

Australians at War Film Archive

John Kinsela (Killer) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:50 **John, just to start with as we discussed, just give me a really brief summary of just going through your life from when you were born right up to now.**

01:00 I was born in Surry Hills, Sydney, the eldest of ten. Then we moved around quite a bit and settled down in Balmain and while in Balmain

01:30 I won selection for the 1968 Olympics and in the same year I received a Queen's Scout Award, the Duke of Edinburgh Award which I received from the Duke of Edinburgh himself. Then come '69 I won the lottery for the National Service and got called up for two years and

02:00 ended up in artillery. The reason I ended up in artillery everybody said that being in the Olympics that I should be a PTI, which is Physical Training Instructor, so I put in for artillery. I got artillery but I didn't get a PTI course. So I volunteered for Vietnam. I went to Vietnam in '70-'71 and when I came back from Vietnam

02:30 I wanted to be stationed at Sydney and our unit was based in Townsville, so they put me on a PTI course. After I completed the PTI course I went back to Townsville finished my two years and then I got out. In '72 I got selected for the Munich Olympics, I was actually finished competing when I heard the shots

03:00 from the massacre, the Israelis being shot and that shook me up. I gave up wrestling for a couple of years after that and then I, in '74, I made a comeback and I got selected to go to the world championships in Istanbul. In '76 I won selection for the Montreal Olympics but it's a ballot system,

03:30 there's ten wrestlers and they only pick three. They nominated me number five so I missed out. The Olympic Committee wanted to know why, if I came eighth in Munich, why I didn't get on the team, but at the time it was politics. After that I did coaching for a few years then I got a bit restless and I joined 1st Commando Company, so in between making living driving

04:00 and doing army reserves part time, that took most of my time up, I gave up coaching and got really involved with the reserves. In '83 I was nominated Commando of the Year and I got out in '84, I did six years. Seeing as I've got three children

04:30 and my sister had a bit of trouble and we got her other two kids, we ended up with five kids. Weekends my wife worked, we had to palm the kids off to the mother. That got too much, I left the army reserve then and took up coaching again.

05:00 Over a period of years I coached several Australian champions, one of which made it to the 2000 Olympics. In 1998 I was awarded the gold award for the Aboriginal Sportsman of the Year, Gold Award and in '98 I was made

05:30 a life member of the NSW [New South Wales] Wrestling Association. Come 2000 I applied for a volunteer for the 2000 Olympics, I was actually at the wrestling venues which was quite good as I got to see some of the Olympic champions.

06:00 **That was very good, a lot of achievements there. Now I'm going to go right back to your childhood and work our way through your story. What year was it you were born?**

I was born in '49, 1949.

Your family lived in Surry Hills is that right?

Well Dad moved around quite a bit. I was born in Surry Hills

06:30 and the earliest I can recollect as a child we moved to Newtown and there where we lived in King Street Newtown, you could actually see the torch bearer from the '56 Olympics and I was looking out the

window and that's my first recollection

- 07:00 of, I mean it didn't dawn on me then what the Olympics was all about, being only about six. From there we moved down the south coast and spent quite a few years in Nowra and then we moved back to Sydney because one of my sisters was badly burnt, she received ninety percent of her body
- 07:30 burnt and she had to get skin grafting all the time and was backwards and forwards to Sydney all the time, got too much for the family, so at that time there was nine of us, so we moved back to Sydney. Back in them days there wasn't any social security and Dad was out of work and Mum having nine kids, couldn't work
- 08:00 so we had to get...the family got split up. The eldest girl was sent to a girls home in the southern highlands and me and my brother ended up in Bowral. One of the church boys homes and we stayed there for twelve months until Dad got himself back together. At that time,
- 08:30 my Dad was an alcoholic but he was the sort of man that used to work and put food on the table, the family came first and then he had money for alcohol. When I got selected for the '68 Olympics he was one of the proudest dads you'd ever seen, he used to drag me into the pub all the time.
- 09:00 I used to work at the same factory that he worked. I was there for about...up until I got called up for national service.

What was the background of your mother and father? Where were they from?

Well my father was born in Condobolin and his father is of Aboriginal descent,

- 09:30 actually the Wiradjuri tribe and my mother's background, she was born in Adelaide and her mother was from the Jarwin tribe up in Katherine, she was one of the 'Lost Generations' [aboriginal children removed from their parents to white homes] and was brought up in Adelaide and she was brought up by white people and married a white Australian which was, he actually went to World War I but when he married my grandmother
- 10:00 he was ostracized from the family. So my mother was brought up in Adelaide and at that time there was a lot of racial tensions and things like that.

