had not really arrived on the campus in the way that it was to come five years later with the Vietnam War. There was generally a sort of left wing vogue in the place, a lot of the

40:00 students were Labor Party people. Some of them were communist, not many. Jim Cairns was quite a cult figure, you know, when he came because lots of people turned out and said warm things about him. He was interesting, a charismatic character. I remember going to one of his talks and I was interested in what he had to say so I waited behind and had a chat with him afterwards, and he switched on to what I had to say, which was not,

40:30 I was asking him a few hard questions and dealt with them, and I thought he was an impressive person even though I didn't agree with everything he said. Anyway….

Tape 2

00:33 **Professor, you were very interested in the Cold War and Korea during that time in university. What was it about the Cold War, why were you so intrigued by it?**

I was, yes. Well, the Cold War was the principal external force shaping our lives, and with the advent of nuclear weapons of course we could have been part of a destroyed civilization, or happening in our own lifetimes. Even short of that extreme there

01:00 was a possibility that there could be widening conventional war by consuming manpower and resources, destroying the liberality of our society and so on. It was a very powerful thing going on, believe me. So because I'd grown up in the time that I had, the Korean War in particular was something that I remembered very strongly, and by the

01:30 late 1960s, having gone through the Vietnam War, I thought it was crucially important that Australia get weaving again on doing some decent histories of the wars that it had been involved in. We had excellent histories of the First and Second World Wars but those teams had been disbanded. Nothing had been done about the Korean War, the Malayan Emergency Confrontation and Vietnam.

02:00 I tried to push against the tide by doing my own book while I was in the field in Vietnam, and that was the one we've just been looking at. But when I was teaching history at Duntroon after I returned from Vietnam, the government did decide finally that it needed an official history of the Korean War to be done. I was one of the people that was approached to do it, and I agreed initially to do it in partnership with

02:30 Professor Len Turner, who was the senior military historian at Duntroon, and then pulled out just before we were about to get going. And I thought, “Well, OK, I feel interested enough about this topic, I’ll do it.” It turned out to take three times as long as I thought it would take because my career in the meantime had taken off in somewhat a different direction, and there I was running the strategic defence studies that

03:00 had been concerned with much more in contemporary and future policy issues rather than history. So I was doing my historical research when I could get time away from my proper paid job. It lengthened out but it was a very interesting project. It gave me unrestricted access to all the government papers between 1950 and 1954. Now, I used to sit in the Cabinet Office, I could pull down any cabinet decision and look at it. I thought I'd start at the top,

03:30 the only way you were ever going to encompass what happened in a reasonable space of time was to say, “Well, what were the things that bothered the cabinet?” Then you would work through all the supporting papers that came to them, and that would lead you off into certain other areas in the Defence Department, the armed services and Foreign Affairs and so on. It took me four years really to survey all that stuff, but it was fascinating and I learnt a lot of things other than the Korean War because I had to think

04:00 myself into the broad context that the Menzies Government during those years had been in. That led to a somewhat different kind of history than the government had in mind. I think they were thinking about a fairly narrow, operational one. As far as I was concerned our most important involvement in the Korean War was the political consequence with our alliance with the United States, which has really shaped our foreign policy ever since.

04:30 So I decided to split the Korean War history into two levels: strategy and diplomacy, which I did first; and then military operations at the second level. Then the first volume of the Korean War history that I wrote really deals with the formation of the ANZUS [Australia, New Zealand, United States (of America)] alliance, how it came about, how it broadened into various other treaty commitments such as SEATO [South-East Asia Treaty Organisation] in South-East Asia,

05:00 growing defence relationships with Britain over the period of the Malayan Emergency and those sorts of things. I think the first volume is by far the more significant as a piece of Australian political and international history is concerned. But the second volume really focused on what our navy, army and air force did in Korea, and that was quite a lot,

05:30 that took me several years to find all that out, and I didn’t get the time to write it down.

Just taking you back to what was written about the Korean War when you were in university; you said that there wasn't much about it. There must have been something for you to be interested and to try and get informed about what had happened.

Yeah, there were a couple of good American books that had come out in the 1950s: Allen Whiting’s “China Crosses the Yalu”

06:00 and David Rees’s “Korea: The Limited War”; Bob Osgood,’s book on limited war as a strategy coming out of the Korean War. There were – I’m just blanking out on the guy that wrote a superb history of the United Nations and Korean War, he was at Columbia University, he came out in 1957.

06:30 All those sorts of things were just terrific for getting the wider world context on it, but there was nothing that really related Australia to it other than a volume that the Australian War Memorial produced soon after the war. It was a collection of essay-length pieces by people that had served in Korea. It was called, I think it was “Australians in the Korean War” or

07:00 something like that, edited by Norman Bartlett – no, “With the Australians in Korea”. That was a sort of rudimentary indicator of what were the important events in the history of our armed services in Korea. I really was operating off tabula rasa when I came to work on all the government documents. I really had to find things out for myself, which was good for me as a

07:30 historian; I certainly got to know the war and its issues and have a sense of proportion about the things. But the down side of that was it took time.

Was it frustrating for you to be studying engineering when your real passion lay with history and politics?

A bit, yes, but on the other hand the engineering work was interesting. I was reasonably good at it and I had a lot of incentive to keep applying myself. But yeah, I was all the time wanting to slip away and read different things in

08:00 the library. The books I collected personally were not engineering books.

How did you know what to select to read? Did you have a mentor at that time or someone – you mention your history teachers at high school, but at this time did you have someone guiding you?

No, I didn’t. You would look at book reviews in quality newspapers and

08:30 pick up some interesting titles to explore, and they would introduce you to other titles through the bibliographies and footnotes and acknowledgements and so on. I was totally unguided, but I was having to find the props myself.

You also said that you'd returned home at that stage when you were at Melbourne University. How did you find that, after being in the army environment for two years?

Yeah, well, it was again

09:00 a bit limiting but on the other hand it had its up side in that it was very nice to be back in a civilian house environment. My mother ran things very well, we were very comfortable, I was well looked after, et cetera. But I spent an awful lot of time not being in the house, because I was out with my friends doing things. That produced a few tensions

09:30 but I felt I sort of owed it to my parents in a way. I was the only child and I had just been away for four years; this would probably be the last time I'd be living with them. And it was, of course.

Did you have a fairly strong social life, girlfriends, et cetera?

Oh, I did, yes, I had a great girlfriend for about four or probably five years. She ended up marrying someone else,

10:00 we probably met a bit early in life, but yeah, I'm very grateful to her.

The other thing that I wanted to ask about your childhood was how do you think being an only child shaped and formed you?

I think it had quite a profound influence, I think it made me more intellectually engaged because I was constantly with people a generation older, so I didn't think of age as a barrier.

10:30 I think that made it easier for me to communicate with people and it also meant that I was listening to adult stuff most of the time, and wanting to hook onto that and understand it and so on. Because my parents were intelligent people there were a lot of interesting things that came up in the course of discussion. They would take me to interesting places

11:00 like libraries and museums. I can remember in my last year of primary school, I would have been about eleven, one afternoon a week I would tear straight home after school and my mother would give me my return train fare to go from Burwood into central Melbourne, and I'd then go up to the State of Victoria Public Library, which was a huge place, a great dome with walls covered with books.

11:30 I would pull out a few books and read there for a couple of hours and then get on the train and come home. You would never think of allowing an eleven year-old to do that by himself today, and there I was, their only child, they didn't think twice about it. They would take me to interesting places on family holidays and that sort of thing. It was an element of it being a guided tour, mind you. You had to

12:00 live with a certain degree of control and a little bit of frustration that that produced, but that was a minor aspect of that.

Did you ever wish for a brother or sister when you were growing up?

I don't think I did. I had quite a few good playmates at school, so the time when I needed companionship, like after school, we would go to each other's houses or to

12:30 the local park and play football or cricket or play soldiers or whatever. I was conscious of at home having no competition, so that rationalised it for me.

How did you get selected to be a Rhodes Scholar? Can you walk us through that process?

Yeah, it is

13:00 like winning the lottery and you realise that a lot of good people are not selected in your year, it doesn't mean that you're better than anyone else. But there were a number of the right boxes that you've got to tick in, and I can remember my father telling me about the Rhodes Scholarships when I was in my mid-teens.

13:30 I don't think he was consciously trying to shape me in that direction at all. Anyway, I knew about it and when I came to Melbourne University from Duntroon and I was thinking about the long-term future, I definitely wanted to do graduate work, and to do that I needed a scholarship. So I began looking across the field at the available scholarships. Of course the Rhodes was there as the most obvious thing.

And the pinnacle.

Yeah,

14:00 and simply the best-known of the scholarships. One reason why I went back to rowing was that if I did decide to compete for the Rhodes then I would clearly have ticked the sporting box, and that was OK. But then the other thing that you tick was a first-class honours degree and it took me quite a while

14:30 to settle into electrical and electronic engineering at the level that I had to do it to be fairly confident that I was going to get a first-class degree, but I thought that by the time I was halfway through my final year I had a pretty good chance at this. They're the sort of three main boxes you have to tick – leadership, intellectual endeavours and sporting capacity.

15:00 Then the fourth one was that you had to get some useful people to say good things about you, your referees. Obviously one of them had to be head of my department at Melbourne University, and that was Charles Morehouse, who was a wonderfully broad-sighted, liberal man. Every Friday afternoon he used to send us off to the Art Gallery to listen to the lectures of the people that knew about Renaissance art, because

15:30 he said, “Without this, you engineers are going to be such boring people, and you’ll waste so much of your lives.” That kind of spirit behind one is very helpful. I looked for a couple of people with whom I had connections who were active in different areas of society. One of them was my local clergyman, JP Stevenson, who became very prominent on letters to the editor pages,

16:00 particularly in the “Melbourne Age” through the ’60s and ’70s. He died in Canberra a year or so ago, still full of opinions on everything. The third was a chap who was actually my father’s supreme boss, he was chairman of the Melbourne Metropolitan Tramways Board, but I had – his name was Robert Risson – I had a connection with him because I was in the Boy Scouts and Risson was the Chief Scout in Victoria, so I buttonholed him

16:30 somewhere and asked if he would be a referee for me for the Rhodes Scholarship, and he would do that. So that sort of combination of things, and the fact that I was the first Duntroon graduate to come up for Rhodes Scholarship selection probably gave me an edge, well, it could have given me an edge, or it could have given me an edge the other way, I don't know. Much to my surprise I got the nod when the shortlists were brought together.

17:00 **Was it really a surprise?**

Yes, it was. I really expected someone more the classical Rhodes mould, you know, someone who had been in the residential college at Melbourne University, who was doing law or medicine and from a professional family, that sort of norm.

So what happened, how long was it when you found out that you got the scholarship before you ended up in Britain?

About nine months.

17:30 The scholarship was awarded in I think mid-December of 1960 and I was in Britain in September of 1961. So I went back to the army. Because I'd done an electrical engineering degree I was with the Signals Corps for a while and ended up doing work of that kind, and learning and teaching. Then in early September I got on the boat – didn’t fly in those days – and three

18:00 and a half wonderful weeks learning about different cultures, because every three or four days you would stop at a different port and you could go ashore for ten or twelve hours and explore each one.

It must have felt wonderful getting out of small-town Melbourne and knowing that you were about to embark on a new phase of your life?

Oh, I can't tell you how good it was. Yeah, it was a very good time.

What happened when you arrived in Britain?

18:30 Well, the most important thing was the impact that meeting to a whole lot of people who also wanted to get out and explore the world had on me in late 1961. Just getting to know chaps in my own college – all Oxford colleges bar five were male in those days, it was a very male-dominated environment,

19:00 and so my friends were mainly male. There were a lot of young British chaps who’d done their National Service in serious places like Cyprus where there was a real conflict going on. There were other parts of the Middle East or South-East Asia. There were a lot of Americans, a lot of them were Rhodes Scholars.

19:30 Brasenose, the college that I was at, was a fairly international place. It was just wonderful just meeting all these people and [to] be able to bounce thoughts off them and discover how wrong you’d been about some of your thoughts about what had happened in other parts of the world, and how different to the stereotype, say, really bright Americans were, from the sort of view that we tended to have of them in Australia, as

20:00 cigar-chomping, coarse, overly-rich people.

Did you find that your education in Australia had prepared you for Oxford?

Well, it certainly had in an academic sense, that was not a problem. But nothing in Australian education could really prepare you for the sudden broadening impact of meeting all these people and coming up against different ideas, different ways of life. I mean

20:30 I’ve been talking mainly about people from Anglo-Saxon cultures, but of course there were a lot of

Indians, Pakistanis, even people from the Middle East, and even some from South-East Asia and Japan, although that was to grow much more during the ’70s. Of course there were a lot of Africans: it was very interesting to meet, I got to know a

21:00 couple of guys from Nigeria in my own college. They were third-generation Oxonians, and there they were, Africans through and through, they spoke English with beautiful received British accents. You suddenly realised that there was a lot about the world you did not know.

21:30 Just getting to talk to people from other parts of the world about their own history and culture and their family backgrounds and so on, it just broadened the mind terrifically.

What were some of the conversations or some of the things that were informing then, that were revelations to you as a young man?

Yeah, I suppose the first one I can think of is the tremendous ethnic diversity in the

22:00 United States. I was coming into contact with Americans who were not only from an Anglo background but from a Germanic background or an Italian background or a Greek background or, in some cases, a Latino background, although they were few and far between at that stage. You got a feel of the amazing thing the United States was to somehow cohere and stay together with all these different

22:30 interests that could easily pull in different directions. All these people still retained their links with their own original cultures in Europe or Asia or Latin America, and you learnt through talking to them a hell of a lot about history and people in other parts of the world that we had not focused on because our educational background tended to focus

23:00 very much on Britain and the Commonwealth and the Empire, and things that group of states had been involved in. So there was that. There were things like attitudes towards law, how much that differs from society to society, because quite a few of the people I was friends with were doing graduate law degrees.

23:30 We used to get involved in complex discussions on the question of criminal responsibility and whether guilt was all in the mind, how if you did not have a guilty mind you're not guilty, and all those sorts of things, which then focused you on fundamental things like the constitution on which your society was based. I never really thought about the Constitution before I went to Oxford, and

24:00 then suddenly you come up against American lawyers who are spouting constitutional clauses every five minutes, and then you realise you're in a country, Britain, which did not actually have a constitution. That led me into an interesting class with a prominent Australian who spent most of his academic life at Oxford, Ken Wheare. Wheare had

24:30 been at Scotch and I was aware of him because one of my form masters at Scotch in 1949 had shown me the big class photograph of Ken Wheare, the Oxford don that he had visited earlier that year when this teacher was in the UK. So I was aware of him and I’d read up on some of his stuff. He and the professor of international law, who happened to be in my own college,

25:00 FH Lawson, jointly ran a seminar called “Writing the British Constitution”. About a dozen of us went along, we all had different interests and we were all given slices of what we thought should be the British constitution to write, and then discuss and see what the legal implications would be and so on. I got, naturally, the defence side of the British Constitution to write. So you had that sort of

25:30 broadening in place. And at the same time, in a more historical dimension, you had people like AJP Taylor, who could give quite spellbinding lectures on complex issues like the origins of the First World War, and European political dynamics in the nineteenth century; his great book, “The Struggle for Mastery in Europe”. And you began to realise that without knowledge of a lot of these things you were very liable

26:00 to make shallow judgements and get into issues that you didn’t understand much about. So I just had a wonderful time for two years extending the bounds of what I knew in a more general sense. I wasn't intending on becoming an academic at that stage, I’m not sure that I knew what I was intending to become. Things were sort of changing in my mind.

So you were getting a degree in what?

It was called Philosophy,

26:30 Politics and Economics.

Specialising in military history?

In international relations. I did that, I got a second-class honours degree, which for the amount of work I put in was quite reasonable. I went back to rowing, rowed for my college and rowed in a combined crew that Oxford put on at Henley in the summer of 1962. I also went

27:00 travelling. I had enough money to have a car and my mother’s family were all from Scotland and so the first vacation I had I went up to Scotland to try and find some of these people and see where we had come from. Well, exploring Scotland ….

This is the Grant clan, was it?

Yes, and the Sinclairs and the Fergusons. Exploring Scotland in late December-early January is not a very good thing to do, to undertake, from the point of [view of] having

27:30 daylight to see things in. But you experience something of the social life that people do themselves when they're protecting themselves from the environment, so that gave me an interesting glimpse of the way of life of the way of our family in Scotland that we had largely lost contact with.

Just going back to Oxford, how do you think you were viewed as an Australian? Were you a bit of an

28:00 **outsider, how were accepted in the college and into university life?**

Yeah, we were certainly viewed as outsiders and not to be taken all that seriously by British society. But I never felt disregarded either, because there were plenty of Australians around before me, but Australians certainly had the reputation of being outward-going, friendly and happy-go-lucky, inclined to larrikin [boisterous] behaviour

28:30 and the rest of the stereotype, which for most of us there was not true. But the stereotype rolls on, like the Americans had their own stereotype to deal with and so on. OK, there was a certain barrier of acceptance beyond which you never got, because you were not British and you're not going to be part of their society, and you're going to go back to your own country and do your own thing. But at the same time

29:00 the Brits were particularly good because so many of them had been abroad and knew the world outside and they were pretty internationally-minded. This is certainly true of Oxford because it had such a big international component amongst its student life. On the whole I found it very easy being an Australian at Oxford, as long as you didn't try and push too hard on

29:30 certain barriers.

What about the defence studies that you were undertaking at Oxford?

That's where I seriously got involved in strategic studies. This happened when I was a graduate student – no, I'm wrong, I was still an undergraduate student when I went to my first strategic studies seminars. One of the nice things about Oxford is that they produce at the beginning of each term a program of all the lectures that are on in your

30:00 faculty, and you can decide what you go to and what you don't. You don't get a lot of direction. I saw one which was just headed "Strategic Studies" and was run by Norman Gibbs and Max Beloff who were the two senior professors in All Souls in this field at that time. As a result of going along there I got to meet people like Alistair Buchan, who was the first director of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, and the

30:30 young Hedley Bull, who was a famous Australian academic. Hedley would have been in his late twenties at that stage. I thought, "By gee, this is really interesting stuff," you know, where they're starting to come to grips with the real complexities of what was the utility of nuclear weapons in the Cold War, should we have more of them or should we have less of them, should we be able to build defences against them or would that be destabilising

31:00 in its own right, and so on. I definitely began to feel the pull that that was the sort of thing that I wanted to get into. Because Oxford was the very broad-ranging place that it was, there were quite a lot of serious discussion groups going on that were not related to formal courses or degrees,

31:30 but more often informal societies. Taking part in these things, that was immensely stimulating and it also tended to reinforce my confidence that I could contribute, because every now and then I would think of something and throw it into the debate and it didn't seem to be rubbished. So I thought, "Yeah, I can hack it." Anyway, so I finished my

32:00 degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. I had another year to run on my Rhodes Scholarship, and the army wanted me back. They already thought I was colossally over-educated anyway. But I got my then graduate supervisor, Norman Gibbs, and the warden of Rhodes House, Bill Williams, who had been Montgomery's chief intelligence officer during the Second World War; he ended up as a brigadier, he and Gibbs had a

32:30 bit of clout with the Australian military and they both said, "Let O'Neill stay there for a third year, he won't let you down." So they did. I began what I thought would be just one year of graduate work, and I thought, "What can I do that will be interesting?" It was about this time that the debate in the United States focused on the relationship between civilian power and military power

33:00 in the control of national security policy, because Bob McNamara had just recently become US Defence Secretary and he was really shaking the Pentagon up. I could see that this was a powerful whole clutch of new issues that I had to come to grips with. I thought, "How can I get a handle on that?", and then the thought occurred to me that a good way to do it was by a historical method. And all the papers

33:30 relating to these problems in Germans under Hitler were available because the Germans had the misfortune to lose the Second World War and we had their documents. I had done six years of German at school so I thought, “Right, I’ll grab this opportunity.” So I went off to Germany to do some fieldwork in ’64.

34:00 My German came back to me reasonably well, I could read German without any problem at all. Spoken German was a bit more of a problem because we didn’t speak German when we studied it at school. But anyway, I had enough to cope.

You mean you never did oral lessons, or you just had no practice?

Very rarely, that’s right, we didn’t have oral lessons. I was taught by a German who is still alive, Dr Mendel, but he taught it all in English

34:30 and that’s the way it was. You were examined on paper and there you were.

Where did the fieldwork take you?

The fieldwork took me first of all to the German Federal Archives in Koblenz, and then to the German Office of Military Historical Research, which was part of the German Army in Freiberg in the Black Forest. Then I went to the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich,

35:00 which is where all the records of the Nazi Party itself were. Then finally I went to Berlin to work on the papers of the Prussian Government, because Prussia had continued as a state under Nazi Germany, and of course a lot of important things had happened in Prussia because Berlin was part of it. So when I was working in the German Federal Archives

35:30 I went out to lunch one day and there was a bundle of papers in my place and I began looking through them, and I could tell that this was important stuff. It was hand-written diaries of a man who had become a field marshal in the Second World War. His name was Von Weichs, and at this time he was a major general in 1934. I began reading the

36:00 record of a meeting that Hitler held with his generals on the 28th February, 1934, in which he mapped out really his whole strategy for the Second World War. Now I knew straight away that this was tremendously important, because AJP Taylor had been arguing very strongly that Hitler had never intended the Second World War, that he just stumbled into it the way politicians blunder along, and quite a lot of people went along with that. It was a raging debate,

36:30 and I suddenly realised that I had the king hit on Taylor in this, and I wondered how the hell had this not come to light before. So I went to see the person who put these papers in my place, and said, “Do you understand the importance of these papers?” and they said that no, because they’d come recently to the archive’s collection, they’d been given by the field marshal’s widow. They were not actually part of the archive’s property but they wanted someone to have a look at them

37:00 so they put them in my place. So I explained and they could see that this was tremendously important. Then there were legal complications to go through because they had to get the Baroness’s permission for me to cite the papers. But that all fell out and I went back to Oxford. I had a lot of luck also as I was going around Germany, getting to meet former members of the German High Command, like Grand Admiral Von Dönitz, who was Hitler’s successor.