What was it like growing up in a house with that many kids?

- 10:30 Being the eldest I had a lot of responsibility, 'cause, when we lived in Nowra my Dad worked in the timber industry and he'd be out bush and I was the man of the house. At an early age I learnt how to cook and do all the chores. When we lived in Nowra we didn't have electricity, we didn't have water...
- 11:00 we just had a water tank, all the washing was done down the creek. It was a happy existence, I mean we didn't have TV in those days, only the radio. The friendship...'cause that's where I met my wife. My father and her father worked together when they were about eighteen.
- 11:30 There was a close bondship between us when we were younger. But when we moved away from Nowra I met her years later and we got married in '72 after I came back from Vietnam.

How old were you when the family moved down to Nowra do you reckon?

I would have been about seven or eight, we moved away when I was about eleven

- 12:00 or twelve. Being of an Aboriginal background see with Aboriginal, my grandmother was very dark but because she married a white Australian over the generations the colour fades and every now and then you get somebody in the family....
- 12:30 like my uncle was very dark and my auntie was very dark but my mother was fair, I think she took after the father and my father, he was fair and a lot of people think I'm an Italian. Every time they ask me what my nationality is I say, "I'm part Aboriginal" and they say, "I thought you were Italian or something".
- 13:00 The culture shock from when we went to Nowra was when I went to primary school all the Aboriginal kids there and there was two cousins, one was black and one was white and I kind of made a comment and one of them wanted to fight me because I couldn't get over how dark he was. At the school I went to there was no Aboriginals.
- 13:30 We became best mates later when he found out I was Aboriginal and I told him that my grandmother was darker than him. The discrimination when you're younger seems to show more with kids than adults some times.

Did you consider yourself Aboriginal; was it something you thought about?

Oh yeah, every where I went, because my mother brought us up to be of Aboriginal descent,

- 14:00 which I was proud of and when I got to the Olympics and in the army people would ask me where I would come from. Actually when I was in the commandos, I joined up in '78, one of the SAS [Special Air Service] coder staff, he asked me what nationality I was and I told him I was Koori [Aboriginal] he

thought...the reason he caught on was

14:30 there was an Aboriginal coder staff that came from one of the infantry battalions and he was the quartermaster and I used to drink with him in the mess and because he was good friends with the SAS guy and he found out that I was Aboriginal, like the whole concept was....because in Vietnam there was some SAS Aboriginals

15:00 and one of them actually got shot by his own man, so Aboriginals make good warriors.

Growing up in that situation in Nowra, what did you get up to as a young fellow?

We used to do the ...got into football and things like that.

Rugby League, I gather?

15:30 Yeah rugby league and I used to run around with no shoes on. We used to have big family get-togethers, Aboriginals are renowned for family. We used to have big card games at different peoples' houses. The turning point for me was the day that my sister got burnt.

How did that happen, John?

We had an open fire

16:00 and she had a nylon nightgown on and she got too close to the fire. It just burnt up and it burnt the whole of her body and they had to rush her to Sydney. After that we went backwards and forwards, she had skin grafts and I spent a lot of my time at the hospital.

16:30 When you think of travelling on the train with nine children....there was one instance where we lost one of us, because every time we got off the train Mum had to count everybody and were at Central [railway station] one day and we were minus one and it was the younger sister and they had to ring up the guard to put her off at the next station. Those sort of things happened you know.

Talk me through the kids,

17:00 **what were their names as they went down through the ten or the nine?**

Well there was Lorraine, and then Michael, Julie, Helen because they were actually born in the same year but I think Julie is older than Helen, then there's Leonie,

17:30 Cathy and then there is Kelly...Kelly...there's a ten year difference between Cathy, she was a change-of-life baby, she was born in Balmain when we lived in Balmain. The only way I can remember the birthdays is to count back from mine one year

18:00 except for when I get to Julie and Helen, they were born in the same year.

How did your mum cope with handling that household with money and food and clothing?

Yeah well like I say, in them days there weren't social security. I must admit that the Salvation Army and the Smith Family helped out quite a bit. When we lived in the bush Dad grew a lot of vegetables and things,

18:30 we used to go pig hunting, kangaroo shooting when things got a bit lean and my wife's family come from a background of fishermen, my uncle at that time was a fisherman so we used to spend a lot of time out at the beach. We always had a feed ...of rabbits or kangaroo, pig or fish.