37:30 I had a three-hour interview with him, getting a feel for what it was like for a non-political guy, as Dönitz was, to suddenly find yourself not only relating to all these Nazis, but swamped by them and having your professional ethics overridden by them and so on.

What did he tell you in that interview?

He thought that it was a terrible time to go through, that he had never imagined, never wanted to have

38:00 any political responsibility, but he could see that there were ways of trying to minimise Hitler’s influence and he would stick around and try and channel things as best he could, in particular to protect his own navy, which he was not able to do all that successfully because the German navy did suffer a high rate of casualties as a result of the

38:30 U-boat war in which Dönitz was a specialist. Anyway they're the sort of things that motivated him, and because he was so apolitical this is why Hitler chose him as his successor. Hitler realised that it was no good handing power over to Himmler – well, Heinrich had gone –

39:00 or one of the other leading Nazis because he could see how flawed they were. So he decided that that Dönitz would be his heir. Well, of course when Hitler clung to pretty much the last, and Dönitz was the fuehrer of the Third Reich for only a couple of weeks. But anyway,

39:30 we got through the interview and he looked at his watch and said, “Oh, I’ve got to be at my dentist’s in half an hour.” And I said, “Well, I’m going back into central Hamburg, can I give you a lift?” So he came along with me, and as we were going into Hamburg we were stopped by a traffic light and I thought, “God, here I am, I’ve got Hitler’s successor sitting alongside me in my own car. How unreal is this!”

40:00 Yeah, that was a sort of supreme instance of the sort of things that were happening to me at that time. I

got to know a Field Marshal Von Manstein, who was the architect of a lot of their great victories in the early phases of the campaign in Russia; General Halder , who was chief of the general staff for the first four years of the Second World War; General Heinrici ,

40:30 who commanded the defences of Berlin in the final battle in 1945. An American friend of mine at Oxford, who is still a close friend of mine, his name is Gaines Post, he was at New College, also Rhodes, so I had that connection with him. He'd been in Germany with the American Army for two years before he came up to Oxford in '61. He had a girlfriend whose stepfather

41:00 was a general whose name was Hermann Flörke who was a Hanoverian not a Prussian. Gaines gave me the connection with the family. And they were not all that far from Koblenz, they lived in Giessen, and so I used to go up there on weekends. It was just wonderful having this guy available as a resource to keep interviewing about the sorts of things that I was reading about and getting his slant on them, and why

41:30 they put up with Hitler. The basic question in my mind, in my thesis, was how did a bunch of very intelligent, educated, experienced people who had already been through the First World War allow themselves to get led into a second losing world war in the space of a generation? Of course having someone around like Flörke to bounce around all the questions that were coming up in my mind was a wonderful resource. So anyway, I was able to bring back not only this new perspective on Hitler's planning of the Second World War, because once you know one thing various others get confirmed and fall out, and you can build your thesis.

Tape 3

00:31 I got back to Oxford in late April '64. My supervisor could see that I really had the essence of a doctoral thesis here, because remember I was just doing a one-year BLit [Bachelor of Literature], and he said, "We've got to get another year from the Australian Army for you." I said, "Well, I'd love to do this, I'd love to turn the thing into a full-scale doctorate." Anyway, he wrote the necessary letter to the chief of the general staff and the response was yes,

01:00 that I could stay on for one more year, but for one year only. So there I was, having to complete the doctorate in two years flat, which is tough going. But never mind, I had this wonderful material. And then during the second half of 1964 I got to know Basil Liddell Hart well, and that will be a name that's familiar to you, I'm sure. He lived about twenty miles away, down the Thames Valley from Oxford. He was a friend of both my supervisor, Norman Gibbs, and the warden of Rhodes House, Bill Williams.

01:30 Basil had worked with a lot of these German people while they were prisoners of war immediately after the war, he was interested in the topic. He'd had personal correspondence with some of them in the 1930s and he gave me open access to his papers, but more importantly he gave me open access to his mind. I used to go down there one day a week and there were a couple of other youngsters that used to

02:00 go down there, too, one was called John Keegan, and we – it was at a stage of his life where he was sort of reaching out and mentoring young people and I was just very fortunate in coming into that group, and he not only helped me with developing the thesis, but his publisher Castles gave me a contract for publishing it before I had it written,

02:30 and Basil did the foreword for it when it was published. So all these things helped to it to make quite an impact when it came out about three months after I'd arrived in Vietnam in 1966.

It certainly sounds like a "Who's Who" of post-World War 2 military thought that you were involved in there. I just wanted to ask you about a couple of the Germans that you spoke to. You mentioned that Dönitz had

03:00 **said that almost he went along with Hitler to try and preserve his navy; it seems like a fairly common thing for German commanders to say after the war, that "we didn't really like it but we just went along with it". Do you think it was valid in the case of Dönitz, from your interview with him?**

Yeah, for a lot of these people. They were honest. There were relatively few senior military commanders in the navy or the army

03:30 who were Nazis. There were important exceptions to that. Romberg, who became War Minister in the late 1930s was a keen Nazi. Reichenau was another indoctrinated Nazi, although he fell out of favour with Hitler around 1942. I think Rommel for a while was quite a keen Nazi; he was appointed as the liaison officer between the army and the Hitler Youth

04:00 in 1935. But Rommel was fairly prominent, he was only a lieutenant colonel but he had the German equivalent of the Victoria Cross, the Pour le Merite around his neck, and he'd written a successful book that Hitler knew about and so on. So there were a number of people that supported the Nazis. But on the whole, Nazism really got up these guys' noses. I mean, they were old-fashioned conservatives, they did not like

04:30 the hustle, the corruption, the racism – while a lot of them were sort of mildly anti-Semitic they

certainly did not agree with putting Jews in concentration camps and killing them.

From your actual interview with Dönitz, though, you don't think there was any chance of post-war distancing from participation in the regime?

There would have been, I think that's a natural

05:00 thing to expect, but it's not the whole explanation and when you look at Dönitz's career he was not keen on Germany getting into a situation whereby it came to war with the principal sea powers of its era, when the German sea power was just getting back on its feet. He could see Germany's

05:30 weaknesses in terms of access to key resources, or at least oil. OK, he wasn't going to resign over it, he was going to do his job to see that Germany came out of this as well as it could, but he had no illusions about where it was all leading to. This was a dilemma that most of them felt, it's there in the lives of most

06:00 military people today. Later on you can ask me about how I felt about going to Vietnam in 1966, and the answer is a complex one. I bet if you ask General Peter Cosgrove how he feels about having to send the Australian Defence Force into Iraq, you'd probably get a complex answer.

I'd also like to ask you about Heinrici, what sort of insights did he give you into that Götterdämmerung period at the end?

06:30 Well, quite profound ones. This showed him quite clearly where political power lay as things were getting closer to the end, he was wanting to surrender earlier rather than later so that they could preserve something of what they had that millions of people would not be left entirely without shelter, and they wouldn't have the Russian army fighting

07:00 wars right over, or fighting battles right over central Berlin and so on. But he was just told to shut up and members of the SS [Schutzstaffeln] were put in subordinate command positions for the defence of Berlin, and any soldiers who were caught where they shouldn't have been or were suspected of retreating without advice, they were just grabbed and strung up from lampposts.

07:30 So Heinrici had enough experience with the Nazis for that to not be a great revelation to him. He was fascinating as a guy who had been through the First World War. He had fought on the Eastern Front in 1915 and '16 and '17, and he said that when they were ordered in 1941 to go back into Russia, he said a terribly cold feeling affected him in his heart, just going back into those

08:00 trackless wastes that go on for thousands of kilometres without an end to it.

OK, we'd better keep proceeding along. When you were back in Oxford writing up all this work and studying, what knowledge did you have of the Vietnam situation that was starting to burgeon?

Not a lot because it wasn't what I was focusing on primarily, but

08:30 I had been reading the newspapers and listening to the news because the Australian Army, of which I was a part, was already involved to the level of having a training team there from 1962 onwards [the AATTV – Australian Army Training Team Vietnam]. I kept hoping that something would go right and that the war would be finished before I graduated. Of course that didn't happen and in

09:00 August of 1965 I got my posting order for when I was due to finish at Oxford – I was due to finish at Oxford in December. I was being posted to the 5th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, which was bound for duty in Vietnam the following year. This was the army's way of saying to me, "OK, now you get back to what we expect you to do fairly quickly." In a way

09:30 it was the army taking me seriously, I was pleased about that, but it was also a total break from what I had been building up and working on, and in which I was achieving quite a lot of success. I knew that when I was back in Australia that would be the end of working on things like Nazi Germany in the Second World War. It would bring my links with people like Liddell Heart and Michael Howard and

10:00 Norman Gibbs and Max Beloff and so on, not entirely to an end but it would be a much more attenuated connection. So I had a lot of regrets about that. Mind you, there was nothing to be done about it, I was a member of the army, I owed them some service, they'd been very good to me for six years while I was doing various university degrees, so back I went. In early 1965 I met Sally and we

10:30 got engaged in June and we were planning to get married in Australia early in 1966, but when I got my posting order, we thought, "Well, hell, let's get married while we can," and we got married in October of 1965 in England.

Where exactly had you encountered Sally and what was her background?

Sally was an Adelaide girl. One of my best friends at school, Anthony Bradford, had married

11:00 Sally's elder sister, and I had been a best man and Sally had been a bridesmaid at that wedding in December of 1960. We had made no impact on each other at that stage. I was going to Oxford the following year, I wasn't looking for a new romantic entanglement and Sally was doing other things too.

We met up again in 1964 when Anthony, my old school friend and Robyn came to the UK [United Kingdom].

11:30 He was doing some postgraduate work in tropical medicine, and through going to see them I met up with Sally again, this was in early 1965, and the right chemistry occurred and pow, our relationship took off and it's still going strong. The first major problem that we had to encounter was Vietnam and the separation that that would involve.

12:00 And I, because I was being sent with an infantry battalion, there was a possibility of wounding or death, so it was not pleasant, but there you are. It was something that had to be faced.

Can I ask you if you can recall at the time, at the time of '65, what was your feeling about the "domino theory" [belief that, without intervention, communism would spread geographically from one nation to the next]?

12:30 I was aware that it was around but because it was a theory it was something that you liked to test a bit, it was not something that was automatically convincing to me at that stage. But remember also that we'd been much more concerned about Indonesia than Vietnam

13:00 in 1964-'65, because of Confrontation and the way Sukarno was moving things. I tended to focus much more on Indonesia, and of course by the end of '65 things seemed to be moving off the boil. With Sukarno out of power, Suharto came in with a much more moderate line as far as international contacts were concerned. I thought there was

13:30 a good chance that all this would settle down, but of course it didn't.

Why was it you were posted to an infantry battalion rather than the engineers, where you had your undergraduate degree in?

It was because the army I think was wanting to take me seriously, and if I was going to go on a fast trajectory up through the army it would be better to be in the infantry than in

14:00 one of the technical arms. I think they just wanted to give me as much experience as possible to make up for what I had missed while I'd been educated. I think they were good motives and I appreciated them. At the same time I didn't really want to go, but there was no option.

Besides the obvious disincentives like wounding or death, were there other reasons you thought you didn't want to go?

14:30 Well, the main one was I really did not want to leave England at that point. I had a very successful career in the development there, and I was going to pull out all the plugs just before things came on stream. So that was the principal one, and of course in a personal sense, having just recently been married, I really did not want to be away from Sally for a year. They were the main issues.

15:00 **What did you think about our ability to win the Vietnam War?**

At that point I was pretty agnostic on it, I just didn't know. I was aware of the French experience and I knew it would be a big ask, but it would be in the light of the British success in the Malaysian Emergency, things would work out.

15:30 I was very impressed by the might of the United States and I thought that perhaps, with all this behind it, it might work out, but I certainly didn't feel as though it was a sure-fire thing.

At what point did you have to return to Australia then?

I arrived in Australia in late '65. I did my oral for the doctorate about

16:00 two days before I got on the boat. That fortunately went well; I had no time for a rewrite.

Perhaps we could get a comparison of your mood on the way back on the boat compared to when you went out on the boat?

Yes, well, life had begun to get serious on the way back. I had contracted to write

16:30 a number of obituaries for "The Times" on senior members of the German High Command who were still alive. Like most newspapers, they like to build these things up in advance of the deaths. So I spent quite a lot of time on that trip down in the cabin writing stuff and earning money, which we needed, of course. Sally was up on deck and every time we'd come along past some interesting island or something she'd come down and say, "Hey, you've got to break off and

17:00 come and look at this." But when I was going to Oxford there I was a young person without any particular qualification or standing, et cetera, looking very widely. Four years later there I was coming back with a doctorate, with a good book contract in my pocket,

17:30 with a sizeable career obligation looming. So it all got rather serious. There I was in my late twenties, I thought, "This is good stuff, I can ride with this."

Whose obituaries did you write, do you recall?

Well, Heinrici was one. I've forgotten whether I – I think I wrote Manstein.

18:00 I wrote twelve of them but I've forgotten whether I did Dönitz. But there were about a dozen – oh, Halder I did. I really need to look.

Oh, yeah, I didn't expect that you'd remember every single one of them,

18:30 **it was just of interest. When you did return to Australia in December of that year, what was the procedure then for your (UNCLEAR) up into the army?**

Yeah, well, I had to report for duty in early January. We had Christmas dinner with Sally's people in Adelaide, we spent the New Year with my parents in Melbourne and went up to Sydney, then I reported for duty on the 2nd of January. We then had

19:00 to find somewhere to live because I was too junior to have a married quarters assigned to me. We found a pretty ghastly flat in Liverpool, but never mind, it was OK. Because the battalion was training up to go to war in a little over three months, the work program was very intense, and there I was arriving back, I hadn't worn a uniform for four years and an awful lot of things had happened.

19:30 The army had a new rifle by the time I got back and of course I couldn't even handle it, and nobody knew this. Because I was a captain, second-in-command of an infantry company, I couldn't just say, "Well, I don't know how to fire the weapon." So the first time we went out on a range I was waiting to take my turn, I was watching what the guy in front of me was doing very closely.

20:00 I'd borrowed his rifle at the end and went through it all. So there was a lot of catching up on, basic physical fitness to reacquire and so on.

Did you lament the loss of the Lee Enfield?

I don't really think so because the FN [Fabrique Nationale (Self Loading Rifle)], which replaced, it did have a higher rate of fire and didn't give you quite a kick in the shoulder when you fired it.

Why was it that you were brought in straight away as a captain, a 2IC [2nd In Command]?

20:30 Well, I had that level of seniority, I was a captain of two years – I was a captain of nearly four years' standing, I was actually fairly senior.

Through the Melbourne University Regiment?

Well, in those days promotion in the army was automatic. If you were a Duntroon graduate you'd done four years as a lieutenant, which in my case elapsed

21:00 in late 1962. I was promoted to captain then, and you did six years as a captain and you were promoted to a major ten years after you graduated from Duntroon. So there I was only two years off being promoted as a major.

Despite not having actually served in between?

Yeah. Well, I was really of the level of seniority where I might have had the good luck to be a company commander, but because I didn't have the necessary

21:30 experience they couldn't make me a company commander, so the nearest thing was to make me a company second-in-command. That's what I went off to Vietnam as, and we'd not been in Vietnam long when the battalion intelligence officer was called off to Task Force to replace someone there who had fallen sick, and Colonel Warr, the commanding officer said, "OK, O'Neill, you can be the intelligence officer," and that was great.

22:00 It was a very interesting spot from which to view the war.

We will of course get on to that later. All that time you had in Oxford you were on the books and it counted as time served?

Yes, that's right.

When you were in Britain, what contact did you have with the British military establishment?

It was fleeting but I did do things with the Oxford University Officers' Training Corps. I did spend a bit of time visiting the British Army

22:30 and some of its bases, particularly when I was in Germany; it was a good chance to familiarise myself with British Army of the Rhine.

Any particular regiments that you recall?

The 4th/7th Hussars I do recall. I had a friend who had been the adjutant of the Oxford University Officers' Training Corps who was a Hussar, and he went to them

23:00 as a squadron commander, so I spent a bit of time with them. It was in spring I think, I can remember coming out of the mess one morning and there was a plate of ice over my windscreen and I was scratching away at it, and one of these young cavalry soldiers came out and looked at me and said, “Don’t be perfectly ridiculous.” He ran back inside and came back with a bottle of cognac which he sprinkled over

23:30 it, and he said, “That’s the way to get rid of ice.”

It’s a way to run up a mess bill as well.

I think he was just putting that on. Anyway, yeah, I saw certain British; I wasn't entirely out of contact. Because I still felt that this was part of my profession, there were quite a few British Army people studying at Oxford and I got to know them personally. Of course

24:00 there were a lot of American armed service people at Oxford and in 1964 I organised what I called the “Oxford Military Dinner”. I got all the serving officers of all the various armies around the world who were studying at Oxford and we held a dinner in my college one night, and I’ve still got the photo of it somewhere.

What sort of a training work-up did you have to go to back to in Australia before you departed?

Well, I had to do

24:30 a lot of infantry minor tactics, weapon handling, but at the same time I was a company second-in-command and all the responsibilities that that job entailed, which were largely to do with administration logistics, people’s pay records, personnel things, making sure they got all their medical shots and so on, there was a fairly full slice of things to be done there too. So I was catching up on a lot of things

25:00 as I went along, but also drawing on that four years of thorough training I’d had at Duntroon. I was off to Vietnam feeling reasonable confident that I could do what I had to do.

Did you have to go to Canungra?

Yes, we did a couple of weeks up at Canungra. That was probably the worst stage of it all because that really was very demanding physically.

25:30 They put you over things called “confidence courses”, which, as I said in my books, speedily remove any confidence that you might have had left in you about your capacity to surmount obstacles. We went sailing along wire ropes over rivers and all those sorts of things. But once you actually got to Vietnam the combat-related stresses were, on the whole, milder in a physical sense, and

26:00 they were much more in a mental and psychological sense.

How did you personally get to Vietnam?

I went by aircraft. The company seconds-in-command usually went a couple of weeks ahead of the company because they had to see the tents erected for them, that there was a water supply, that there would be vehicles, and virtually to get the whole thing set up.

26:30 So I arrived in Vietnam I think around the middle of April in 1966 and went down to Vung Tau, which is where the battalion came in at, then helped to get things set up. And then the company came in around the 26th of April and we then had a couple of weeks to shake down.

27:00 **What were your first impressions of arriving in a place like Vung Tau?**

Well, the smell: it was quite powerful because we were out in an area that was not far from a rubbish tip, and because it was a fishing area there was fish waste all over the place. Humidity, heat, realising that it was going to be like this for the next twelve months.

27:30 The climate sort of alternated between wet and dry, but it was hot and humid nearly all the time. Being in a South-East Asian essentially village environment was the next thing to get to grips with and to discover how these groups of people worked, and how to relate to them if you wanted co-operation from them, how you could do things for them to improve the relationship and that kind of thing.

When I’ve interviewed a lot of Vietnam veterans,

28:00 **they arrived at Vung Tau when it was quite a thriving metropolis; what was there when you arrived there?**

Well, we were the first battalion to come into Vung Tau, so it had not been shaped by the presence of the Australian force before. There definitely was some – it was a sizeable town, there were a couple of restaurants, there was a run of bars. There were Americans around, they used to use it as

28:30 a leave centre, but I would say it was only marginally developed by comparison to what it would have been in, say, 1968.

From Vung Tau where did you proceed to?

Well, we had, as I said, a week or two to shake down in Vung Tau, and then we set off by helicopter to clear the central area of Phuoc Tuy which used to be the Task Force base, Operation Hardihood, in May

29:00 of 1966.

Now you went out by aircraft; how did the rest of the battalion get out there?

By HMAS Sydney.

How long did they take to catch up with you then?

They took a couple of weeks, I think they probably left Australia a day or two after we left by aircraft from Richmond.

29:30 **How did you go about preparing the facilities, the camps? Where did you get the materials from?**

A certain amount came from the Americans; I just assumed that they were done by purchase. Some had come through the Australian system, not a lot; the Australian logistic system was only just building up. The first Australian logistic support group was barely established, I think, when

30:00 we arrived. For the first three or four months not very much came through the pipeline. I can tell you some amusing stories about how we got things from the Americans later on.

You can tell me now if you want.

OK, well, we arrived at the beginning of the wet season and once we were established on our base up in central Phuoc Tuy the heavens were opening up every afternoon, and, boy, it was like being under Niagara. All we had to

30:30 camp under were our capes , half-shelter that we carried in our packs on the back, and you joined yours on with another guy's to make a full shelter. They were called "hoochies": they were about that high off the ground and went down, there was nothing much to put on the ground other than a piece of plastic and you'd usually wake up in a flowing river of mud if it had been raining at all during the night.