19:00 You can't do that sort of thing now because there's a lot of restrictions on shooting, protected species and that sort of thing.

So you lived off the land a little bit?

Yeah and like our stove....imagine some of the hot summers and you're cooking a baked dinner how hot the house must have been....but you just don't think of those sorts of things....

19:30 And our fridge, it was a kerosene fridge and the iron was one of those ones that you put on the stove and then we up-graded to a metho [methylated spirits] one, you know you put metho in and you light it up and our lights were, oh we were lucky to have the incandescent lights...

With the mantles?

20:00 Yeah with the mantles. The walls were, there wasn't wallpaper there was newspaper because it was an old house with the rafters to insulate the house it was pasted with newspaper. We didn't have locks on the doors so any body would come and went, but we didn't have any valuables.

20:30 Whenever you went to anybody's house you could open the door and go in.

Where about was that to the centre of Nowra town?

It was just outside of Nowra probably about two ks [kilometres] out of Nowra. But at that time there

was..... because my wife comes from Nowra we do a lot of trips down there...that is all industrial area now and where the creek was where we used to go fishing, I mean that's just about....

21:00 there is still a small creek, I remember when I first went there I just couldn't believe the clarity of the water and there was frogs and plenty of wildlife, snakes and birds but as soon as you get civilisation everything changes.

It sounds like you enjoyed your time down there?

Yeah. I learnt a lot of survival things down there so later on

21:30 when I joined the Boy Scouts a lot of those different skills came in handy.

So you reckon you were about eleven when you moved back up to the city with the family?

Yeah. Me and my brother were put in a boys' home and we were down there for twelve months which was pretty horrific because...

Why was it that the kids got moved out to the homes?

22:00 Well at that time we didn't have anywhere to stay because whenever we did trips to Sydney we used to stay at my auntie's place and her husband was Reg Saunders, he was a renowned soldier in World War II and Korea and they had a house full of kids, so it was like one big happy family. When we moved back there, see they didn't have a housing commission in those days

22:30 so whatever house you got, you had to pay rent because there was no rental assistance. The only thing we ever got was the Salvation Army and the Smith Family helped us with food, so it was a pretty harsh sort of a bringing up. Being of an Aboriginal background, people don't realise the bond with family.

23:00 When you get separated from your family, especially when you're young, it's pretty horrific. It's like the 'lost generation'. For twelve months we were down there, we only saw our mother about once or twice because she had, I mean it was pretty hectic to get transport down there and she still had some of the children with her.

23:30 **How did you feel when your mum told you that you had to go away?**

Well at that time, I still remember the trip down to Bowral and at that time the man in charge of the boys home he was one of those authoritarians if you got out of line he would give you a kick up the backside.

24:00 There was one young boy there that was a bit of a rogue and he used to get brutalised pretty bad. It's like being in a jail, I mean the only time we ever went anywhere was to school and on Sunday we'd walk into a church. Every Sunday we'd go to a different church

24:30 so we got to learn all the different religions because it was a Christian boys home that was part of the system.

What was the name of that institution do you remember?

I can't remember it's that long ago.

So it was you and how many brothers went with you there?

I've only got one brother.

25:00 **Oh. I beg your pardon.**

He died in '98 or '99 in suspicious circumstances. He was at a party and he was asphyxiated. We found out later, he was a Vietnam veteran too, that somebody poured half a bottle of whisky down his throat when he was drunk and he regurgitated on chips

25:30 and peanuts and because he was on a bed, he just died. It was two years later one of the fellows that held him committed suicide over the incident, he must have. But it was suspicious circumstances so they couldn't do anything...because the autopsy said 'death by asphyxiation' there was nothing they could do

26:00 and even after two years if you don't have witnesses So that was a shock for me and then my Dad died of lung cancer and then in 2000, me Mum died and in 2000 my wife got cervical cancer. A combination of all those things and having post traumatic stress

26:30 and anxiety disorder, it's just come to a head.

Sorry to hear all that. You had a bad run there for a few years.

Yeah. All the good times make up for the difference. I come from a close family having eight sisters

27:00 and since I, I'm now on a TPI, [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Pension] since I've left work I get a lot of support from the family. I think that is the Australian Aboriginal way of life. See it's just the

family bondship, like if anybody dies in the family,

27:30 everybody is there. People from other nationalities don't realise that the Aboriginal culture is totally different.

When you went to that home in Bowral, were you and your brother the only Aboriginal children there?

Yeah. I mean people at that time, there wasn't any Aboriginals there

28:00 but listening from different people, their..... It was funny there, I played rugby league and we almost got to the state championships we won out district, we had a play-off with Minto which would have got us into the state championships. I actually met a young boy there on the Minto team

28:30 and when we moved back to Sydney back into Redfern, I went to Cleveland Street High School and I actually bumped into him, so we had a little bit of a mateship there.

And you reckon that the discipline was pretty harsh down in that place?

It was. Actually when we came back to live with the family, Mum couldn't believe how much weight

29:00 I'd put on. So it done us a lot of good. It had us working around, it was a little bit like a farm, they had a horse there and everything and they had us doing a lot of the gardening and the older boys did different things. It was just the boredom of trying to create activities to keep us going.

29:30 I think that experience there and the experience of being in Vietnam on a gun, the isolation; its one of those things like, it was a traumatic experience

30:00 for me and being in a war zone it was almost like being in the same situation. You're on a gun in position and the furthest that you can walk is about fifty metres up to the mess and back and you're over there for twelve months.

30:30 Life deals a lot of different surprises you know.

Did you look out for your brother in that place?

Being a couple of years younger than me, the thing is I wasn't in the older group then, there were boys going to high school then and I was still in primary.

31:00 My education grades were pretty good and when we moved back to Sydney to Cleveland Street High School. They had a different education system which was a lot higher than what I got in the country, so that decided what high school I went to and I ended up going to a second rate high school which meant that you couldn't get a school certificate or a leaving certificate, so when I turned fourteen I left school

31:30 and that was to help support the family. With nine mouths to feed that extra money came in handy.

What had changed in your parents' situation that they were able to bring you back from Bowral?

Oh well Dad got a job and Mum was, at that time in La Pouse

32:00 they had a, what you might call, a 'refuge' today. She was actually there and when Dad eventually got work, 'cause he wasn't living with the family, he was living with some relations, he got some work and they got enough money to get a house. We moved into the house

32:30 and we were there for quite a few years and while we were in Redfern, that's when I joined the Boy Scouts because one of Dad's drinking mates was a Scout Master. I joined the scouts and I was in there for quite a few years, went to the World Jamboree way back in the '60s in Melbourne and that was a bit of a.....

33:00 it kind of opened the door for me. While I was in the scouts they were asking for applicants for the Outward Bound School and that was up the Hawkesbury and you had to write in an essay. So I wrote in that I came from a family of nine, there was nine of us at the time because Kelly didn't come until later, and Sydney Rotary Club sponsored

33:30 the person and I was lucky to get sponsored there and that was a few weeks up the Hawkesbury River. That involved a lot of outdoor activities and I was actually in the Boy Scouts and I was training at the Police Boys Club at the same time so I had two interests.

34:00 I had a couple of different jobs before I actually went to work in the factory with me Dad. When you leave school at fourteen you need something to occupy your mind and not having enough educational qualifications I couldn't get a trade. When I went to work at the sock factory with my Dad, the manager actually

34:30 put me in the, I actually got a job as a knitting mechanic. I did and apprenticeship and finished that in '67 and in '68. I got selected for the Olympics and in '69

National service?

National service.

Redfern is a pretty notorious district these days,

35:00 **what was it like when you were living there as a younger man?**

We actually lived quite a fair bit in Eveleigh Street but the 'Block' wasn't renowned in those days. At that time South Sydney was one of the leading football clubs and the majority of the Aboriginal kids lived in La Perouse.

35:30 We knew some of the people from the Aboriginal communities from around Redfern but they didn't have the medical centre. They had nothing. Charlie Perkins [Aboriginal activist] actually opened the Aboriginal Foundation in George Street and Mum actually got a job there as a welfare officer. When the kids were old enough and we were all going to school

36:00 and she actually worked with Charlie Perkins and Sunday nights were the highlights of the week, they used to have dances at the Foundation and a lot of Aboriginals used to go there and it was an alcohol free thing. Today I think it's the drugs

36:30 and the alcohol that has made it bad for the Aboriginals, I feel ashamed sometimes when you hear about the riots in Redfern. I actually did twelve months in juvenile justice, working as an Aboriginal youth worker you see some of what the drugs do to a lot of the boys.

37:00 **You mentioned that your dad got you a job in the factory, a sock factory did you say?**

Yes it was.

What was the name of the company?