31:00 This was leading to health problems and morale problems and so on. I had a very experienced company quartermaster sergeant, he was my right hand man, "Sailor" Mealing. Sailor had been in the Korean War and the Malayan Emergency – a great character, I don't know what happened to him, I hope he's still alive. Sailor said to me one day, "We ought to go down to the beach and liberate a marquee from the Americans." So I said, "Do you know how to do it?"

31:30 and he said, "Yeah. I'll need your authority." So we took the company jeep and trailer and we went off down to Vung Tau. Saylor was one of these old soldiers that could talk his way in anywhere, and we got into this American base and looked around and saw there was a row of six marquees all pitched there, of which four were empty. Sailor raised his eyebrows and looked at me and said, "You see what I see, boss?"

32:00 He then went off and sweet-talked the Americans into lending him their jackets and caps and he gave me an American jacket and cap and said, "Put this on." He put his on and we went around and he took the pegs out and took one of the marquees down, and I helped fold it up and we got it and its poles all into the company trailer, then he returned the caps and jackets without explaining what they'd been used for, and we

32:30 set off through the gate and we had ourselves a marquee for the company. So our chaps were able to eat their meals in shelter. There were a few other stories like that to be related, of how Australians got by at a time of a real dearth of supplies. Quite important then, lots of things were transferred through the ANZUS lines without any formalities taking place.

I think it's an Australian soldier's right to

33:00 **"borrow" things from the Americans: it still happens today, you'd be pleased to know.**

Oh, good.

Why do you think the Australian supply line was so weak?

Well, we are very bad at logistics. Our focus in the two World Wars and the Korean War had been in providing frontline troops, and they'd done that very well. It had been very heavily dependent on allies for logistic support, and logistics is

33:30 expensive to do properly and it consumes a lot of people. We didn't have the floor [?] structure to do it properly. Now, as a result of our initial shortcomings in Vietnam the army and the government, I think, began taking the logistic side more seriously and things did improve towards the end of our first year, but we were getting by on very much a hand-to-mouth basis, even with basic things like ammunition supply.

34:00 **That's an important one, too.**

It was, yes.

So around Vung Tau the battalion initially did some training?

Yes. There is a small range of mountains that overlooks Vung Tau that are the Ganh Rai Mountains, and we climbed around in there and honed up our jungle skills a bit. It was very interesting, the top of Nui Ganh Rai is

34:30 crowned by a French gun battery position that must have been built in the 1930s, or possibly the ’20s, to protect Vung Tau from seaward attack. When you got up there and saw that the French had really made a major effort here thirty or more years ago, it sort of said to you, “Well, what do you think that you could do that’s

35:00 better than what they can do?”

So you were conscious of the fact that someone else had failed to do the same thing?

I was very conscious of it, and you saw evidence of it all over the province, you saw quite a number of French ports that had either been vacated and fallen into disrepair, or some had been taken over by the South Vietnamese Army. Of course there was still a French commercial presence in the form of the rubber plantations around Binh Ba and further north.

35:30 But we’ll talk more about that later.

What sort of mixture was the battalion of National Servicemen and regulars?

Fifty-fifty, pretty well. It was very hard to tell who was National Service and who was regular, apart from the age difference in the case of some of the regulars. The only way to tell really was to look at their regimental number: if the second digit was a seven they were a National Serviceman. It was quite remarkable the cohesion that the

36:00 battalion developed, you just didn’t feel that it was a divided unit at all.

Amongst those National Servicemen were there some who didn’t want to be there?

Well, I suppose there were but only one of them ever made that at all apparent by refusing to obey an order, and that was only for a short space of time. It was remarkable, it was just not a problem. I expected it to be, but

36:30 no, it wasn't. I think there is a certain amount in the logic of the combat situation, where you're placed in the situation where your lives are all at risk, the best way to get home is to do what you’ve been taught to do and all support each other.

What about fleeing?

Well, there’s nowhere to flee to. You're in a hostile environment, and no one was going to desert to the Viet Cong.

37:00 Not a good way to have an army future.

So amongst those National Servicemen there was no deliberate dragging of the feet or avoidance or unrest generated?

Certainly not, not in my time.

Tell us how you came to move up north, then?

Well, we got orders for Operation Hardihood in

37:30 early May and we were moved up by an American Iroquois helicopter company. We’d done some shake-out training exercises with them before so we knew what their procedures were and how to call for more assistance and how to release them so that they were not held in a vulnerable area for longer than necessary, and so on. They took us up and we arrived

38:00 a bit north of Nui Dat – there's a map in my book which shows exactly where we went. We did company patrols around the area and gradually converged on the part that was to be the base, having cleared the area around.

And you were, as the company 2IC what was your role in that situation?

Well, I was the administrative link: when we needed

38:30 anything sent up it was my job to get in touch with headquarters and say that we need such-and-such supply of ammunition or medical supplies or rope or whatever it was that we needed. It was also my job to see that everyone was properly fed on the ground and, when we occupied a defensive position at night, it was

39:00 my job to go around and see that the three separate platoons co-ordinated their defences and each could give each other mutual support. And generally be available to help the company commander,

Bruce McQualter who had been one year ahead of me at Duntroon, and who I knew pretty well and we had a good personal relationship, and anything else I could do for him.

39:30 **As the company 2IC, did that mean in the normal schedule of things that you would be left out of battle?**

Yes, except on the patrol operations where the company was moving as a whole into a new area everyone went along, but on quite a number of the earlier company actions my job was to stay home with say about twenty soldiers and man the

40:00 company base, so that if there a was Viet Cong attack while the company was out they couldn't just walk in the front door.

Can you describe to me the terrain and the topography up there where you lived?

Yeah, it was very beautiful, for the most part. At times it reminded me of an overgrown English park because of the lushness of the growth, the bright greenness of everywhere.

40:30 For me, having been in Europe and gotten used to bright European greens, coming back to Australian for four or five months and then going back to Vietnam, it kind of seemed like reconnecting with normality, to see all this bright greenery again. The terrain of central Phuoc Tuy was fairly flat, there were mountains in the south-east and the south-west. There were a couple of hills in the central part of the province which were not all that high but they were important tactically because they gave you viewpoints, and they were not difficult to climb. Of course we had one at the central part of the Task Force base in Nui Dat, but there were three Nui Dats in Phuoc Tuy, as you may have come to learn by now, so you had to be careful which one you were talking about. The northern part of the province was covered with jungle, the central part was that it was the fertile rice growing area that was mostly paddies, and you had a band between the paddy area and the jungle which was the rubber plantations, and the rubber plantations went further on up Route 2 which ran north-south through the province. Over on the eastern side of the province had the district of Xuyen Moc, which was quite isolated from the rest. It was an outpost which was very well defended by a terrific South Vietnamese captain by the name of….

Tape 4

00:32 **Professor, we'll just pick up where Mat [interviewer] left off and you were giving us a wonderful description of Nui Dat and its surrounds.**

The soil was red, very fine particles, and so it got into everything, so everything green or khaki acquired this pattern of redness and you just had to accept this as part of your life. Your skin

01:00 even acquired a reddish tint because of all the red dust in the water and in the clothing you wore and so on. For six months of the year you had this terrific downpour that took place most afternoons, so you just got used to being wet, which was not uncomfortable because it was not cold for the most part. But if most of your clothing is wet a lot of the time your feet deteriorate

01:30 and looking after your feet was a problem, and there were a lot of skin disorders. We were lucky we had good medical attention; otherwise we would not have been able to stand the distance.

What about the locals, did you have much to do with them, or what were your impressions of them during that period?

Yeah, once I became the intelligence officer I had quite a lot to do with the locals, because they very soon worked out what came down the chain of

02:00 command by way of intelligence to me was often a week or a fortnight old. The best way to find out what the Viet Cong were up to in the province was to go out and talk to Vietnamese who lived out in the various districts, and so I think there were six districts in Phuoc Tuy – Xuen Moc was one, Dat Do in the central area, Duc My in the north – no sorry, Duc Tan –

02:30 I've forgotten. Duc Tan in the north and I've just forgotten the name of the district in the east – sorry in the west.

03:00 Anyway, each of those was run a South Vietnamese captain; in a couple of them there was an American adviser. They all had the problem of survival in an environment where they could easily be overrun, because if the Viet Cong concentrated their forces they could produce a whole regiment like 274 or 275. So these chaps needed good intelligence and in some

03:30 cases they did their own trade-offs with the Viet Cong to buy protection for themselves. Not all of them did. Anyway, by establishing a network like that I was able to find out what was going on in the immediate vicinity. And then coming down from higher up we had the benefit of signalmen's traffic intercepts. We weren't told very much about that but every now and then someone would come down from the Task Force

04:00 headquarters and say, “We have very reliable information that so-and-so,” and you'd know where it had come from. Then the third source of intelligence I had was establishing personal contacts with the Americans. I had a commanding officer who was very liberal, who gave me a lot of latitude in operating, and having got to know Americans a lot at Oxford

04:30 and knowing how much they like to talk, and knowing how they're interested in foreigners themselves, I decided I would go to the American corps headquarters up at Long Binh. I Just got one of our little army helicopters to fly me up there and I just turned up at this place that was commanded by this lieutenant general and hundreds of colonels and so on, and walked in the door and said,

05:00 “I am the intelligence officer from the 5th Battalion in the Australian Task Force, I am here to talk to your intelligence staff.” That sort of threw them and they said, “Sure, down the corridor and in there.” So I got to meet people personally – while the Americans normally have a very fixed and formal chain of command, I fell outside of that because I was Australian and they would tell me all kinds of things face-

05:30 to-face that would take a couple of weeks to reach me through the chain of command. So I was able to do this and then report back to Task Force Headquarters on things that I found out that they needed to know about as well as to let the battalion know. So I had intelligence going at those three levels. But coming back to the local people, the key thing we knew about what would determine the success and failure of our operation is whether the local people liked us, basically,

06:00 that it was a war for their affections and we were there to help them and not make life difficult for them, and not to take big chunks of territory off them and declare them free fire zones; definitely not to drive tanks across their rice fields, as the Americans would do time after time – which is a story that I used to tell my students at Oxford, the difference between the American approach to counter-insurgency and the Australian approach. And I’ve seen it with my own eyes in Vietnam:

06:30 an American cavalry unit chasing some Viet Cong on foot, the Viet Cong would run for a village, they’d run along some paddy field buns and the Americans chasing them in armoured personnel carriers would go straight through the rice fields destroying the means of sustenance for that village for months to come.

And creating more Viet Cong.

Exactly. Australians in exactly the same project would do it on foot and they

07:00 would run around the paddy buns too and then try and talk their way into the village. That had – it didn’t always work but it had some chance of working, whereas the Americans were making enemies by the hundreds.

When you arrived at Nui Dat there was an assessment made that some of the locals had to be pushed back?

Yes.

Can you talk about that?

I can't tell you much about it because it happened above my level and it was a couple

07:30 of villages of people – one was Long Tan village and I think the other one was Long Phuoc. They were displaced and put somewhere else and the 6th Battalion did that. If you talk to people from the 6th RAR [6th battalion Royal Australian Regiment] they can – I knew it was going on but we weren't involved. We were operating more on the northern side where our task was not to displace people but to try and get some relationship

08:00 going, so that we knew what the Viet Cong were up to in the northern part of the province. After establishing ourselves the first major operations we did were to try and get a handle on the Viet Cong presence in the village of Duc My, which was the first one up Route 2 north of the Task Force, which is normally a

08:30 Montagnard village, they were people who had been refugees during the French war and had been resettled. They tended to be isolated, and there was certainly some Viet Cong penetration but they were not terribly enthusiastically Viet Cong at all. They just wanted to help and they were easy to fix. The next village up was much bigger, Binh Ba, which had a population of

09:00 somewhere between one and two thousand. It was a French rubber plantation village; everyone lived in little brick cottages laid out in formal grid pattern, totally different to what you'd expect for a South Vietnamese village. There was a lovely big airstrip in the middle of the rubber plantation, and the rubber plantation managers lived in lovely big 1930s-style houses with white plastered walls outside.

09:30 They had it good, but of course that village was the centre of economic activity in the northern part of the province, it attracted a lot of Viet Cong influence, and they used to particularly come and tax people and collect rice and other things that they needed. The French rubber plantation used to pay tax to the Viet Cong. Exactly how they did it I never found out, whether they it was locally

10:00 done or whether it was done on an international basis from their headquarters in Paris goodness only

knows, but they certainly had protection. We had to treat the French in a special category: they obviously were not enemy and we didn't want to treat them as enemy; at the same time, although they were sort of fellow westerners in the South-East Asian environment,

10:30 we didn't want to embrace them too much because that would be the end of them. The Viet Cong would cut their throats, as they did later on in 1968 after the Tet Offensive. But they didn't at least while we were there. But it was useful to have a degree of rapport with them; we never used them as part of our intelligence linkage but it was good to have a friendly relationship with them so we could continue

11:00 to work through the people of Binh Ba who did provide useful intelligence. I had three Vietnamese English Literature students from the University of Saigon as interpreters with me, I didn't speak Vietnamese – I could speak a few words of it.

This is when you were an intelligence officer?

Yes. I used to always take one of them with me, and they were particularly –

11:30 I mean they were very intelligent, and they could not only interpret for me in a linguistic sense, but they could interpret for me in a social sense, and they could tell me what to do, how to conduct myself, how to sit, what sort of gestures to avoid and so on. They could also give me a fair idea of what the mood of the place was.

You must have trusted them completely?

Yeah, I did. Well, then I realised there was a risk in that, but

12:00 I used to always make sure they came with me on operations so that if I got it, they got it.

Talking about your first combat, just taking you back, were you at all worried that the Australian Army were going to match up to the North Vietnamese?

Yes, of course. There we were with a battalion that had recently come together, half of them were motor mechanics, barbers, taxi drivers from around Sydney,

12:30 going to war with this lot against people who had been defending their native soil for thirty years and done it rather well – it was scary. However, after our first couple of contacts with the Viet Cong, I could see that our guys could really hack it. They had learnt a certain amount about tactics, they were good at seeing where the enemy were, they were accurate shots. In a

13:00 fire fight, they could hold their own. It was a remarkable confirmation of the effectiveness of the training system and of how adaptable the average Australian is to this sort of situation.

There was a fatality on one of your combats?

Oh yes, the first one. This was Private Errol Noack, who was the first National Serviceman killed

13:30 in Vietnam. This happened I think it was on the first day of Operation Hardihood. We got B Company – Noack was in B Company – got rather close to A Company, I think, in our patrols, and there was a small Viet Cong group somewhere around and in the process

14:00 of a skirmish Noack stood up and someone shot him. It was probably someone in A Company mistaking him, but I don't know the details to that extent. My feeling at the time was that he had probably been shot by the Viet Cong, but I didn't know at that point how close the A Company element had been. He died on his way back to hospital.

14:30 I think he had a bullet in his liver.

Were you in charge of evacuating casualties, was that one of your roles?

Yes.

Can you talk about how you handled that? I mean it wasn't part of your life at Oxford, it must have been quite harrowing.

Yes, it was. There was a company medic and his job was to put the first dressings on and try and make some specialised assessment of what actually needed to be done.

15:00 My role was more in terms of being able to get hold of the people who had the helicopters and have one sent forward to an area where it could reach us fairly quickly if we needed it, then guide them in, make sure that there was an adequate-sized landing area for the helicopter, that it was secure, that the pilot could see the H on the ground and know where to put down and that sort of thing,

15:30 and also to try and give some sort of psychological comfort by talking to whoever was being evacuated, if they were capable of talking, but that's really what it involved.

Was there many casualties in those first few combats?

No, not many. There were a few woundings; Noack was the only death that I can recall in Operation Hardihood. But there were

16:00 quite a number of others. I think we had twenty-two killed in the battalion during the year and seventy or eighty wounded. You never knew when it was going to happen: sometimes you expected to run into a sizeable Viet Cong group and you didn't; and sometimes you were not expecting anyone around and, blam, a sniper shoots someone. So you had to be constantly on your toes for it.

16:30 My battalion doctor, Tony White, really was particularly good – I don't know if you're interviewing him?

Not personally, yeah.

I made a recommendation, when your people contacted me I made a recommendation that Tony should be interviewed. He's a skin specialist and his surgery is only a couple of k's [kilometres] away from where we're sitting now; they live in Randwick.

17:00 If you read my book you'll see what a brave guy he was in terms of going right into combat situations where there were wounded so that he could get to them and treat them quickly.

Did you have time to pause and think about where you'd ended up, you know, working in the infantry in the frontline there, and really you're an academic and intellectual man: how was that juxtaposition at that time, working for...?

17:30 Yes, I did. Well, it was not always a happy juxtaposition. Some of the reasons why I began writing the book was that when you're out on operations I didn't have a huge amount to do as intelligence officer. My main work was done when we were back in base, using my network, finding out what was happening, advising the commanding officer on what I thought the Viet Cong would be doing in the face of

18:00 the next operation. So when we were out in the field my job was mainly being a spare command post officer, and I used to take my turn on the command net for three hours every night, and sometimes during the day, so I had a bit of time spare. And I wanted to get a book out of the war, so I said to the colonel, "How about I write a history about operations while we're going along?

18:30 Would you approve and would you co-operate?" And he said yes to both of those. Later on I had problems with the army with getting it published, but that's another story. So when we were out on operations I was usually able to take a bit of time and sit under a tree somewhere and just write my thoughts on what we were going through and why we were doing it.

19:00 We had an excellent postal service, that really was one of the features of this war. I used to carry a little green-covered plastic notebook in my pocket, because that protected it from the rain. It had small loose-leaf pages and I would write several of these, pop them in an envelope and send them to Sally. She would read it, type them up, do a bit of editing because she's very good at that, and she would then send a copy of the typescript back to me

19:30 and I'd go through it and make a few editorials and send it back to her. So by the time I got through twelve months in Vietnam I had this book pretty well written, so that was one way of coming to terms with it. But the more I served in Vietnam, the more I could feel that this was OK to do once but definitely not again.

20:00 It was mentally testing to a certain extent, but you could see that it was going to run out of fascination some time soon. The whole business of soldiering is pretty physical, pretty basic and so on. An interesting thing to do once. I realised after I'd been there for a few months that I had to think my way out of the army.

20:30 It got me down a bit. And I can remember an operation we did, I think it was in November of 1966, on Long Son Island: it was an operation that went fairly well, not a lot happened at battalion headquarters and I had a lot of time to myself, and I really disliked what I was doing. I was not happy.

21:00 So I then decided that I would definitely leave the army as soon as I could after we got back to Australia.

What did you dislike that much, what was getting to you?

I suppose just being told to do things all the time and not being able to take a lot of personal initiative, and partly feeling that I was getting a bum rap, that we all were, that we were in

21:30 this war situation not defending our really vital national interest – it was different from the First and Second World Wars in that sense – and coming increasingly to think that maybe our government hadn't made a very wise choice in all this, and we were being bunnies for the sake of some sort of national insurance policy, and that was not a terribly appealing thought.

National insurance

22:00 **policy against the communists?**

Yeah. It's like the old argument that John Howard uses for being in Iraq, to maintain the ANZUS alliance. "Well," I thought, "OK, if they want to do that they can do it with someone else. I'll do it once and never again." So that raised the problem of what to do next and then of actually how to do it. It was

not long afterwards, the chap who was the

22:30 director of academic studies at Duntroon wrote me saying that Duntroon was going to become part of the University of New South Wales, and, “We’re going to set up this department of military studies, we’re going to upgrade the academic side of the work and would you be interested in coming back and joining the History Department as a senior lecturer?” That was just the right time to ask me that question, so I said

23:00 yes. The long and the short of that was that I knew my next job would be a quasi-academic one at Duntroon and I could probably then continue to move sideways out of the army into a civilian capacity at Duntroon, and then move on into the wider academic world, and that’s really what happened. So I became more adjusted to my fate, I suppose, by the end of 1966. But

23:30 for a while there I was not a very happy camper.

You mentioned that you were thinking your way out of the army: was the fact that you could see people being killed around you, that the civilian population was getting killed, was that an issue for you as well or was it more the political reasons that you didn’t believe were right that you were there?

It was much more the political and strategic issue. I mean, people being killed around you, particularly

24:00 of your own kind wearing your own uniform, that has a pretty reinforcing impact. You want to help, you want to stop other people from dying and so on; that didn’t sort of undermine my commitment, but it was more the feeling that the people in Canberra just did not understand this. The feeling of, well, the knowledge

24:30 of serving alongside the Americans, seeing how ineffective their huge resources were. When our battalion first came to Vietnam a couple of the officers – Max Carroll, who was the battalion operations officer, along with a couple of others – were seconded to the American 174th Airborne Brigade, and they did a couple of operations with them. The stories they brought back were quite frightening, the Americans

25:00 not knowing anything about jungle tactics, and instead of creeping around and finding out what's going on silently and not betraying your presence to the enemy, they would come in helicopter loads by the dozen and they would advance a certain way into the jungle. Every now and then they would conduct what they called “recon [reconnaissance] by fire”: they would set up machine guns and they would fire hundreds of rounds forward of them into the jungle, just to

25:30 see what was there.

And you were witness to this as well?

I wasn't but Max Carroll certainly was and others. We heard these sorts of stories, and you heard about the lack of training of a lot of American infantryman. There were people smoking on patrol, giving their presence away to anyone that had a sense of smell and so on. There were some operations that the Americans were very good at, like

26:00 kicking the Viet Cong headquarters out of Tay Ninh province and across the border into Cambodia. You needed hundreds of armoured personnel carriers and helicopters for that, and they did it. But counter-insurgency they were not making much of an impact on, they didn’t understand it, Westmoreland didn’t have any feel for it. He tired to keep the South Vietnamese and the American armies as far apart as possible. He accepted no responsibility for command over the South Vietnamese forces.

26:30 And the South Vietnamese forces tended to crawl into their shell and feel demoralized and feel not wanted anyway, “So we won’t do anything”. The result was increasingly you had the war conducted by the high firepower-oriented American military, who really understood very little of the social structure of the country they were trying to assist. So seeing all that

27:00 going on we developed our own style of operation in contradistinction to that. One of the purposes of this book, which was a little subversion, which I had to be very careful about because I was still in the army, that chapter there, “A Re-evaluation of Strategy”, was looking at our earlier operational experience which might have been in conventional

27:30 operations, and partly in specialised counter-insurgency, which involved cordoning villages off, getting to know the people in them and then applying the programs of civil aid that would be help to them, and evaluating the success of each kind. We came down very heavily on the side of the special lightweight counter-insurgency approach.

Lightweight?

28:00 Yes. You don’t make much of a military impact on the soil and you don’t need heavy military to do it, for the most part. This gave me more of an insight into why the Americans were getting it wrong. I also thought some parts of the Australian Army were getting it wrong, too, but our own

28:30 battalion developed its own operational style, which is really what that book is all about.

What are the hallmarks of that style?

Trying to develop as friendly and supportive relationship as you can with the local people. Minimising the harm, the economic disruption, the personal

29:00 disruption that you cause them. Try to keep the Viet Cong well away so that they don't bring much pressure to bear on the local people, and eventually to starve the Viet Cong of information and supplies through interdiction of the area between the central populated part and out into the jungle. In other words you did not need to take the war out there to the Viet Cong and get

29:30 involved in big battles, which is what the Americans were doing all the time. The Viet Cong were very good at what I call the strategy of the lure – you know, if you've ever been fishing and you drop something in the water and it looks interesting to a fish and along he comes and investigates and you hook him. Well, the Americans were being hooked by the Viet Cong: they would create some small incident, they would come and raid a small village or a police post or

30:00 a small army outpost somewhere and then they'd back off. Then of course the Americans would come charging out with all might, and before they got there they would be ambushed or find themselves in a minefield and booby traps going off around them all the time. They were losing a high rate of casualties. There were fifty-five thousand killed, that's big losses in this war. You could tell that

30:30 American society could not support that all that long. The Americans did see the error – or some Americans did see the error of their ways in the late '60s. The guy that replaced Westmoreland, General Creighton Abrams, was much more alive to the nature of the war, but he was taking over a situation that was five years old, where a lot of damage had been done. The military didn't really want to be re-educated, the American military

31:00 is still pretty much firepower, high driving stuff, and where they can't do it effectively, they'll do it ineffectively.

Can you tell us, then, and give us specific examples of, how you tried to apply that re-evaluated strategy from your own personal experience, and then how you tried to transfer that knowledge to the Americans?

Well, we didn't try and transfer it to the Americans: there was no point in that; they didn't want to learn.

31:30 Some of them looked down on us, we had the occasional semi-hostile article in American press about how we "pussy-footed around the jungle and didn't get involved in the serious war", kind of thing, so you had that attitude working against you. Americans don't learn from Australians on the whole – you can on an individual level,

32:00 but nation to nation we are irrelevant; they do their own thing until they run into big trouble and then they learn from that, they don't learn from us.

Can you give us an example of coming up against maybe trying to have a conversation and impart what you knew to an American?

Yes, OK. After we'd been in Phuoc Tuy for about six months a big American contingent, the 11th Armoured Cavalry, came into the next province, Long Khanh,

32:30 which had not had any allied force in it before. This had been brought straight from West Germany, it had hundreds of helicopters, hundreds of tanks, armoured personnel carriers – it really was "hell on wheels", to pinch the motto of another American division. I went up there to establish contact with their intelligence officer not long after they arrived,

33:00 and I could see all this stuff sitting there. Every time you moved clouds of dust went up, and the noise, the money it cost and so on! I said to my American counterpart, "What do you think you're going to do with all this stuff? This is not a high firepower war, this is a war about what the people in the villages who work the rice fields

33:30 think about the government in Saigon. How does this relate to that?" And he kind of looked at me in amazement and said, "We're here to apply our doctrines of mobile firepower, and if the Viet Cong put their heads up we'll blast them off." Well, looking at it the Viet Cong were smart enough not to do that by and large – every now and then they did. This huge outfit, God knows how many hundreds of thousands of dollars a day it cost

34:00 to operate. It did the odd very successful operation – it played a big part in Operation Junction City, the clearing out of the Viet Cong headquarters from Duc My province – but for the most part it created trouble and got itself into trouble, always irrelevant at the best of times. But they just didn't think we were serious and so we didn't push it, it was too hard.

You just thought this was too hard, you gave up?

34:30 Yeah.

So what about your own personal, your re-evaluation strategy, how did you personally apply

that in the field?

Well, it was really up to the commanding officer and the senior operations people, but John Warr was a very unusual commanding officer – about every week he would say to me, "Bob, why are we here? Why do you think we're here?" And I

35:00 would talk about the sorts of things that we've been talking about in the past five minutes, and he would say, "Well, do you think we're achieving that? What about kicking the people out of their banana plantation somewhere," – this happened a week ago – "Do you think that's helping?" You know, there was plus and minuses to talk about and all those sorts of things. But he constantly kept us thinking about bigger issues, and when we got back from

35:30 the operations on Long Son Island we had a bit of a lull in operations. He said to me that he wanted a really thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of our operations over the past six months, so I got to work and I wrote a paper – goodness knows whether it's still among us – but the essence of that paper is chapter 13 of "Vietnam Task". We talked about it at battalion headquarters:

36:00 the colonel, the adjutant Peter Isaacs, the operations officer which had by then become Peter Cole, Max Carroll had swapped with Peter so that Max could go off and command a company, we established a fair consensus that what we should be doing was more specialised counter-insurgency operations with very light application of force,

36:30 concentrating on getting the Viet Cong cadres, their clandestine infrastructure, out of the populated areas and then keeping them separated by a policy of interdiction. That's basically what we did for the next couple of months.

What kind of intelligence had you been gathering to be able to come to those kinds of conclusions? What conversations were you having with the locals, et cetera, for you to actually realise that this was the best way forward?

You'd get to talk

37:00 to them about what they thought about our presence and some of them would be pretty frank with you and say that they really didn't want you there, or that they thought we could do some useful things for them. But they definitely did not want us going around the place creating mayhem and getting innocent people killed and so on, as happened from time to time.

37:30 They could all – there was not a lot of support for the Viet Cong per se in the district, although there were quite a lot of people who had given them support, and that's because on balance they thought the Saigon government were useless or ineffective or corrupt; and it was, for much of the time. If they thought you could offer or help them

38:00 towards some credible alternative, that was good, they were willing to help and they were positive and so on. But you had to work within that constraint all the time, and it was an easy constraint for me to see because I was spending a lot of time going around villages talking to people. There were Catholic priests in several of the villages and they were easy to develop relations with, partly

38:30 because they were personally friendly, some of them spoke English and they definitely were anti-communist. Other people you got to talk to were just ordinary farmers or people that had some responsibility in a village, and you didn't always know that they were telling the truth, you had to make some judgements there and probably I got some wrong. But by and

39:00 large you got the feeling that there was a useful role that we could play that would help them that would be sustainable. But it had to be applied in the spirit of a long-term partnership. So I could also see that if this war was going to be turned around and fought successfully it was going to have to be a very long-term commitment. Of course I came back to Australia in early '67 and the political scene was very different to early '66, there was

39:30 much more public opposition, and of course it builds and builds. So I could see that my idea of how to conduct a war in Vietnam was not remotely possible, which again led me to feel that I really didn't want to get back in that kind of thing.

During your year in Vietnam was your stance towards communism changing, I mean verses American democracy, because you saw it in action?

40:00 **Did you re-evaluate that while you were there?**

Big questions like that I think no. I mean I saw enough of the negative side of communist control within the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese forces against – not to think that there was anything attractive in that, you got to understand why people supported communists, because they needed some alternative to

40:30 corruption, exploitation, or just non-government, which is what they had to a large extent in Saigon. It didn't affect how I thought about the bigger Cold War so much, other than it made me increasingly worried that the Americans knew enough about the world to hold their own in the Cold War.

41:00 Time had moved on a good deal from the ’50s: China was going through the Cultural Revolution; there was a clear split between China and Russia and we were not dealing with a possibility of an alliance between the two, as seemed likely in the ’50s; the situation in Europe was more stable than it had been in the 1950s.

41:30 So I had a basic feeling that the Cold War would somehow work out, I had no idea when and how, I wouldn’t pretend to have that now. As far as America and the Vietnam War was concerned, inside me I thought all this was headed down hill and I was sorry but that’s the way it was going, and I sort of….

Tape 5

00:35 **What sort of success in the intelligence role did you have in getting Viet Cong soldiers to come across?**

Very modest. There were a few defectors but not a lot, and whether any credit was due to me or any of the people I was working with was hard to tell, because quite often the

01:00 decisions of defectors were taken months ahead of when they actually defected. They were looking for an opportunity and it was not easy to break away. But it certainly was a conscious part of our policy. We were not wanting to appear implacably opposed to them, that there was no way out, and certainly a lot of literature was distributed around the places that they would be.

01:30 There were a couple of episodes I relate in the book about returnees. They happened, but not in large quantities.

Can you give me one of those episodes with a returnee?

Yeah. We had one guy, he had decided quite some time ahead to defect and we just happened to be the people he could

02:00 come across to because we were operating in his area, and I got to talk to him for an hour or so before he got on a helicopter and went back to Baria, and was able to ask him why he became a Viet Cong, what he thought of it, how his thoughts had changed, why he wanted to leave and

02:30 so on. That night he was back in Baria in an army mess sitting in an armchair with a beer watching television. It was as quick and as painless as that. Of course, the Viet Cong returnees were extremely valuable to talk to because they understood their operational technique and could instruct us in it. They were also

03:00 pretty capable – I can remember one operation where we were building a large barbed wire fence around a village to cut off the flow of supplies and intelligence to the Viet Cong. We had a company of Australian infantry, there was a company of what we call the “Rev Devers” – these were the sort of guilded youth of Saigon who were recruited to become the

03:30 members of the Revolutionary Development Corps, kind of like a Vietnam Peace Corps, who were to send out and carry democracy and prosperity and so on. They were a pretty useless bunch, who rode around on motorcycles and carried guitars and had lovely girlfriends and so on. We had a company of local Vietnamese troops and we had a company of hoi chan [Chieu Hoi] returnees.

04:00 We built this section of the fence and we got each of these companies to have a go at getting through. Well, the Red Devers looked at this and thought, “Nasty, spiky stuff’ and by and large stayed on this side of it. The South Vietnamese troops made a reasonable effort of getting under or over it, and the former Viet Cong just went straight through it. It was an

04:30 amazing comparison of effectiveness.

How did they go so easily through it?

Partly because they were well trained in working together and lifting a small part of the fence, a couple get under and lift the next part, the guys then come through and then they work together. They also weren't terribly worried about getting scratched by barbed wire. They had a real sense of mission as well as the technique.

05:00 **What perspective did that put into the fixed fortifications that you were building and the Americans were relying on?**

Well, we weren't building a lot of fixed fortifications apart from our own base, and we knew enough about the liability that protecting it was, because we had to devote really half the manpower of the Task Force into securing the base the

05:30 whole time. The idea of having a two-battalion Task Force really was very inefficient. If you had three battalions, two could be out on operations; it would double your operational capacity and so on. The South Vietnamese forces in their little posts had to have some protection around them, but that didn’t really help you much towards winning the war; you had to get out

06:00 and amongst people and help them.

That seemed to be the basis of your strategy, then, to win the people's hearts and minds, the old phrase.

Well, that's a real cliché so I don't use it.

Yes, which is why I raise my eyebrows when I say it. Let me put it another way: you've described the sort of rather hapless tactical approach of the Americans in the way that they tried to apply their firepower and mobility. At a

06:30 **tactical level, while they were patrolling and the way that they were approaching things, what were your Australian infantry doing, what lessons had they learnt and how did they apply them?**

Well, we learnt to keep a low profile, keep our forces fairly well spread out, to move quietly, to not betray our presence very often by

07:00 the use of radio transmission because that did involve a certain amount of speech that would be audible twenty yards away, try and reduce dependence upon helicopter support as much as possible, carry what you needed with you for a couple of days what you needed in operations, set out sentries well out when you stop for a break or an overnight camp.

07:30 **What sort of fire discipline were you under, compared to the American recon by fire?**

Well, we didn't fire until you were sure of a kill, that if a Viet Cong sniper fired at you and slipped away, well, you didn't blast at the jungle with machine guns. You probably didn't fire at all; you might get one shot off.

08:00 If you were in a defensive position and you're expecting a Viet Cong attack, you didn't open fire when the first probes came in and give away your position, you'd wait until they got in really close and then give them a good blast, but that happened very rarely; and you didn't saturate the jungle with artillery fire before you went in on operations. Again, this was a

08:30 frequent American technique, to clear resistance out of the way, to clear up booby traps and so on. Sometimes it had some useful side effects but usually it was much more negative than positive.

It's been going on since the Somme, really, hoping that artillery will clear things for you.

Yes, that's right.

How often did you yourself get out into the jungle on patrol?

I didn't take patrols out

09:00 a lot, but every now and then Colonel Warr would say to me would I take a little reconnaissance group out and check out something or other, so several times I would set out with a group of about three or four others from battalion headquarters. On one occasion while I was still 2IC of B Company, I led a joint patrol of all the company seconds-in-command

09:30 out, because we had to work out how to site the administrative support in an operation. So I did a bit, I did enough to have some stories to tell and be thoroughly scared by the whole business, but not enough to get wounded.

When you are out doing that sort of patrol or reconnaissance, what sort of mental stress is involved in walking through the jungle?

Oh, it's fairly intense

10:00 because you've got every sense strained to try and pick up some indication of an enemy presence before you get shot. The strain on the forward scout on a patrol is really quite immense, and you've got to rotate them every twenty or thirty minutes, otherwise the pressure just becomes too much and they don't do it properly.

10:30 But once you've got used to it, all your senses are straining but you feel this is something you've done before and that it doesn't phase you, but it's very tiring intellectually as well as mentally. You heave a sigh of relief when you get back into the safety of your own perimeter.

Did you, in particular, take any measures to make

11:00 **yourself unidentifiable as an officer?**

Yes, we did not wear badges of rank; in fact we were careful not to carry any paperwork with us. The big giveaway was proximity to a radio set – officers did not carry radios as a general thing so they were freer for command purposes, and of course the radio again

11:30 attracted attention of the sniper and sigs [signallers] were often shot at and a few were killed. But they would pick your proximity to the radio and work out "That's the guy that's running it, that's the guy to

go after." When, for example, Michael Deak, who was commander of our anti-tank platoon, was involved in a big scrap with the Viet Cong up on a mountain called Nui Thai Vai,

12:00 as soon as the Viet Cong worked out that he was the guy that was shouting the orders to the various infantry sections, they would direct waves of fire in on him and sort of [UNCLEAR] him up.

Did you carry the standard SLR [self-loading rifle] rifle when you were outside?

No, I carried an Owen gun.

That's a blast from the past.

Yes, but that was true of a lot of battalion headquarters personnel, I think company commanders

12:30 and company 2ICs, and I think most people who were not actually in infantry platoons where you needed the higher firepower. We carried an Owen gun essentially as a personal defensive weapon, and if it ever came to the point where we had to use it, things would have been really grim.

But carrying a sub-machine gun did that not itself identify you as an officer or commander of some sort?

I suppose it did, but

13:00 if they were that observant they would probably had have you in their sights anyway.

You mention the stress of roles like forward scouting and so on: in the months, how did you notice that build up amongst the men? Any incidents in particular?

Well, people did get tired

13:30 and they needed time back in base, and sometimes they didn't get a lot of time. A lot of the disadvantage with working with helicopter support is that you can be flown back into action very quickly once you've been taken out of it. If you look at the number of days on operational patrols that our guys put in in the course of the years, as against the number of days that

14:00 someone was in the front line in the First World War or the Second World War, I think the comparison comes out pretty high on the side of the Vietnam forces. So strain was a problem. Some people didn't handle it too well – when they got back in base they would drink a huge amount and carry on in a wild fashion, or when they got a few days down in Vung Tau

14:30 they would go berserk and have punch-ups with the locals. There was one occasion where a Vietnamese stall of some kind was set alight on a beach in Vung Tau, you know, drunken soldierly horseplay. All that sort of thing undercuts the effectiveness of our civil operational program. So they were – I mean

15:00 alcohol was a problem. There were guys that would drink twenty cans a day when they were back in base, and Tony White, our doctor, had to deal with quite a lot of severe alcohol cases.

And venereal [sexually-transmitted] disease?

Yeah, well, there was plenty of that.

15:30 I think Tony told me that – we were a battalion of eight hundred or so – I think he treated nine hundred-odd cases of VD [venereal disease], and that was because several guys were multiple catchers. It wasn't the whole battalion by any means; there was a fairly sharp differentiation between the guys who used prostitutes and the guys that didn't.

16:00 Marriage was often a big factor in that – it wasn't always.

What about the relationship between officers and men in your battalion? Any antipathy?

It's hard to think of it, but I only saw it from the officers' side, so there probably were antipathies on the side of senior NCOs [non-commissioned officers, i.e. had come up through the ranks], who would think that the officers were a bunch of

16:30 jumped-up Johnny-come-latelys who didn't understand as much about the trade of soldiery as they did. Probably there were times that your ordinary infantryman would feel that the boss had lost the plot, or "He doesn't understand what he's asking us to do." et cetera. I would think that all those tensions were there normally, but they didn't boil up in any way that presented a problem

17:00 in terms of relations. We were a fairly informal lot. People rarely called me "sir", for example, they would usually call me "skipper" or "boss" or something. We didn't have first name relationships up the chain of command, and I was careful not to use first names in normal mode of address down the chain of command unless I knew the person

17:30 particularly well. I think Colonel Warr played a big role in keeping the battalion happy. I think he had served in the army as a private before he went to Duntroon in the Second World War. He had a very nice, easy way of relating to people. If he saw an officer being a bit offhand towards

18:00 one of his troops, then you felt the weight of the colonel's displeasure.

Was there any antipathy between the Nashos [National Servicemen] and the regulars?

I don't think so, but I was not at an interface that I was likely to see it. I certainly wasn't aware of it as a company 2IC, nor as battalion IO [intelligence officer]. You would probably get a more informed answer on that [from someone] who was a platoon commander.

18:30 But my gut feeling was that there weren't tensions, we were all part of a team, we all wanted to get home in one piece and we'd all help each other to do so.

How did you deal with the stress?

Well, writing the book was one way. Working out my own future was another. Regular exchange of letters with

19:00 Sally was a third. Having a good personal relationship with John Warr and Max Carroll and Peter Isaacs in headquarters was another, and Tony White, the medical officer: there were a lot of fine and intelligent people and you could share your problems with them. But there was a certain amount that you just couldn't help – I mean, no-one liked being there and we

19:30 looked forward tremendously to going home. We could all tell you the number of days to go and so on. We were all very glad to get home, and I should think only a tiny proportion ever wanted to go back. But also you were busy; time went by because there were always things to be done. For those of us at battalion headquarters there was the battalion command net to be commanded twenty-four hours a day.

20:00 At night you didn't ask the colonel to do it, you didn't ask the battalion second-in-command to do it; the three people that did it were the adjutant, the signals officer and myself. That was three or four hours out of every night, so you were always tired because you were never getting more than about five hours' sleep a night.

What sort of level of discomfort were you living in on a regular basis?

Pretty extreme, I suppose. When you were out

20:30 on operations you were sleeping on the ground on a piece of plastic, sometimes under a shelter cape, sometimes not. We were out on operations a good half of the time, I suppose. You were eating canned rations that were pretty monotonous. You learnt various things, like to take along a pack of curry powder to put in your bully beef and heat it up on a little hexamine stove, and so on.

21:00 I drank a lot of tea because there was plenty of tea and it was a good way of keeping the body fluids up. The water was pretty terrible because it was always warm and it was mainly chlorinated. The worst thing, I suppose, was trying to sleep in those circumstances. Of course you slept fully-clothed with boots on when you were out on operations.

21:30 Back in the base I slept on a reasonably comfortable stretcher and after the first four or five months I had a tent with floorboards, and that improved things. But there were always lots of other things to deal with, like the latrines or showering out of a shower bag – you had two gallons of water and that was it.

What sort of health issues were you

22:00 **dealing with?**

Skin was the big one, I suppose, and then muscle strains. People would do things that were really beyond their capacity. I came back with a few afflictions as a result of having to lift heavy timber beams that were too much for me. You try and do it when you're constructing a bunker or something like that, you know,

22:30 it's got to be done and there's no mechanical equipment to help you with it; or you fall into a weapon pit at night and you're not aware it's there and so on. So you've got all those sorts of things.

What sort of skin situations were you dealing with?

Where you had any tightness, particularly where your belt went or where your pack straps went, those patches of your skin

23:00 tended to become red and prickly, and if some dirt got into a pore that could quickly become infected and turn very nasty. There were some guys that got ulcerated sores, particularly on their legs. Exposure to the sun was another problem that you had to think about; most of us avoided that

23:30 through if you had to be out in the open you kept your shirt sleeves down and your hat on, and so on. Foot problems. I suffered from vertigo towards the end of the time, and that's virally-transmitted, I believe.

Speaking of that, what about malaria?

Malaria was around and we all constantly took

24:00 paladrin. The Americans didn’t have paladrin, you could bargain all sorts of things for paladrin off the Yanks, so we did that. Encephalitis was another thing that was around, and that’s actually what led to our first battalion intelligence officer being taken to Task Force Headquarters, because one of the Task Force

24:30 intelligence people got encephalitis, and that was a frightening thing because it, you know, takes away the effectiveness of the brain. That’s something I found very scary, but it didn’t happen to many people.

What about gastric conditions?

Yeah, they were there in plenty, and you just got used to having a case of the runs [diarrhoea] – we all had it from time to time.

Did you wear underwear?

25:00 Yes, I did. I didn’t wear a singlet much but I certainly wore underpants. Some guys didn’t, they felt comfortable that way – I tried it and didn’t feel comfortable. It was nice to be able to put on something clean every couple of days. I always used to carry a spare pair of undies in the pack.

You mention that some people really hooked into the

25:30 **alcohol when they got back; did you personally see any evidence of other substance abuse?**

No. We didn’t have that problem to any visible extent. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if some guys were not buying drugs down at Vung Tau when they went on leave, but they wouldn’t bring them back, or if they did they

26:00 kept their use of them very confined. I don't think we had a drug problem in the battalion in the time I was there. I went back about three years later, just to have a look at things from a historical point of view, and that stage the American Army was really being rocked by drugs. But on the whole we were spared it, partly because I think we didn’t have as much money as the Americans, and therefore the drug pushers focused

26:30 much more on the Americans, and the Americans were much more numerous, much more high-profile and so on. I think also our social mores were a bit slower to be infected by that culture. I don't think there's much difference now, but in the mid- to late ’60s there was.

How aware were you and the men about the protest movement back home?

A bit, it had

27:00 begun to make itself apparent before we left. There was an organisation called Save Our Sons, which turned up and demonstrated outside Holsworthy. This was ostensibly the mothers of National Servicemen. I’m not sure whether the mothers of our National Servicemen were involved, I never knew about it if they were. I began to hear more in letters from my wife, who was teaching at the University

27:30 of New South Wales, as to how the campus attitudes were moving. You heard a bit about it on broadcasts that you could get on Radio Australia. But I think on the whole we were taken a bit by surprise by the way things had moved while we were away; we didn’t understand the full impact of it and where it was heading when we got back. But at least our battalion didn’t have much trouble in its

28:00 march through Sydney, whereas 1 RAR [1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment] the previous year had been the target of a number of protests, including tipping a bucket of blood over the commanding officer as he led the battalion through Martin Place.

Was that protest causing any morale effects in Vietnam on the battalion?

It was too early, no. It probably did later on, but you'd need to talk to people from other battalions.

28:30 If anything I’d say it caused mild annoyance.

As the year went on, what sort of morale changes did you see as it got closer towards being rotated?

Yeah, good question. Well, we sort of had a crisis point in morale around February of 1967, when we were still a couple of months off going out and everyone was

29:00 sort of tired. You're looking forward to being taken out of it all but you knew you still had a couple of months to go, and there were some serious operations. We took a lot of casualties in February and part of that could have been due to thinking too much of going home and not enough about doing their job.

So it can make you, more or less, careless in some ways?

29:30 Yes; when people start thinking of home it does take your mind off the job. There's also a tendency to think that you're immortal, that you’ve survived eight or ten months in operations and you’ll survive the rest and you don’t need to worry. That’s when people found out that they did need to worry.

What about the opposite attitude of, “God, I’ve survived this far, I don’t want anything to

happen to me in the last two months, I don't want to do anything"?

30:00 Yes, that's a symptom that some showed, too, but they had to get out and do it for the sake of everyone else. But it was a force that was exerted.

There were no old, bold soldiers?

No, not many, anyway.

What sort of time away from the battalion did you have, R&R [rest and recreation leave] or official trips elsewhere?

30:30 Very little time. I had my five days' R&R, I went to Hong Kong. I could have come back to Australia but Sally and I thought it just would have been too stressful to come back for four days and then head off again. There were quite a lot of short visits to American headquarters, as I said earlier, but I'd just be away during the day, not overnight.

31:00 We were entitled to five days' R&C [rest in country] leave in country: I certainly had my share of that. That would be like an overnight trip to Saigon. I had an American Air Force friend up there. We'd both published books through Castles in the same month. His name was Ray Fredette and he had written a book on the first

31:30 Battle of Britain – you probably know about the first Germans' strategic bombing offensive against Britain in 1917-18 – and he wrote this very good book. And we were both being handled at Castles by the same editor, and he said, "This is odd, you guys are both in Vietnam, you should meet up," so he wrote to each of us and he gave us the other's address. And it was

32:00 easier for me to get up to Saigon to see Ray, so I had a few weekends in his company and our friendship continued for quite some time. Ray was absolutely scathing about the way that headquarters, MACV [Military Assistance Command Vietnam], the big American headquarters, worked. He was on the intelligence side and he said, "We put up our view of what's

32:30 going to happen and assess the effectiveness of operations and so on, and the operations staff get hold of it and they just disregard everything that doesn't suit the sort of operations they want to conduct. They present it to the general – but life goes on. They just present the intelligence that supports the sort of plan they want to conduct to the general and that's what he believes." So that was an interesting insight,

33:00 it helped to again destroy my confidence in the way the American military command system worked.

What was the scene in Saigon in those days?

Turbulent. A lot of people around, a lot in uniform, the noise, the bustle, a huge number of people on motorbikes, everything available in the shops, amazing quality restaurants,

33:30 you know, it was just unreal to step out of the provinces and see all this going on. But it was fun to take part in for short periods. I wouldn't have wanted to have spent my war in Saigon, I think it would have been very corrupting. This is, of course, where most journalists were, and they had a very, very partial view of what was happening. Perhaps after lunch we should spend a few minutes talking about reportage.

34:00 **Yeah, I was going to start that anyway. When you did go to Saigon, how did you get there?**

Usually by a C-130 or a Caribou. The RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] ran regular courier flights from Vung Tau to Saigon, and we would go down to the Vung Tau airfield by Land Rover and then catch the courier to Tan Son Nhut,

34:30 and then you were handled by the 8th Aerial Port Battalion that the Americans ran the place with. Then you would have a ticket for a BOQ – a Bachelor Officer's Quarters – that was where your overnight accommodation was, and usually I'd go with someone else from the battalion, someone that I had some rapport with, and we could go and find a decent restaurant or interesting places to stroll around.

35:00 **Did you have any interest in Vietnamese history and culture?**

Yes, I did, but it wasn't well-developed. But it was interesting. Sometimes when we captured some Viet Cong documents, there would be poems amongst them. I would give these to one of my translators to work out what it was about. You became aware very quickly that

35:30 this was a very literary culture and people used it as a way of supporting themselves in all kinds of desperate circumstances. I got interested in the various types of Buddhist temples and there were some quite fine ones in Phuoc Tuy – one on Long Son Island and one on Nui Thai Vai in particular. The Catholic-Buddhist

36:00 split and all that, the impact of the French on the place – there were some fine French colonial buildings, like the general post office in Saigon, and they had a small cathedral there, and the opera house, the Cirque Sportif was still going, and so on. And because you had to understand a bit about the history of groups like the

36:30 Binh Xuyen , the river pirates who operated in the Vung Tau [area]. They were not Viet Cong and they were not friendly either, they ran their own little empire. And the Hoa Hao up in Duc My province, that's where their temple was. And the Cao Dai they had their own Pope.

A real melting pot there.

It was, it was wonderfully complex, but you never got to the bottom of it in the course of a year.

37:00 **Do you think sufficient attempt was made to understand those sub-categories?**

No, I don't, and with hindsight this was a serious fault because it meant that we didn't understand enough about how to put together some kind of acceptable government in Saigon.

37:30 It's naïve to think that you could actually run a democracy in any rigorous sense of the term there, but to give power really to the hands of the military and ignore all these other groups or treat them as hostiles, it was undermining the whole process.

Trying to build a democracy out of a country with lots of different power groups in it.

38:00 We're started, yes.

I did mean to ask before when we talked about the protest movement: your wife, being in an academic role, was she subject to any special attention?

She was a bit. There were other faculty members – she was in the Politics Department at the University of New South Wales, which on the whole was a fairly conservative department. Doug MacCallum, the head of the department was pretty conservative. But there were a few other people in the department

38:30 who were not – I mean they wouldn't attack Sally, but they'd make pretty disparaging comments to her on what was going on, or on the effects that the war would be having on me, or the militarisation of the Australian culture and all these sorts of things. But it was not an intolerable situation for her, but it wasn't an easy one either. And of course

39:00 those problems built and I came to feel [them] much more when I moved over to the ANU [Australian National University] in 1969.

What did you get up to on your R&R in Hong Kong?

I went with Bruce McQualter, and we were winies [wine enthusiasts] and foodies [gourmet dining enthusiasts]. Bruce had a very good palate and a very good knowledge of wines, and me having come from four years

39:30 in Europe knew a certain amount about it, too. We both had wives of whom we were very fond and we knew each other's wives, so we were not tempted to stray in the direction of the ladies of the town, and what we did was just have a nice, civilised period of self-indulgence with

40:00 food and good wine.

So you kept each other honest?

We did, quite consciously.

And just developed your own little officers' mess over there with Bruce?

Yeah, right. We were lucky, we both got rooms in the Hong Kong Hilton. You sort of went into a sort of lottery when you arrived there, and the Hong Kong Hilton was definitely the pick of the bunch.

40:30 End of tape

Tape 6

00:33 **Professor, if you could tell us what you gleaned of a Viet Cong leadership style from the intelligence that you gathered over in Vietnam?**

Yeah, well, it varied according to the type of unit that you were dealing with. We had local guerrilla forces that tended to be loosely organised and didn't have much of a command structure. They were essentially peasants who knew each

01:00 other and they had a very casual way of relating to each other, as you would expect. Then you had provincial mobile forces who operated across Phuoc Tuy province, and they had a somewhat more formal structure, but these were people who were still essentially civilians for most of the time and they would come together for some operations. Then you would have the Viet Cong regulars like the 274 and 275 Regiment and the North Vietnamese. They had a pretty formal

01:30 command structure which worked very much like our command structure did, and it had to control logistics and infantry and artillery and intelligence and do all these things in a pretty ordered, systematic way. I have to say that I thought on the whole their command structure worked very well. They were durable, they could withstand stress, they were adequate for controlling troops

02:00 when there was a lot of danger around. They were a pretty capable lot.

Can you give us an idea of how the command structure worked in the Viet Cong?

Well, I should answer that I can't, because I wasn't ever actually in there with them when they were in battle so I don't know exactly how they transmitted orders or how they related to each other or how they punished shortcomings, and so on.

02:30 They, we know about that from interrogation. But all I can say is that down to provincial mobile level they were pretty well-trained, they certainly had a good level of experience. Most of them had been in action for some years – in the case of the 274 and 275 Regiment, they would have had several years of operational experience, so they were pretty capable.

03:00 **Do you know what you learned from the Viet Cong defectors? What kind of information did they pass to you?**

Who was who in the structure, who the regimental and battalion commanders were, where they came from, what kind of family backgrounds they came from, what the internal

03:30 cohesion of the battalions and regiments was like, what their logistic situation was, how well they were fed and supplied, what their weapons were, what they had done in the past few months; and what they thought of our operations, how effective we had been, what gave them problems,

04:00 what didn't bother them, those sorts of issues. Quite often these people that defected came as a result of some personal crisis, you know, they were not getting on well with their section commander or the platoon commander, or there was a family problem at home and they wanted to be out of their service and back to deal with it. Or, in some cases, they thought they

04:30 were on the losing side and that this was all pointless and they wanted to be released from it. They had a pretty tough system of discipline: when people did commit misdemeanours they were physically punished or they could be tied up for a while. Or if they did something which their commander thought was really bad

05:00 they could suffer the death penalty.

What about the methods of extracting the information from them – obviously the defectors were giving it willingly, but the Viet Cong that you may have captured, was there a torture process used? How did they get the information from them?

Well, the method I used was just to try and sit down and talk to them the way that

05:30 you and I are talking to each other today. I was not a professionally-trained intelligence person, but on the other hand I had had a lot of experience in getting information from people by talking, and so that's the way I went about it. And on the whole I think people tell you things because they want to, not because they have to. What you get from people in situations of duress is often what

06:00 they want you to hear, not necessarily the truth. But there were incidents that we found out about later on at Task Force Headquarters where pressure was applied. You probably heard about the water torture episode of, I think it was late '67 or '68, that the then Minister for the Army, Phillip Lynch, got into a lot of trouble over because he said to the press, "There is not one scintilla of evidence that this happened," and yes, there was, Minister.

06:30 But I have apprehensions about what happened to some of these people once they got back into South Vietnamese hands. I think that some of them got abused.

Were you able to learn anything from the Viet Cong that you could then apply to the way the Australian Army was managed and run in Vietnam?

I think the

07:00 answer to that is not much, because I think we already knew their basic order of battle and how they operated. The information that we got from them had more to do with the political side of the war and how they were standing up to the stresses being applied to them. You could get

07:30 some feeling, as I said earlier, of the efficiency of our operational methods, but quite often you didn't need the Viet Cong to tell you, you knew. So I don't think interrogation had much use from that perspective, but it was very helpful in terms of finding out where Viet Cong bases were, where their supply routes were, what parts of the

08:00 province they drew support from.

Where were they getting their support from as an organisation? Did there tend to be a theme

as far as that was concerned?

Yeah, they tended to get more support from big villages in the central area, and that of course was what they concentrated on because that was where most of the food was produced. But they also had taxation points

08:30 on a lot of the minor roads in the province. Peasants coming in to sell their produce in some of the central markets would have to pay five or ten per cent – in one case it got up to as high as forty per cent – to the Viet Cong to be allowed to go through. They would come into villages at night and they would sometimes conscript people as

09:00 porters carrying rice from one part of the province to another, or they would proselytise, they would conduct recruiting drives in villages at night. They were a strong presence around whenever we weren't there, and of course we could only be there a relatively small percentage of the time in such a big province.

You mentioned that you were sometimes surprised that you weren't attacked by the Viet Cong at your most vulnerable,

09:30 **for instance when it was pouring with rain. What are your reflections on that now: why do you think they didn't attack you at your most vulnerable?**

Mainly because they just weren't prepared to do so. If they could have, they would have. But they had their own major logistic problems and their manpower was under stress. They were not constantly following us so they didn't necessarily know where our

10:00 points of vulnerably were at a particular time. But they were at their best when they took the initiative and created an incident which would draw an American or and Australian response which they could then ambush, or get caught in booby traps. We discovered that fairly early in the piece and so we were pretty cautious in the way in which we reacted, but that was

10:30 often not the case with the Americans.

As far as access to intelligence material and research material that you needed as an intelligence officer at Nui Dat, were you given carte blanche [free access] to the materials on the base?

No, I wasn't. There was a certain amount that I could get access to, that I could get, that related to our own battalions operations in the next couple of weeks, but there was a lot of material that was kept in the Task Force Headquarters to which I had no access

11:00 and for the purposes of secrecy had to be kept to as few people as possible. One thing which bugged me from time to time was that I had very limited access to signals intelligence, and you quite often didn't know whether the information you were getting was really good, based on signals information at a high level, or whether it was just third-rate gossip that someone else had heard in a village

11:30 and passed on to you. But they're the sort of frustrations you find working in a military security system. As I said earlier, I was able to shortcut through the maze by going up to the American headquarters at Long Binh and finding out more there.

Were you the only intelligence officer to go up to the American headquarters and seek that?

No, I wasn't; the Task Force Intelligence Officer, Alec Piper,

12:00 used to go up and I think he was slightly peeved by my cheek in going up there as a battalion intelligence officer, but he didn't stop me. I used to share information with him; he possibly thought it was useful, too.

What about the SAS [Special Air Service]: did you have any involvement with them, or contact during your time?

Yes, they did some very useful long-range patrolling

12:30 and I was able to debrief them a little and find out what they had discovered on their missions. But the SAS on the main part were controlled by Task Force Headquarters and so they didn't need to report directly to us, it was only when we were going to operate in an area where they happened to have been recently that we had this interface. We did also commit to them

13:00 a responsibility for a big area in the Nui Thai Vai range after we had cleared it of Viet Cong in October of 1966, and they used to go back in there and check on it from time to time to see if it was being reused.

You say you cleared the area of Viet Cong, were you involved in that?

That was one of our major battalion operations and it is a full chapter in "Vietnam Task".

OK, well, that probably

13:30 **brings us to a good point. Perhaps the best way is to get down which operations you were involved in and just a brief summary of your personal involvements in those, starting when you arrived in Vietnam over the twelve months, just for people watching this in a hundred years and haven't read your book.**

Our first operation was Operation Hardihood, and the objective of that was to clear the central part of the province preparatory to setting up the Task Force base.

14:00 For that operation I was second-in-command of B Company and my responsibilities were chiefly to be the rear link man for the company, organising the flow of supplies, casualty evacuation, ammunition information, that kind of thing. I also did that in operation Sydney 1, which was

14:30 the cordon and search of Duc My. After then I was battalion intelligence officer, and the first big operation I was involved in was the co-ordinance search of Binh Ba. Then we had quite a few operations on the north-eastern and north-western perimeter of our area of operations in

15:00 Phuoc Tuy because there had been Viet Cong activity there, and we were trying to push them back or interdict their supply routes. It was while we were on one of those operations that D Company of 6th RAR was ambushed out at Long Tan – this is on the 18th of August of 1966 where the Battle of Long Tan occurred. Then we came back into the Task Force base, ready to provide assistance to 6 RAR

15:30 if they had got into more trouble. Then in October we worked to clear the Viet Cong off the sides of Route 15, which is the main highway connecting Vung Tau and Saigon. The Americans were developing Vung Tau as an alternative support for Saigon, because to get to Saigon the ships had to wind their way up the narrow river that went

16:00 through the area of mangrove swamps called the Rung Sat. They were bringing in a new brigade of troops, I think it was the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Division, in early October, and they thought that it would solve a lot of port congestion problems if they were offloaded at Vung Tau and then sent by road up to Bin Wah. Well, to do that we had to take the road

16:30 out of Viet Cong control, and there was a range of mountains on the north-eastern side of the road called the Nui Thai Vais. Nui Thai Vais means that Nui Thai Vai Mountain was the highest point, I think it was fifteen or sixteen hundred feet above the plain. In going into that area we got involved in our biggest encounter in the war, it was quite hard fighting. There were a lot of

17:00 caves up in the mountains where the Viet Cong could develop into bases. The bases were interconnected. There was also a long rock fall down one side of the mountain and there were plenty of passages that the Viet Cong could use under the rocks. If you were out on top of the rocks you were exposed to view and therefore to fire. We got ourselves into a very sticky situation climbing the mountain, with the Viet Cong

17:30 in the caves and under the rocks being able to fire at us, and we couldn’t even see them, let alone return the fire and suppress it. That was an action that went on for a few days, and we had quite a few people killed. And a couple of our platoon commanders won the Military Cross at the same time, it was quite a notable action. Then we did about three operations in that area

18:00 in conjunction with the passage of the American brigade through, and then because we had got to know the Viet Cong infrastructure in that area, we found out a little bit more about the use they were making of an offshore island called Long Son. Our next operation was over there in November. Then in December we focused more on securing the area

18:30 immediately around Nui Dat. There were a lot of fairly short-range company operations but nothing really big involving the battalion as a whole. Then in the new year, having done this assessment of our operational methods, we decided to focus much more on getting the Viet Cong infrastructure out of the central populated area, and we did quite a number of village cordons and searches just in the central part of the province.

19:00 Then in February we had to clear some Viet Cong out of another range of hills in the south-eastern part of the province, and that was quite a difficult operation. Again we took quite a number of casualties there. During this time we had made contact with the isolated headquarters out at Xuyen Moc,

19:30 out on the eastern side of the province, and once we had the spare capacity we re-opened the road, re-established control over the road there so that they could have free access to the markets in central Phuoc Tuy. As we were doing that someone in Task Force Headquarters had the unfortunate idea that the best way to secure the eastern approaches to central Phuoc Tuy

20:00 would be to lay a big minefield down the eastern side of our area of operations. The South Vietnamese Army had offered to keep it secure so that the Viet Cong couldn’t lift the mines – ha-ha – and the result was that we spent a lot of time in March and early April, and other battalions coming in afterwards probably putting in several months of work, in laying this

20:30 minefield and fencing it in. And of course, the way wars go, Murphy’s Law [anything that can go wrong will go wrong] applied, the South Vietnamese Army was under pressure, it couldn’t provide the perimeter security to the mine field, the Viet Cong used to get in there at night and lift the mines, and

they turned up in booby traps all over Phuoc Tuy and other parts of Vietnam – it was a disaster. But anyway, we had left by that stage.

You mentioned that there were a lot more casualties

21:00 **towards the end: was this part of the reason there was more casualties?**

Yes, I think so, but it's hard to really give you solid justification for that, it's more just an impression that I have. I don't think the operations we were doing were as intrinsically dangerous as some of the earlier ones. But anyway, for one reason or another, people

21:30 stepped on mines where they didn't step on them earlier, or were blown up by booby traps – it really was a very nasty time.

You were part of a mobile command unit?

We were foot mobile for the most part, but we used to sometimes get into armoured personnel carriers and go from area to area, and I myself used to do quite a lot of reconnaissance by helicopter.

Can you talk about your experiences doing that reconnaissance work?

Oh, it was great fun

22:00 because, as I said earlier, Phuoc Tuy province was very beautiful and once you got to know its physical structure you could tell where you were with fair precision, and also with familiarity you could tell whether the Viet Cong were making use of certain tracks that you could see.

How?

Because they were the only people out in the remote parts. And it just very nice to be up there at three thousand feet by yourself, just with the pilot,

22:30 because you had to be above three thousand feet on a reconnaissance mission; if you were below that you could be shot at. If you were doing an assault mission you may come in at very low level fast, but that was not what I was about then. It was interesting making the sort of judgements and deductions that you have to with your eye and your brain and a notepad on

23:00 your knee, and gather information to try and give the commanding officer of just what the Viet Cong are doing out there. And of course it was not easy because the Viet Cong were adept at camouflage, you very rarely saw them unless you caught them really unprepared.

What about mateship? Can you talk about that in Vietnam, and in particular the real great friendships that you personally made?

Yeah, well, it's

23:30 quite remarkable. You get dumped down in a strange country with a bunch of people that you don't know very much about, it takes a little while for friendships to work out. But they usually do, and in my case it certainly did. I was very lucky I think to be taken on to battalion headquarters, because that was a concentration of very interesting people. Although John Warr

24:00 is dead, the rest of us are still alive, and one of the great things about email is that you can be in contact. I think it was more a chance of being able to separate ourselves from the army environment and the operational environment and relax and talk about other things in our lives, and things that we were interested in doing, things that we wanted still to do,

24:30 that we were going to do; or being able to get out of what we were talking about constantly and just discuss books or places we'd been to, or events, or music, or something like that. We did have access to the American PX system – PX stands for Post Exchange – and it's the equivalent of our canteen system, but as befits America they are phenomenally well-stocked.

25:00 It wasn't long before we were going off and buying nice tape recorders, and you could get beautiful 4-tracks – this is pre-cassettes, it was reel-to-reel tape. Also you could get wonderful extended play discs and so on. So when you had a little time, which wasn't often, you could put on some lovely music.

25:30 **What music were you listening to there?**

It was a combination of, I suppose, chamber music, light classical, pop, rock, and a bit of light folk kind of thing. Once I had a nice little tape player myself, Sally used to record things for me from home and mail them up to me. I used to do

26:00 tapes like we're doing today, or all on sound of course, and send them back to her and give her the sound of my voice and a bit more detailed comment than you could put in a letter of what was going on.

How important was having Sally in Australia, and the strong connection that you obviously had, in getting through the Vietnam process?

Phenomenally important. I mean I don't know how I would have done it otherwise, because

26:30 she was constantly in my mind, I knew I had a support. I would get a good letter from her every three or four days. I was doing my book and sending it back to her with letters – it was a very important part of the experience.

Did you observe other gentlemen in the army and think that, if they had that kind of contact, they may have been better mentally prepared?

27:00 Yeah, I think that's a fair comment, and because I think a lot of the people that I knew best had that sort of supportive relationship with a wife or a fiancé or a girlfriend in Australian, yeah, it was extremely important.

What about your friendships when you're actually in op, when you're actually working together on an operation? How did that work for you?

It was very functionally-driven, you related to people that you had to

27:30 to get control of a situation or stave off a threat. So friendship didn't actually enter into it a great deal. But you knew there were certain people that you had a close personal relationship with who would just understand you a lot better, because you were sort of more attuned to each other, and it was always much easier to work with someone like that, particularly over a radio command net when

28:00 all you've got is the voice. Sometimes you can get a bit of tone into it, but military command circuits are not very hi-fi, so you have to be pretty good at it to convey much tone. Max Carroll, our first ops officer, was supremely good at that. He could get more out of people on a command net than most people I have heard, and we all learnt a lot from him

28:30 that way, I think. But just coming back to the impact of personal relations on operations, yeah, it did come into bearing much more when you had a quiet time, when there was a lull and you knew you were going to be staying in the area for a few hours, so you got together with someone you knew you could have an interesting conversation with

29:00 and chat away.

Were those conversations about home, or were they about the situation there and then, in most situations?

On the whole they were not about the immediate situation; sometimes they had to be, but if nothing was happening you didn't talk about nothing so you talked about things you heard on the radio or mutual friends or some common experience we'd had

29:30 in an earlier stage.

What about your relationship with your batman?

Yeah, that's an interesting thing. I was very lucky, I had three excellent batmen. The first one when I was in B Company was Norm Crane – Norm was a regular, he had quite a bit of service, he was an old hand, he really knew how to look after me and was a bit smarter than I was in a few instances. Then

30:00 when I was IO my batman was a guy by the name of Brown, who was also a regular – tall, fairly thin, very perceptive, quite a good cook when we were out in the field and so on. The third one a bit later on was Mick Iredale – Mick

30:30 I think was a National Serviceman, from memory. Anyway, they were good to work with, and I think they preferred being batmen to being a rifleman out in the platoon for a while. None of them wanted to be a batman forever but it was interesting for them to see a bit of battalion headquarters life. They knew

31:00 that I was under pressure, and if I was taking time to cook my own meals and boil my billy for tea and so on there would be a lot of things that the battalion needed that didn't get done, and so on. But you didn't have a batman at your personal service twenty-four hours a day, they did have other responsibilities to do: they had to stand sentry duty; at night they had to prepare defences and put up shelters; and

31:30 do their share of lumping supplies and ammunition and so on. But it was a very important part of the war, and I'm glad you raised it, because batmen often get completely forgotten. And you need to have a batman that you can relate to very well personally, otherwise tension wells up.

Do you get a choice in that?

I suppose yes – you don't get a choice in the sense that

32:00 twelve people are lined up and you can pick who you want. You come into a job and there's a batman, and you find out from the previous occupant of the job what the batman was like, and if he says, "Get rid of this guy at the first opportunity," that's a warning. But I didn't have that situation. I'm just trying to remember how Brown phased out and Mick Iredale

32:30 phased in, I've lost that; whether Brownie fell ill or maybe his company just reclaimed him and that's the time he came back, I don't know. I can't remember choosing Iredale, someone chose him for me, but he was a good choice and not a problem.

You had a couple of visits from some very important Australian politicians

33:00 **while you were in Vietnam: tell us about those visits.**

We did, yes. Well, they contrasted quite a lot. Not all that long after we arrived, I suppose we'd been there about three months, we had a visit from Malcolm Fraser, who was Minister for the Army. Malcolm was very young then, I think in his mid-thirties. We had an acute supply crisis at that time, because the Australian logistic system had just not kicked in at that

33:30 point, and I can remember our commanding officer saying, "Good, the minister's coming, I'll be able to tell him our problems and be able to get some ministerial attention on this." Well, when Malcolm came to the battalion area – I mean, he's not a very chummy man – and John Warr began telling him about our difficulties, and Fraser just cut him off and said, "Don't tell me

34:00 your problems, you've got a chain of command to deal with that. I'm here to study the war from my perspective." So he did what he wanted and we got no sympathy or support from him as far as we could tell. Yet a few months later the Defence Minister Allen Fairhall came up, and Fairhall had a very different personality: he was not detached and high and mighty in the way that Malcolm Fraser was at that stage.

34:30 He asked if we had any problems and of course John Warr told him and Fairhall took out his notebook and started taking notes and said, "Right, we'll get these fixed when we get back." I think he did do something to improve the situation.

(Reportage UNCLEAR) in the Vietnam War?

Oh yeah, right. This is a very interesting chapter. Because I

35:00 was the battalion intelligence officer I also had the responsibility to look after journalists when they came with us on operations, and I also had some responsibility for civil liaison. I was the battalion Civil Affairs Officer, that all went with the portfolio. We got a great variety of reporters. Some you could tell had really just come up to write sensational accounts.

35:30 Those were, on the whole, tabloid journalists. We had one that was with us not long after we arrived who used to write all this hair-raising stuff as if we were about to overrun every night. I can remember one headline: "A night in the doctor's weapon pit", and that was full of all kinds of fanciful

36:00 stuff. The sad thing about this was that it frightened our wives and girlfriends back home rather needlessly, and sensationalised the war. This chap I think was supportive of the war and fairly conservative, and he was really trying to show what a good job we were doing and how tough it was. But the trouble was that it wasn't terribly credible. Then you had other people who came up who really were

36:30 looking for points of criticism, and they were really quite a challenge. You could tell very early in the piece when you had someone like this, and my approach to them was to try and match their argument a bit and explain why we were doing certain things, why we did them the way we did

37:00 and what sort of results we hoped to achieve, or what we had achieved in the past operations. So I'm not trying to destroy their perspective, but give them a bit more factual fodder to bight on and incorporate in their articles, and perhaps get them to approach reportage of our actions in a somewhat more serious, reasoned way than they might have done otherwise.

37:30 I think I had a bit of success in that, too.

What kind of preconceived notions were they coming in with?

That we were killing large numbers of South Vietnamese civilians, that there was a lot of destruction of civil property going on – the sorts of things that were going on in other parts of Vietnam that had begun to get the American operations

38:00 a bad name. You could convince them on the whole that things were a bit different and that there were other approaches to the war, so that was interesting. The Australian correspondent at the "London Times", Stuart Harris, came up and spent a bit of time with us, and he was just a very

38:30 interesting person, I got to know him in a personal sense, and later we spent a bit of time on a friendly basis in Canberra, after the war. We had a very interesting "Newsweek" correspondent whose name was Francois Sully. He died, I think, in the '80s, but he made a huge reputation as a journalist, and he was

39:00 good because, although he was critical of a lot of American operations, he'd been around wars long enough to see that we were different, and he did quite an interesting "Newsweek" article on us, which I thought was a pretty fair comparison.

What slant did he take in that article?

I think he was saying that we had a different approach and that it worked.

How difficult, given that your views on Vietnam were changing

39:30 **during your time there, how challenging was it for you to keep telling these journalists, that were asking sometimes disparaging questions, about the war? Did you have to keep face or did you just tell them what you were thinking, as your thinking was changing?**

No, I didn't tell them everything I was thinking, but I did try – well, first of all I tried not to tell them anything that was wrong or misleading, and second thing –

40:00 you know, reality is always such a complex business – to throw in a whole lot of stuff so that they could take their pick, really. I wasn't trying to say that everything was going fine, but I wasn't saying that it was all going to hell in a handcart either, and they could make their own selection of it. There was a guy, his first name

40:30 was Russ – it will come back to me – he was writing a book about the Vietnam War, and it was published later on, it was called "Happy Hunting Ground". He had been a US Marine in the Korean War and he had written a very good book on his experiences as a marine: I think it was called "The Last Parallel". Anyway, he wrote this book about

41:00 Vietnam and we could tell it was going to be a pretty critical book, but it had a chapter about his experiences with the Australians in there, and he had a few lines on me there. If I remember them correctly he said that he had met this guy who had been a Rhodes Scholar, "A tall, slender guy with a face like a priest, what's he doing in the gooking business?"

Tape 7

00:32 **We've talked about how you would gain intelligence from Vietnamese people; what efforts did you make to dig intelligence from your own people, your own troops?**

Yeah, well, the amount of information that you would get back from them was pretty limited, because it depended on what they saw and heard during operations. But sometimes, particularly if they were out on patrols lying up quietly in the jungle, they could

01:00 discover some useful things. There was an intelligence section representative with each of the companies and they would gather it immediately and let me know. If need be I would go down to the company and talk to them or someone from the company would come and talk to me. But on the whole it was fairly short-range, immediate stuff.

Did you suffer from the

01:30 **age-old military tradition that military intelligence is a bit of a contradiction in the way the men dealt with you?**

No, on the whole because we were working with pretty pragmatic people who knew enough of the military system not to take it too seriously, and again, the practical consideration was that we

02:00 all depended upon each other for our lives so you didn't make things unduly difficult for the system to work. It was up to me to get as clear a picture as I could in my own mind of what the enemy intended over the next couple of weeks, and it behoved them to let me do it, and it worked pretty well.

During you time as battalion IO, what major

02:30 **coups did you and the battalion have in the war?**

Well, I think the most important one was up in Nui Thai Vai, and you really needed to read "Vietnam Task" to understand that, but we cleared a formed Viet Cong defensive position out. It had a lot of people in it and it was potentially very dangerous to us. It gave the Viet Cong control over

03:00 a substantial area of Route 15, which meant that they could close off any important strategic access between Vung Tau and Saigon. During that operation we also captured the diary and some marked-up maps that had belonged to the deputy commander of 274 Regiment, Nguyen Nam Hung, and that was the big intelligence coup of the war, because his diary when translated

03:30 enabled us to see exactly where they'd been day by day over the previous nine months. It gave us some idea of what they thought of us, of our effectiveness, what impact our coming in to Phuoc Tuy made on their operations, and it also gave us some idea of what they were thinking about doing. One of the curious things is that they stayed on track – you'd think after losing

04:00 these documents they might have scrapped the plans for various attacks and so on, but they didn't – so

we were forewarned.

When you entered that Viet Cong complex did it give you any surprises about how they were set up?

Yes, they were amazingly cleverly set up. There was a network of caves and they had dug interconnecting passages

04:30 between them at the back, well inside the mountain. They had beds in there, they had organised a water supply. They had one marvellous self-concealing passage which was a pivoted rock which swung on a beam, and you pivoted the rock back one way when you wanted to open up the hole, and once you'd gone through it you pulled the beam

05:00 and the rock pivoted back, and when you were above you couldn't tell there was a passageway underneath it. They were very good at that kind of thing. And also the amount of radio equipment they had with them, that was surprising. We captured some of it, it was fairly new Chinese stuff, so its loss to them would have been quite significant to them, too. We also got some complaints from our signals intelligence people because, as we'd

05:30 pinched the Viet Cong radio set, there were no longer any signals for them to listen to. However, they soon made good the deficiency.

It must have been quite an eerie feeling to walk through a complex like that, recently vacated?

Yes, well, I didn't do more than go to the entrance. It was our assault pioneers and the engineer squadron from Task Force who were the professionals in handling tunnel complexes who did it. But yes, they had

06:00 left the interior of a few of these caves laced with booby traps that were set off with fine threads that were laid in a criss-cross fashion across it. John Macaloney, who was an assault pioneer platoon commander, got a Military Cross for the way in which he approached that. He led the way in there personally and removed the first few booby traps.

What a joyous job.

06:30 Oh, tough, yeah.

What would you describe, looking back, as your most dangerous time or your most dangerous incident?

I think probably on Nui Thai Vai. At one stage when the battalion headquarters was climbing up a very steep, narrow part that went up over rocks, we'd sent the anti-tank platoon through to sort of clear the way,

07:00 and there were a bunch of Viet Cong who let the anti-tank platoon go past thinking, "Perhaps this is just a small patrol." Battalion Headquarters is not really brilliantly situated for conducting its own defensive battle; you think you're going to have the battalion around you and suddenly we found ourselves on the point of the attack. A couple of people were hit by snipers,

07:30 including the signals officer, Brian Ledan. I suppose we were all vulnerable, but very few of us were hit. So that was one scary moment. I can remember another one: we were involved in an attack on a Viet Cong position somewhere in the north-east of the province, I think this is probably when I was B Company second-in-command.

08:00 There was quite a lot of fire flying around, and seeing some of our chaps just get up and charge straight into it you felt like saying, "Get down, you fools, you're not bullet-proof." These guys never thought about that, they were aware that someone was firing at them, and particularly when one of their own friends had been wounded, a different sort of reflex takes over and you're full of adrenalin to "go and get that

08:30 bastard before he kills someone else". Those sorts of things are very vivid. I can remember being a bit worried before our first operations by the factor of fear: was this going to be a problem? But when you get into an operation and angry people start exchanging shots, all that goes, all your instincts for self-preservation take

09:00 over and you're very sharply-focused on eliminating the opposition. A couple of those small reconnaissance patrols that I was talking about earlier, they were quite scary. The worst danger was not being killed but captured, I really dreaded that prospect, but fortunately none of us were. So you put that to the back of your mind.

What, in your

09:30 **experience of Vietnam, makes a good infantry officer, in terms of leadership in battle?**

Intelligence, in the sense of mental capacity, above all – I don't mean intelligence in the sense of information about the enemy – because a good platoon commander had to be capable of seeing where the threat is, recognising it

10:00 and quickly working out in his mind what's the best approach for dealing with it, and then understanding where his own people are and how he's going to communicate his orders and make them comprehensible and doable for his chaps. If you can do that, then you're a very good platoon commander. Yeah, I would say basic intelligence is the most important attribute.

Is that more important than courage, in your opinion?

10:30 I think courage does come second after – I think most people are courageous, actually, I think we're programmed that way. Some people are, I suppose, super-courageous and will think nothing about risking their life. Most people will think a little bit, but you can think of rationales for putting those doubts to one side. I think there are some people who take foolish risks,

11:00 and there, in your own studies of the First and Second World War, some of the notable multiple award winners were probably people of that kind, who genuinely did not care whether they lived or died. But those people are very few and far between, and most people I think really have what it takes to make a good infantry soldier, provided they're led in an intelligent and

11:30 understanding way which does not take their efforts for granted or sort of treat them in an unfair or inhumane way.

How did you personally react under fire? How did you keep yourself going?

I wasn't often under fire, that's one thing. Second, when

12:00 you are under fire you want very much to get rid of whoever is firing at you, and so all your instincts are towards eliminating the threat. Running away is not a very good idea because you get up and expose yourself as a target; it's much better to be down and getting into a fire position or move to somewhere where you can use your weapon, or help other people who can do it

12:30 better to do so.

As the converse question to that original one, what would you think was your most ludicrous, or your most humorous moment?

Yeah, well, again, that is related in "Vietnam Task". Not long after I became battalion intelligence officer, we were doing a co-ordinate search of Binh Ba and we had to put the battalion headquarters down in a safe area a bit removed from the village.

13:00 We chose a cleared area that we could defend easily. What we didn't know was that this was an occasional burial area, and we had just got ourselves set up there and an old lady in the village died. The following day her relatives wanted to bury her in the middle of battalion headquarters' position.

13:30 So this raised an interesting problem: how did you know that there was not a bomb in the coffin? I can remember saying to Max Carroll that this was clearly an operational matter and that he should go and sort it out, and he said, "No, O'Neill, this is a civil affairs matter and you're the civil affairs officer: you fix it." So I then had to go and halt this team of loudly wailing

14:00 mourners and coffin bearers and get them to put the coffin down, and through my interpreter explain to them why we had a problem with them burying this coffin in the middle of battalion headquarters on that afternoon. Fortunately, they could see our problem, so they were willing to talk about it. But the only way to resolve the problem was to get them to take the lid off the coffin.

14:30 They didn't like doing that, but they did, and it was just a little old lady. They lifted up the feet, they lifted up the head, they lifted up the middle and I could check that there was no bomb in there and we could put it all back together and the wailing continued and the procession continued.

Everything went back to normal then?

It did, yes. No explosions occurred.

15:00 **At what point was it, can you confirm when you were contacted regarding the possibility of a teaching post?**

I think it was in November of 1966. It could have been December, but it was around then.

And your good friends amongst the officer establishment there, what did they think of you doing that?

Well, some of them thought it was quite a natural thing to do, others thought, "Oh, God,

15:30 why go and be an academic?" You got a fairly full range of reactions but Colonel War thought, "Yeah, this would be a good thing for you to do." He said, "You won't stay in the army." He was quite sure about that and he ended up quite right. A lot of them had been through Duntroon themselves and

16:00 thought it was on the whole a good idea to upgrade the place.

Can you tell us about how your tour came to be cut slightly short by illness?

Yeah. Well, I had vertigo in my last few weeks in Vietnam, which meant I lost my sense of balance. I probably couldn't

16:30 walk properly for a week or ten days, it was quite a nasty attack. And with vertigo you get nausea, it's really not a very pleasant thing at all. Tony White recognised what it was straight away and sent me down to Vung Tau to the hospital, and I had about a week in hospital and recovered some capacity to walk and then got back to the battalion. By that stage all the detailed

17:00 instructions for our movement back to Australia were coming through and a certain number of people had to go by air. Tony said, "Well, twelve days on a pitching aircraft carrier is not what you need at this point," so he made sure I got on a plane, and I came back on a C-130.

What sort of medical facilities were you in in Vietnam? Can you describe the care you were given?

It was the 8th Field

17:30 Ambulance. By that stage they had some galvanised iron huts down at Vung Tau, which I think had concrete floors. They were certainly hard floors, they were fairly basic army beds but they were all right. I didn't need much treatment other than rest. I was on a drug, I think it was Stomatal. I have

18:00 had vertigo since then and it is Stomatal I used; whether it was Stomatal then I'm not quite sure. But anyway, whatever it was, it suppressed the nausea and helped me get back on my feet, and I was able to do a bit of reading, so that was all right.

How did it feel to be in Vietnam one day and back in Australia the next?

Well, it felt really good, because this was the day that we'd all

18:30 been looking for for a long time. It was just wonderful to be back with Sally and to have the next phase of life moving along in a much more materially comfortable way, not having to deal with the problems of Vietnam every day.

I should have asked you, how did you come to be awarded a Mention In Dispatches?

That was due to the goodness of

19:00 Colonel John Warr. He had the capacity to write citations for people he thought really deserving of them, and he did several. I think Max Carroll had a MID [Mentioned in Dispatches], and I think Tony White did, too. Yes, I came across the citation for mine the other day and it refers to "excellence

19:30 of intelligence work" over the course of the battalion's tour there, and something about leadership.

What sort of trouble did you have in settling in to life in Australia after a year in the bush, as it were?

Well, things are a little bit boring and mundane

20:00 when you get back in your own apartment, it's all very confined and so on. You tend to feel a little bit at a loose end sometimes. I had the book to finish off; although I had the first draft there it needed a lot of stitching together and editing and so on, so, although I had leave for about four or

20:30 five weeks, I spent most of that time working on the book and getting it into shape to go to the publisher, and of course spending time with the publishers, then beginning the process of getting the army to approve it. I'm just trying to think. I don't think there were that many problems, it was just so nice to be home in so many ways.

21:00 A lot of people were wanting to talk about the war. I suppose I got a bit bored with that after a while.

Were you faced with sort of "did you kill anyone?" questions from people?

Not really, no. The people I talked to on the whole were very nice, intelligent people.

Did you bring home any of that jumpiness, paranoia, stress-related condition from Vietnam?

21:30 I don't think so, but Sally would be a better person to ask than me. I wouldn't be surprised if I was a bit jumpy, but the relief of being home was what I focused on, but I could well have been a bit jumpy. The one thing, I've never had bad dreams about Vietnam. I don't think I've ever – I may have had a couple of dreams about it, but they weren't terrifying ones.

22:00 It was a long time ago.

As a hypothetical question, if you were just to say to someone, "Hi, I'm Robert, I'm a Vietnam veteran," what do you think would go through their mind about you? What is your view of that cliché?

"What sort of psychological wreck is this?" I'm afraid Vietnam vets [veterans] have got a bad image. That's partly due to the antics of a

22:30 minority of people, and partly due I think to the translation of a lot of the American Vietnam Veterans' syndrome into our own society. Quite a lot of people do suddenly find out that I, as an academic, served in the Vietnam War, and it's a matter of great surprise how this could come about. They might ask a question or two or they

23:00 might not; quite often they don't; it's beyond their comprehension, they hadn't come prepared for this situation. Because I've spent a lot of my life in the international environment, if this comes up, a huge number of people say, "How, but you're not an American, how could you have been?" Relatively few Americans know we were in the Vietnam War, let alone other people.

23:30 **Having served in an infantry battalion at the sharp end, as it were, what do you think it gave you for the rest of your career?**

Well, it gave me an understanding what it was like to be in combat, and as wars do play a big role in the course of human history, it does give you a much sharper insight into war as a phenomenon, and to why wars

24:00 often work out the way they do. There are not a lot of other people in the military history business these days who have been in a war, so it gave me a huge professional advantage like that, which I've never sought to play on in any negative sense against my military historical contemporaries, but it's certainly there and

24:30 I think it's always strengthened my credibility in teaching and writing in this field.

Does it strengthen your understanding of sometimes dry historic fact?

Yeah, it does, because you can think your way into the minds of the soldiers who were taking part, and you can think, "How long since they've had a decent meal?", "How much sleep did they have the night before?" "Were they soaking wet this morning?" and that kind of thing.

25:00 "How are they relating with their command system?", "What are they being told about the enemy?"

Sometimes you read historical recounts written my modern historians and they say, "Such-and-such company really failed to move to that objective quickly enough." You must think of it sometimes in a different way, about what was going on.

Yes, it's much more complex than that.

So tell us about integrating yourself into the Royal Military College when you got back.

25:30 That wasn't so difficult because I was there as a member of the faculty and I had an interesting bunch of academic colleagues around: Alec Hill, who was in charge of the History Department at that stage, a

26:00 distinguished military historian who had taught history at Sydney Grammar School and went on to write a fine biography of Harry Chauvel; Len Turner came in as the first professor of history, he was a South African with a photographic memory and a huge experience of writing on wars; there were other people in other departments who were interesting to relate to. I mean, Duntroon was a bit frustrating

26:30 in that it was so small, and its library facilities at that point were poorly-developed. A lot of people at the University of New South Wales thought it was a bad idea suddenly to be taking on the responsibility for the army's academic training, you know, with the war in Vietnam, and so we began to experience some of that backwash in the relationship. But the main thing really was relating to the cadets and trying to prepare these guys to face what I had had to face,

27:00 because they were all going to be platoon commanders in a year or two and so on. Those cadets included Peter Cosgrove.

Do you recall him personally?

Yes, I do.

What was he like as a cadet?

He was good. He was not what I would call academically gifted, but he was certainly bright, a good participant, and quick – he had a very quick brain.

27:30 There were other people like General Peter Abigail – Peter didn't rise to the same heights as Peter Cosgrove but he was a very bright, impressive guy; David Horner, who's written a lot of Australian military history, was a cadet then; Alan Dupont, who is now a senior fellow of the Lowy Institute for International Policy. They were a bright lot.

What exactly was it that you were teaching?

28:00 I was teaching – I taught the Franco-Prussian War, I taught some aspects of the First World War, I taught the Vietnam War, I taught the French in Indochina from the mid-nineteenth century through to Dien Bien Phu. I taught things relating to my doctoral thesis.

28:30 I think that's about it.

How had the army's attitude towards education and academia changed in the ten years since you'd been involved?

Quite a lot. It had become much more positive – I wouldn't say it was entirely welcoming of academic rigour, but for the most part it was and it could see that it had to happen. There were plenty

29:00 of bridgeheads of resistance amongst the diehards, and some of these people sometimes gave me a bit of a hard time personally because they saw me as embodying it. But you didn't let that worry you too much.

For these young future platoon commanders who were heading off to infantry battalions in Vietnam, why on earth did they need to know about the Franco-Prussian War?

Well, the short answer is

29:30 that they didn't for that purpose, but you were training people who were going to go on to ultimately be generals, as a couple of them were, and they needed to have a much broader view of what how wars are fought, the political problems, the military problems when you get large forces in the field and all those sorts of things. So in thinking of preparing them

30:00 for Vietnam, I laid on a special course which focussed on the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, and that led me to write my third book which was on Giap, the North Vietnamese commander. I thought it was, a good way of bringing all this all together around the one theme would be to do a biography on Giap, so I called it "General Giap – Politician and Strategist" and looked at these two sides of his career,

30:30 and that came about in 1969.

For these men who could potentially be going off to Vietnam, what lesson above all others did you strive to impart to them?

That force need to be applied very sparingly and intelligently, that it's very easy to create mayhem and be a counter-productive military force.

31:00 **Do you think that was received well?**

It was received with resistance. It sort of went counter the culture a bit, but I wasn't the only person imparting this perspective, and it kind of pulled a lot of them up short and they would then look around and talk to other people and then discover that yes, there was a certain amount of pragmatic sense in this approach.

31:30 **So how did you come to get your "divorce" from the army?**

Well, it really happened on Long Son Island, that's when I decided that I really wanted to go, and the rest was a matter of implementation. I was at Duntroon initially as a major, I was still in uniform, and when the University of New South Wales took the faculty over

32:00 I was offered a job as a senior lecturer, which would solve all this problem about having to get my writings cleared by a higher authority. The experience I had in "Vietnam Task" was very frustrating, and there were lots of other books that I wanted to write and so on. So it was a clear, fairly easy choice for me and I was lucky that the University of New South Wales was there offering

32:30 me the job. It enabled me to still square a sense of responsibility towards the army that I had as a result of all the help it had given me with my education, while at the same time enabling me to begin to move off and do what I really wanted to do. So I made the switch out of uniform in, I think it was July, 1968. Then in

33:00 early '69, it was probably just after the publication of my book on Giap, Bruce Miller, who was head of the Department of International Relations at the ANU, asked me to come and see him one day and said how would I like to be a senior fellow in the Institute of Advanced Studies. So I couldn't think of anything better. He then asked me to write him a letter and supply a CV [curriculum vitae] and so on.

33:30 That went through the ANU's processes and I moved over there in December of that year. Hedley was there at that stage as the alternative head of the department. Tom Miller had recently established the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, and during 1969 I had also been appointed official historian for the Korean War, so I was bringing that all with me. They also told me

34:00 not far into 1970 that they wanted me to take over running the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre the following year, so I had a pretty full plate.

What sort of political climate did ANU have, and particularly your department?

My department was somewhat to the right of the university, I think that's true in the fairly general sense that people involved in international politics

34:30 tend to be a bit more pragmatic than people whose interests are mainly domestic or they don't have any

particular political shaping. But, that having been said, within the Department of International Relations, probably no-one thought the Vietnam War – Tom Miller is an exception to this – but everyone else thought the Vietnam War was wrong and we shouldn't have been there and so on.

35:00 That was obviously a fairly large problem for me, that I had to live with. My own thinking had come around to accept that perspective, but I had to be careful about what I said and wrote so that I didn't appear as if I was some militarist who was trying to

35:30 subvert what people thought. So it was a time when I had to be delicate rather than a time that I had to really had to reorient myself. But you were constantly running into people who knew that I'd served in the army in Vietnam, some of them even knew that I was an intelligence officer, they would then

36:00 think that they had me stereo cast and they would proceed to do a job on me. I got a bit tired of that but I always gave as good as I got.

What sort of paradigm shifts was international relations dealing with at this point in history?

Well, it was moving away from the

36:30 central confrontation of the Cold War. There was a lot more awareness of the complexity of international relations, partly due to the role that China was playing and partly dur to the process of imperial devolution which was going on in Africa and had gone on in South Asia and was still going on in South-East Asia. So it was a time

37:00 when paradigms were tending to break down but a new paradigm had not really established itself. It was an interesting stage to be at, because I was able to focus things a bit more in the region and less on the central confrontation of the Cold War. We in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre began looking a lot more at the

37:30 dynamics of the Indian Ocean as a realm that had a certain amount of cohesion and a certain amount of autonomy, the South Pacific, our relations with Papua New Guinea and the small island states, and of course South-East Asia, as the armed forces were moving away from involvement in Vietnam by the mid '70s and the big issues arose as to what were the

38:00 Australian Defence Forces for and what sort of shape should they hold, and it was a golden opportunity for us in the Centre to try and generate some new ideas. I was lucky, I had some very bright people on the staff. Des Ball was one, Ross Babbage was another. Ross had done his masters thesis at Sydney and I learnt about it because I was the external examiner, and he came and did a

38:30 PhD with us on the defence of Australia. We had a very bright retired colonel, "Jol" Langtree, who came in really as an administrative officer, but he was so good creatively that he made a big contribution to our work. So starting from myself and a research assistant, by the mid '70s we had a good team of half a dozen people, and the thing had critical mass and took off. We began organising a major national conference each year

39:00 where we got about three hundred people from the international security community along, and get some papers and a book out of that each year, and other papers and seminars and so on. That must have attracted a certain amount of attention to me abroad, because by 1982 I was offered the job of running the International Institute of Strategic Studies, which was doing a lot of the things that the SDSC [Strategic Defence Studies Centre] was

39:30 doing but on a much bigger scale.

And you were concurrently working on the Korean history?

I was, yes, which was a bit of a millstone around my neck for a few years, but I had accepted to do it so I did it.

I guess Korea is a fairly forgotten and minor conflict in Australia's history: what is your opinion of that?

It is certainly true.

40:00 Korea gave us a lot of useful lessons in terms of working with the Americans. It also again gave the little Australian Army a chance to develop an approach to the war which was somewhat different from that of the big American Army, like I would say that a good deal of our approach was supported and helped by the British Army through

40:30 working together in the Commonwealth Division. It taught us a lot of negative things about how to organise a small force in an ongoing coalition war: we tended to keep the same battalion there right through and just keep people through it, which didn't work particularly well, in '52, '53 we

41:00 went for unit replacement; I suppose learning to work with the Koreans, the importance of the indigenous people. Over half the manpower burden in the Korean War from 1952 onwards was borne by the South Koreans themselves, and this was a notable difference with the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese were never as effective in their own defence as the South Koreans were in Korea. You learnt that there

were very important national differences between the Koreans and the Vietnamese.

Tape 8

00:31 **Professor, what contribution did your "Australians in the Korean War" really make to the whole debate about the Korean War, about Australia's involvement?**

It gave people for the first time a full account of what we'd done in the Korean War, why we'd been there, what the government's purpose was in sending a force there, what problems arose in terms of our relations with the Americans as a result of

01:00 being part of the coalition there, the difficulties as working part of the United Nations Command Force, and the whole lot of operational issues that relate to each of the three services.

So if you hadn't written this book, or these two volumes, where would we be today? It's really the only full account, isn't it, of our involvement?

01:30 If I hadn't written it probably someone else would have, but at some later stage because there really weren't the number of military historians around then. There are not all that many now, but I can't believe that, say, David Horner would not have done it perhaps twenty years later, or it would have been something that would have been handed to Peter Edwards as part of his responsibility. But it would have had to have waited a while and it would have been one more big job to have been done.

02:00 **You said that it ended up being a bit of a millstone around your neck, having to write these two volumes: why do you say that?**

Because I found myself with more responsibilities than I had known about than when I took the job on, and I was just a bit overladen. I would have liked to have had a bit more time to publish more things that related specifically to the strategic studies end of the spectrum. But life

02:30 isn't perfect and you've got to get on with it as it lies.

How did you maintain your interest in the Korean War?

Well, just by being involved with the documents on a day-to-day basis. I must say that at times I was not terribly interested in it, I just wanted to get it out of the way. But that's true of any major book that one does, I suppose.

03:00 But I was under a lot of pressure because the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre was taking off and there were a lot of things to be done. Also I was getting a bit more of an international profile and being drawn into more things in Europe and South-East Asia and the United States.

When you published these volumes were they received well? Was there an interest in them or was the same thing occurring, were people forgetting about the war?

I would say not a lot; there was some interest, they certainly

03:30 got noticed and reviewed in major newspapers. The first volume had more attention than the second, which is natural, because it deals with the broader, more political issues. I was fairly happy with the reception that it got, it's just that there wasn't a lot of it and it didn't make a lot of impact outside of Australia because it was on a very specifically Australian thing. But things have long-term consequences. When

04:00 I was being interviewed for the Chair of the History of War at Oxford in 1986, one member of the interview committee had the two volumes of "Australians in the Korean War" on the table in front of him. I thought, "Well, maybe it wasn't such a bad investment after all: look where it's got me!"

You mentioned briefly before that you got access to Australian Government classified

04:30 **documents in the writing of the book: can you talk about the kind of documents that you were given access to? This obviously helped the whole process for you?**

Yes, it was absolutely essential. The most interesting ones were the cabinet decisions because they were usually supported by fairly full papers which were done by the people who were the real experts in the Department of Defence or Department of Foreign Affairs

05:00 or the Prime Minister's Department. The cabinet minutes are fairly brief and you get some flavour of the discussion – you don't know exactly who has said what, although you can sometimes work it out. The cabinet papers were pretty well shaped and organised from a historian's point of view; that was good. It was more of a problem when I came to the individual departments

05:30 because their files are less hierarchically-ordered, and the number of issues I had to cover, say, in the Department of Foreign Affairs were numerous. They sort of ranged from Australia-US relations, and a subdivision of that was ANZUS, through to Australia-British relations, which were partly looked after by

the Prime Minister also in those days, Australia-South Korean relations, Australia-UN relations, relations

06:00 with South-East Asian countries and particularly Indonesia. Because India was playing a prominent political role in the Korean War, the Australia-Indian relationship was important. Then you had to work out what was going on in the Australian parliament and how that was impacting on what people in Foreign Affairs and Defence were thinking about; the parliamentary questions that were being handled; the press

06:30 commentary both from within Australia and outside. So there was a huge area to cover. Then in Defence I had the various committees, the Defence Committee, the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Principal Operations Officers' Committees and so on. So to do the job thoroughly was a long task.

Earlier, when you were studying the Nazi commanders,

07:00 **you found that gold nugget amongst the papers; was there gold you found amongst the cabinet papers, or anything during your research that helped this book?**

Not on the scale of the Weichs diary, no. I suppose the best stuff that I got was on the origins of ANZUS, the role of the then Foreign Minister, Percy Spender, the tensions between

07:30 himself and Menzies, Menzies' scepticism about whether an ANZUS alliance was possible and whether it would achieve anything – they were the sort of sexy issues of that particular work; but there was nothing that had really been raised to a high level by the historiographical debate in the sense that Hitler's role in the causation of the Second World War had been.

08:00 **I'll just take you back to the publishing of "Vietnam Task": how was it received when it was published in 1968?**

A variety of reviews. Some said that this was simply the pious reflections of a very orthodox military person – people who had obviously not read the book very thoroughly, or appreciated some of its more subtle

08:30 arguments. But I can understand why people would have said that. It had quite a lot of favourable reviews, just as an account to understand what the Australian troops had been doing in Vietnam in the last year or two. It got a very favourable review in London in the pages of the "Journal of the Royal United Services Institute", it got a lot of note there – not much, but

09:00 people who knew me knew I had written this book, so that was helpful. I don't think it got any attention in the United States.

Given you'd just come back from Vietnam were you very sensitive to any criticism that the book may have received, or did you care? Was it over for you after having written it?

I did care and I would have been sensitive, yes. One is always over-sensitive, I think, about the criticism

09:30 of the things one's written. I've suffered from that in the past.

Did it help you to think – because you were also writing the book as you were in Vietnam – was it a process of getting over what you were seeing and experiencing while it was happening?

I think it probably was, yes. It helped me to cope with it and to come to terms with it, to be able to put it on paper and try and trace out the line of

10:00 reason for why we were doing things, rather than just letting the general horror of it all to overwhelm me from time to time, as I think tends to happen to people in wars.

And all these years later in 2004, how do you read the book now?

Well, I'm quite interested in it. In preparing for this interview, I've read the book over the past week and I assure you I have never read the book, since

10:30 writing it, as a whole, and that was in 1967. So that's a lot of memory to make up, and what I am impressed by is the detail of my description of the landscape, the people, how they related to each other and some of our own, individual experiences. It comes out as a more differentiated book than

11:00 I would have said if someone had asked me a year ago about it. I enjoyed it very much; I have to say, modestly. My interest in it was partly re-awoken by my son-in-law. Before he married my elder daughter he had been looking after her apartment in Berkeley while she was away, and she had a copy of "Vietnam Task" there. She came back and Peter said to her,

11:30 "A very interesting book your father has written," and Kate said, "I don't know, I don't read things he writes." He said, "Well, you ought to read it," and so she did, and they both saw some new dimensions of me. And I think what was particularly relevant for a family perspective was there was I, younger than Kate is now, going through a situation where I could have been killed

12:00 most days of the week and getting through it somehow and surviving.

So she's got a bit more esteem for you now?

Well, it's certainly a different esteem.

General Giap, why did you particularly choose him to spend all that time writing about?

He was the presiding genius behind the North

12:30 Vietnamese and Viet Cong side of the war, and I thought that if you could get some understanding on how he thought about it we would have more hope of fighting a more successful, more intelligent war. So that's why I did it. I could get much more information coming out of the French-Indochina War than I could out of the

13:00 contemporary war – I mean, I was writing this in 1968 – so I focussed very much on the French period, which I think enabled Giap to define his own operational style and his own sense of how to maximise his effectiveness, and in particular to note the way he orchestrated military and political pressures

13:30 and applied political pressure through world public opinion at the same time as he was laying on heavy military pressure, particularly in the case of the French and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu where the French were pretty isolated internationally. There was not much feeling that they could succeed or that they should be doing it, anyway. So it was a time that he could afford to take a risk, rather than worrying

14:00 about bringing in the Americans or other allies. I think, having been in the Vietnam War and having seen the way in which the Viet Cong operated, I had a bit more of an insight into the way in which the North Vietnamese went generally to war, getting their opponents to over-react continuously and put themselves in situations

14:30 where they would suffer from an operation far more than the North Vietnamese or the Vietminh, as they were in those days.

You were writing the book while you were in Australia?

Yes.

Where were you sourcing the information from? Was that kind of information available in Australia?

Yeah, it was. I was getting it from the National Library, from the ANU library or a couple of

15:00 specialised libraries like the Department of International Relations library, and I talked to a couple of people that were Vietnam specialists about things that were available only in the Vietnamese language, the things that were published in Hanoi, the things that Giap had himself written and so on. What I was not able to get access to but would have been very valuable is all the classified material that was being built up in the United States in the 1960s on Giap.

15:30 But nobody has ever actually been given access to all of that for the purpose of writing a book. My biography of Giap was the only one in existence until the early or mid '90s, when John Colburn produced one called, "The Volcano Under Snow". He had kind things to say about my book in his introduction, so I feel satisfied that that was something that made its mark

16:00 and lasted for some time, even though the source material was nowhere near as good as I would have liked it to have been.

Were the Americans interested in your book on General Giap?

Yes, and an American colonel came down from Vietnam to spend a few days with me, in I think it was 1969 or '70. Yes, and the American edition had been printed by Praga, and it

16:30 got a lot of attention in the States. It got some rave reviews in both directions, and it again helped me to get a bit better-known in the States.

Just back to your conversation with Mat, as head of the Strategic and Defence Studies at ANU, what over that period would you say were your main achievements in changing and shaping policies in the Asia region?

Well, first of all,

17:00 to try and promote a sense of engagement between Australia and the region and not just treat it as something halfway between here and London, or of minor importance alongside our relationship with the United States, but to think of it as a much more autonomous area that could do things that we might not always like but that we had to come to terms with and understand it and make a big effort. That was one

17:30 aspect. And the second was to do with what the Australian defence forces are about in the post-Vietnam War era. We developed a fairly cohesive policy which was focused on the defence of Australia: much better to do that at a distance, focussing on naval and air power, rather than raising a huge army that's going to be very expensive and

18:00 may never be where you want them, and so on. That line of thinking was taken up by Kim Beasley when he was Defence Minister in the 1980s, and it was developed to a higher level by Paul Dibb in a report that he did, which became the government Defence White Paper in 1986, which

18:30 probably has been the most formative of the defence forces in the past twenty years. I wouldn't say that it applies now – the world has gone on and changed – but those sorts of things helped to anticipate policy changes that came into effect in the 1980s.

Why do you say that the government Defence White Paper was amongst the most significant and had the biggest impact?

Because it defined what the mission of our

19:00 forces was more precisely, and it gave a basic formula to those as to how they should react, what proportion of the burden it should carry and how interrelated they should be. It stressed the importance of defending the sea barrier between us and potential sources of hostility, and one way of doing that is with good submarines

19:30 and good defensive air protection. Out of that came the Collins Class submarines – there've been all kinds of problems with them but they seem to have sorted that out now – and the F-18 purchase as a long-range attack fighter, plus some redeployment of the army into areas of Australia that the army had never been before other than during the Second World War,

20:00 in areas of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, and some preparation of defence infrastructure there.

What kind of input did you have personally in refocusing our attention to Indonesia and China, which had been neglected, really, in the face of the Cold War?

Yeah, I'd say my influence was fairly indirect. The most important things I did were to hold

20:30 conferences and seminars and working groups and encourage people to write the sorts of things that became the product of the Centre, plus raise a bit of money for the Centre to do it, and doing all the necessary university politicking that you need to do to get an operation up and running and maintain the flow of resources and people.

As far as Indonesia is concerned, what was the change of thinking at that time, when you were

21:00 **head of the Institute?**

I'd say it was an evolution rather than a major change, but the evolution was to understand how they see the region, how they see Australia, how they reacted to various lines of Australian policy in the past, how they saw their own national interest being served in the medium to long term, and

21:30 what the role of co-operative arrangements for regional security was. I was greatly helped in this by Peter Hastings, who was the foreign editor of the "Sydney Morning Herald". Peter came and worked in the Centre for three years as a senior research fellow, and he made a tremendous personal contribution in that direction.

What about your input into the debate about our relationship with the United States in a military

22:00 **sense, in our co-operation with them?**

Again, I would say it's probably been more to do with organising and stimulating and getting people applied to the task – training, raising money and so on – than any particular one thing that I've written. I mean, I kept writing then, during

22:30 the '70s and '80s, about the ANZUS alliance and the fact that it was a complex issue that could lead us into trouble as well as the problem-solver, in some ways.

What were the alarm bells in the '70s and '80s that you could see in the ANZUS Treaty?

That the Americans might become detached

23:00 from a region that they'd had a nasty rebuff in. That President Nixon's famous Guam Doctrine might become one of the major tenets of US foreign policy, and that therefore America's friends in the Western Pacific would be left largely to fend for themselves. And another

23:30 side of the coin was that the Americans would try and assert control of the whole Western Pacific region and manage it themselves without much consultation with others. We had to really fight hard to get our voice into American counsels and get them to listen to us, and of course that's a perpetual problem.

24:00 John Howard had tried to approach it by saying things that American will agree to; therefore they do give him high profile and so on. But it does kind of lock you in and leave you without options.

What about China, did your Institute perceive what the big changes were that were going to

happen in China at that time?

We didn't have a lot of China speciality; there were other people at the ANU who

24:30 focused more on China and we listened to what they said. Stephen Fitzgerald was head of the Contemporary China Centre and they were doing lots of interesting things. I did piggy-back a little on work that Paul Dibb, who was then director of the Defence Intelligence Organisation, was doing in China. Paul went to China a couple of times in an official capacity.

25:00 I was the first Australian academic analyst in the strategic field to go to China, and he gave me a lot of useful contacts, places to go, people to talk to and so on. He gave me a reasonable insight into the sorts of things that were likely to come up in these discussions, so that helped enormously. Again, it helped me to begin the sort of institution-

25:30 to-institution contact that you need to get deep-seated academic dialogue going. It did an enormous amount to help me when I got to London and running the IISS [International Institute for Strategic Studies], because I already had contacts in China, which were very hard to come by. We were able to organise a Chinese researcher to come to the Institute each year, which was a

26:00 big breakthrough in terms of what the Chinese had been allowed to do in the international environment in the past.

So that takes us up to London: tell us about that position and moving over and being part of the global circle of international studies.

Well, it was a big leap up for me in terms of profile and responsibilities. The International Institute of Strategic Studies is the sort of senior global

26:30 think tank in this field. It's wholly private, it has to raise its own money, so one of the jobs of the director is to be the chief fundraiser for it. Its pronouncements are pretty eagerly sought-after and keenly listened to in the public debate, so you've got to be sure that what you say is on the button. And with issues with the sorts of complexities that we had, such as the deployment of American Cruise and Pershing

27:00 missiles into Europe in the early 1980s, they were tough issues to decide where you stood, but you had to take a position, you couldn't avoid it. It was fun being the first non-European to have that job and see how Europeans reacted to an outsider coming in, and at the same time

27:30 it was also stretching because you had to understand their problems and be able to speak to them so that they wouldn't feel that, "Oh well, we'll never get a non-European again," because they just bring in all their intellectual baggage from the past. It gave me an opportunity, though, to bring in more of an Asian-Pacific perspective to the work of the IISS, and I thought this was overdue since the principal conflicts of the post-Second World War era had happened

28:00 in North-East, East and South-East Asia. I think the Institute was ready for this kind of broadening, otherwise they wouldn't have picked me to do it. Then you had to find the right sort of staff to underpin this intellectual broadening, and raise the money to do it. But it was a lot of fun, and it was a tremendous challenge with a huge amount

28:30 of satisfaction. We got a lot of high-profile media exposure, I mean I could go to Washington and say, "I want to see Weinberger," who was the Defense Secretary, and I would get to see him, or, "I want to see Schultz," the Secretary of State, and I would get to see him. There were not many positions outside the United States if you're not in government where you can have those kinds of options.

How do you feel you left your stamp on that position? You mentioned that you brought Asia more into focus.

29:00 Well, let me go back to the phrase of a mentor of mine, Michael Howard: just after I stepped down from the Institute he was trying to sum up my impact, and he said I had "Converted Europe from being the centre of the world to being in a rather irrelevant position on the wrong side of the peninsula on the wrong side of Asia". That was a European speaking, of course. I think the

29:30 main thing was they were paying much more heed to events outside the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation]-Warsaw Pact relationship, and it really was time to do that. The other thing was developing the Institute's financial basis. When I arrived we still had to pay off the debt on the building, we didn't have any endowment, we were totally dependent on our foundation

30:00 grants and so on. So I was able to raise about six million dollars for an endowment, and we paid off the building and we instituted a decent pension plan for the staff, which they didn't have, and a few things like that.

Was there much emphasis on defence in that institute, or were you moving away more into the strategic?

Yeah, it was a much more strategic policy, I would say. I moved a long way out of the purely defence field.

30:30 **Did you feel ready for that?**

Yeah, I did. There were lots of good people coming on in the defence field, it was good that I was getting out of their way; and at the same time the strategic field needed someone who could bring a broader perspective than just the NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation.

So your next port of call, 1987, was the Chair Professor of History of War at Oxford?

31:00 Yeah.

Tell us about that position.

Well, it attracted me because it was a very prestigious one, and I'd done my doctoral work at Oxford and I'd been supervised by the guy that held that position in the 1950s and '60s. I really enjoyed my time at Oxford, it's a very policy-oriented university. A lot of the people there have not

31:30 always been in academia, they've spent some time in government service. It's a very international university, and All Souls was a fairly prestigious college to be in, and I had some wonderful colleagues there. So again, it was one of these split-second decisions that you take as to whether you want the job, and I knew the Oxford environment.

32:00 My old, new friend Hedley Bull was around in the – not while I was actually in Oxford, he died in '85 – but he'd done a bit to introduce me to the Oxford social scene earlier in the '80s. Anyway, so I went through the hoops and applied. They had originally conducted a search

32:30 the year before and I was asked if I would apply then, but I said, "No, I couldn't, I've only been at the IISS for three years." They came back the following year and asked me again if I would be willing to come in '87 rather than '86, so I said yes. Then I just had to go through the interview process and satisfy the selectors that I was up to snuff, and that turned out the right way,

33:00 so I knew in early '86 that I was going to Oxford in October of '87.

What did you actually do in the position, what did it involve?

Mainly teaching graduate students. It's a very teaching-intensive post, and it's a wonderful opportunity to build up the field because you do get to pick the cream of students in international relations and international security from all around the world. Because I'd

33:30 enjoyed my time there as a student so much I really wanted to give them all as good a time as I had, so I took on a lot of students. I had about eighteen doctoral students at any one time right through my fourteen years there, which meant that I spent a lot of time reading other people's theses and examining them and so on. But I made some terrific friends.

34:00 I owe a good deal of my understanding of what's going on in Iraq today to the fact that I have two former fairly recent doctoral graduates both serving there, one with the United States Army and one with the United States Marine Corps. Of course email keeps us closely connected, and these sorts of things you can't value in any specific way, but they're enormously worthwhile. While I was there

34:30 I set up a foreign policy, a graduate foreign policy studies program in All Souls. I got a bit of support for the college and the Ford Foundation, and had a good colleague in the college, Julian Bullard, who'd been British ambassador to Germany, and he was keen to do this sort of thing. So we used to run a weekly seminar program and conferences.

And that was open to the public?

35:00 Yeah, it was actually, and quite a variety of people used to come along. Because Oxford is in a fairly central and high-profile position I was asked to do lots of other things outside the university. I was on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for ten years, I was a trustee of the Imperial War Museum for about ten years

35:30 and chairman for three.

I'll just stop you there: what did that involve, what did you have to do in that position in the Imperial War Museum as chairman?

You had to give guidance on – because my specialty was on military history I was then charged with, responsible for giving advice on the content of exhibitions, publications, the sorts of projects

36:00 in research that the museum should concentrate on, aspects to do with redeveloping displays. When I first went to the council of the IWM [Imperial War Museum] the museum was very much focussed on the two World Wars, and I said, "Come on, we've moved on, we've had a few other wars. The Commonwealth" – it's meant to be Commonwealth-wise, not just British – "the Commonwealth as a whole

36:30 was involved in the Korean War, and let's give that a lift. There are various engagements in Africa that Britain has taken part in. There are a number of Middle East conflicts, particularly Suez," which is a rather painful thing for the Brits, but never mind, that's part of life, "of course the Malayan Emergency

and of course the Vietnam War." So we began to develop part of the museum, which involved some rebuilding to

37:00 house those kinds of things. It's not satisfactory yet but it's moving in the right direction. People coming into the museum who are just interested in wars of the past fifty years have got something to relate to. We also raised a lot of money in the United States to build a war memorial to American Air Force personnel who had

37:30 died in the Second World War, and at the same time we could have an example of each of the air force that flew. We had a very famous architect to design it and we used a wonderful building in the southern reaches of Cambridgeshire, at Duxford. We do a lot at the cabinet war rooms under

38:00 Whitehall and they've been expanded a good deal. There are lots of other things like that.

As a professor of History of War at Oxford how did you try and reshape what people were learning and put your stamp on that position?

Yeah, OK. Well, going back to what we were talking about with the Vietnam War, a lot of people don't think enough

38:30 about the objectives of war and the political context and what the political ideas are involved in wars, so I wanted to teach warfare over the past two centuries with more of this kind of perspective. So I developed a course that I called "Strategic Thought in the Conduct of War from Napoleon to the Nuclear Era". It ran over two years, it was a cycle of lectures, I would do one a week so that graduate students who were doing a two-year

39:00 course would have something different each week during that course to focus on. It was a lot of work. I thought at one stage that I might turn it into a book but I haven't had time to do that yet. It also gave me, in the mid-'90s computer-aided lectures came into being, and I got to master PowerPoint: for a

39:30 military historian it's marvellous because you can put twenty or thirty maps up in the course of a one-hour lecture with PowerPoint and there's no way you can do it if you've actually got to have the maps there and unroll them and hang them up on the wall. So that was a lot of fun, that was a big slice of my work.

Why did you feel it necessary to introduce that course, the "Strategic Studies from Napoleon to Nuclear Era"?

Well, because I thought it was time. Thinking on war had moved on and

40:00 no-one was doing that kind of more intellectual, policy-oriented approach to warfare, and it was something I could do.

So you went back to Australia after you finished your tenure with Oxford. What pulled you back to home?

In a word, the beauty of the Australian bush. Let me tell you the story.

40:30 Sally's younger sister, Sue, married a guy who lives in a remote mountain valley on the western side of the Blue Mountains. His name is Mike Pridmore, he's a Brit, his father was a judge in the Persian Gulf. Mike had a scholarship to Oxford in 1968; after his first term he said, "This is too much like boarding school." and he left and came to Australia. A very intelligent guy and although he was a classical scholar he became a computer programmer. He made enough money to be able to buy some land, that's what he wanted to do, and he bought the top end of this valley north of Rylstone called "The Badger Ground". And we went to stay with them in the early '90s and we thought, "Gee, this is beautiful country." Sally said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have forty acres around here?" And I said, "No, forty acres you can only put a shed on it." Local restrictions say you've got to have a hundred acres before you can build a house, and I thought that was too big an investment and we wouldn't use it and so on. Anyway, roll on to August 1986 and Sally and I are there with Sue and Mike. Mike says to me on a Saturday morning, before we were due to go on the Sunday, he said, "Bob, come for a walk with me, I want to show you something." So we walked over the ridge on the western side of the property, he said, "I'll show you Long Gully," and I thought, "OK, I'll go for a walk." I was expecting to see....

Tape 9

00:31 **...up and shown Long Valley?**

Yes. Mike took me up onto the ridge, and I thought, "I'm going to look at the usual Australian agricultural disaster – barbed wire fences, sheep and nearly bare paddocks." and so on. But when we got to the ridge and looked down I saw this beautiful valley full of tall trees and a few nearly circular open clearings. The wattle was out; kangaroos were jumping about down there, there

01:00 was a mountain on either side of the valley and I thought, "This is wonderful." It was one of those things

that really bowls you over. I thought, “Gee, I must talk to Sally about this, I would love to buy that place.” Mike said to me, “It’s for sale, Bob.” I said, “How much?” And he told me how much it was per acre and I began running the numbers through my head and I thought, “We can do this.” Anyway, I couldn’t

01:30 talk privately to Sally. She was there. We went down and I thought, “I’ll talk to Sally in the afternoon.” Well, over lunch Mike said to me, “Are you thinking about buying some property around here, Bob?” and so I thought I better grasp the nettle, and said, “Yeah, I’m thinking about buying Long Gully.” with one eye on Sally’s face to see her reaction, and that lit up. So we got permission from the owners to go and look at it that afternoon, and we did the deal on the ’phone that night. It was a no-brainer.

02:00 It’s a beautiful place, it’s a thousand acres, it’s about five kilometres long. It’s about two-thirds natural forest and it has some wonderful rock formations and, as I said, the mountains on either side and a lovely big bowl at the head of it where we have the house. So that’s how we came to acquire Long Gully. One of Mike’s many attributes

02:30 is that he’s a house builder, so he took charge of building the house. That’s how we come to have a wonderful mud brick house, with lots of local hardwoods as the structural timbers.

Wonderful. I just wanted to ask you, the Imperial War Museum and the Australian War Memorial and institutions like that, what do you think their role is these days?

Public education

03:00 and the development of a deeper understanding of our national experience and our international experience in warfare. I think they do a lot to undermine the simplistic belief that a lot of people have about war from a pro [for] or a con [against] perspective. I think both places have really great research facilities, they’re capable of being developed

03:30 further and I’m sure they will be. The two institutions talk to each other much more, and I had a certain amount to do with that.

Do you think that Australians are a bit obsessive about their military history?

I think there is a tendency to over-promote it in a simplistic sort of way. I’ve been very struck with the sort of militarisation of Australian culture since I’ve been back.

04:00 Nearly every other month there seems to be some kind of military parade or other through Sydney, and you just see the military side of life being promoted much more than it was, say, twenty years ago. I think this is very much a government policy and I think there is a political angle to it. I think also that it has political dangers

04:30 and I think we might see some very negative fall-out from the Iraq war, which will make it more difficult to study wars and warfare in the way in which we’ve been able to in the last twenty years.

Also I wanted to ask you about the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. What are your impressions of that particularly body?

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has a very vast mandate.

05:00 It has to look after all the graves of all the war dead in Commonwealth cemeteries all over the world, there are a couple of million of them, and in tending for the war graves it also has to tend for all the national memorials that accompany them, and it has to do it on a reasonable budget. The budget when I left the Commission was around twenty-three or twenty-four million pounds. And it has to preserve a lot of history in

05:30 the process. Computers have helped enormously: you can now get internet access to the information on anyone whose remains are in a Commonwealth War Graves cemetery, where they are, how they came to be there and so on. As time moves on we’ve found that people are not forgetful of their relatives that have died in

06:00 war. There is a greater public hunger for understanding, and the number of demands that are on the Commission for information have gone up and up. So it’s meeting a major need and I think that it will have a big role to play for a long time.

I must ask you, as someone who served in Vietnam and involved in the academic side as well, what do think

06:30 **of the common media parallels that are drawn between Vietnam and Iraq?**

I think there are some parallels, in particular the fact that the United States is landed in a long-running counter-insurgency war for which they're not particularly well suited. There are obvious differences, of course: there’s not the same inhibiting effect as Communist China

07:00 being exerted on American policy during the Vietnam War; there is not a real equivalent to North Vietnam – it would be interesting to see what kind of role Iran plays. But another very important

different is that Iraq is scarcely a country at all. I mean, Vietnam had been a nation state for a long time; it had been under various people's control, but there were Vietnamese people and culture, and it had been there for a couple of thousand years. Iraq

07:30 is a creation of the British Empire of the early 1920s when they needed somewhere to park Prince Faisal because he'd fallen out of favour with the French. His pay-off for leading the Arab revolt was to be given Syria, and the French didn't really want him there – I mean the French had already been given Syria, so Faisal was offered something that was really no prize at all. And so they put

08:00 together Iraq out of a number of provinces of the old Ottoman Empire that had been run separately, and it has only been kept together as a country by pretty totalitarian action. OK, you get rid of one dictator; the result I think is going to be continued separation between the major elements of Iraq and chaos.

08:30 And of course that is going to affect the whole dynamics of the region: it can lead to much more recruiting of terrorists who can be used against the United States and other Western interests elsewhere; I think it jeopardises the position of Israel; and it ultimately will have a bad effect on world oil prices in the long term as well as in the short term, as we've seen this year.

09:00 **What are your views on the seeming increasing Australian bellicosity in the last few years?**

I don't see it so much as bellicosity; I think there is a growing appreciation that we can't just sit at home, we've got to have some impact on our region. Although the military have been involved in East Timor and the Solomons,

09:30 it's been pretty much as a shield for a much broader civil aid process going on underneath in which the military have played some part. I'm fairly supportive of that kind of activity, but if it were to turn to true bellicosity then I think we would be stepping into a quagmire, something that we could really not control because our own military firepower is limited in size

10:00 and scope.

You mentioned being witness in Vietnam to "cherry-picking" of intelligence and people being told what they wanted to know rather than the full picture: what are your views on the allegations that that's happening in our own system now?

Well, it's hard for me to comment with any definitive knowledge because it's just hearsay that goes on, but

10:30 I think the same factors are at work and governments do tend to make decisions without consulting their advisers and then they tune what they get and replay it in the public domain accordingly. It doesn't mean that governments are necessarily lying; it's just being selective with the evidence and putting

11:00 their spin on it.

OK, professor, we'll get you to your taxi in just a moment. I'm just wondering if there is any – for the record, for the future, for posterity – any message you wanted to leave behind, particularly about service or Australia's military history, in a nutshell?

I think I've probably said it at length – I mean the things that occur to me now at the

11:30 end of this interview are that it's very easy to apply force counter-productively in the international society. It does need to be applied from time to time, and it can be applied selectively and with beneficial results. But we've got to think very hard about how we do it, and understand the fragility of the international system.

Thanks, professor.

My pleasure.