Betterware Hosiery, I mean they've closed now, that was way back in the sixties, Dad used to press socks there

37:30 and he got me a job pressing socks and it was pretty tedious work and it was what they call piece work you got paid so much a dozen. It was like a furnace because the presses were hot all day and in the summer it was horrific

38:00 and then they sent me upstairs to work on the machines and I did an apprenticeship as a knitting mechanic. Then I called up for national service after Vietnam, I didn't want to be locked in a factory anymore I wanted to be free and that's when I got a job as a courier.

38:30 When we lived in Redfern, Sundays, coming from a big family, Mum was religious so we had to go to church every Sunday and the church actually had a, we'd call it a congregational church, they had the Girl Guides there, so my sisters went to Girl Guides and me and my brother went to Boy Scouts.

39:00 **You liked Scouts?**

Yeah. I actually got the 'Queen's Scout' and the same year, at that time they brought out the Duke of Edinburgh Awards and part of the qualifications, you had to do community work,

39:30 so through one of the ministers from the Congregational Church I ran a youth club in Alexandria and used to teach kids games, a lot of the things I learnt in Scouts, used to take them bushwalking, taught them a little bit about survival and I did all this when I was about seventeen.

40:00 **The kids that were in that youth centre, what backgrounds did they come from?**

40:30 Back in them days the inner city was a bit like a slum, if you know what I mean, a lot of the old houses, if you get a house in round Redfern or Alexandria now its big dollars. Back in them days if people got rich they'd move out into the suburbs, they got bigger houses and then when they brought in housing commission houses a lot people moved from the inner city slums to the housing commission areas. That's how Mt Druitt, Campbelltown, Minto, that's how they became communities from the people that moved from the inner city.

41:00 That's where I got my experience teaching kids and then, I didn't actually start off wrestling, see South Sydney Police Boys Club was the closest Police Boys I went to. I used to go down there and I tried different sports Judo, did a bit of weight training and went down to Woolloomooloo gym which was

41:30 probably about five ks from where I used to be and then I used to walk and walking through Darlinghurst in those days, it was like walking the streets of Blacktown, you know there was no prostitutes, no crime.

I have to stop you John as we're running out of tape.

Tape 2

- 00:32 **I started going to the Police Boys Club, see the Boy Scouts were only Friday night. I needed to do something the other four nights. So I started going to the Police Boys Club and I thought I'd get into some organised sport. I started off at South Sydney and I went into the boxing**
- 01:00 **but it was like an elitist thing, and I being a bit shy in those days I didn't go up and say that I was interested in boxing. I did a bit of weight training there and I was fortunate enough one of the constables there showed me a program and I did a bit of Judo there**
- 01:30 **and we used to do these back flips for actually braking you fall and not actually lifting my head, I ended up with a headache a few times. You had to wear a jacket and that sort of thing and I didn't think that was my kettle of fish and then I heard about Woolloomooloo Police Boys Club**
- 02:00 **so I wandered down there and they had gymnastics, different clubs had different sports and that they kind of excelled in. I tried a bit of gymnastics but I think, it was about five or six kilometres from my place and being late in the night and I was working, the travelling got too much so....I was talking to my uncle one day**
- 02:30 **and he was an ex-boxer and one of his mates was the boxing coach at Leichhardt Police Boys Club so he introduced me to the coach and I started boxing. I went there for about two weeks and on about the third week he didn't show up so I wandered up stairs and I saw some wrestling and I made a few inquiries and I thought, "This looks good"**
- 03:00 **and they said, "We've got a tournament on next week just front up with a pair of shorts and sandshoes and we'll put you in". I thought this is good and I won two wrestles and the third wrestle I got to the state champion.**
- So you were a natural?**
- Yeah, he only just beat me on points but that was the only time he ever beat me.
- 03:30 He came from the same club, so we used to train with one another but I just started to get better and better and within three years of starting wrestling, I got selected for the Mexico Olympics.
- From your story and what you've said there you seem like a bit of a natural at it. Had you had experience, while you were growing up with fighting and defending yourself? Why do you think you fought so well?**
- 04:00 If you look over the history of Aboriginal sports people, I mean we're natural at a lot of physical sports, like boxing, athletics, football, all the different codes we've got representatives and when you look at the greats like the Ellis and Arthur Beetson and all that
- 04:30 I mean Aboriginals are just natural sports people and with a little bit of proper coaching we could be basically anything. I was fortunate to be a good wrestler you have to have good balance, flexibility, endurance...I had a lot of physical endurance
- 05:00 which I found out later when I did a PTI course in the army, I was the fittest person on the course. Just before I went to Mexico in '68, one of the wrestlers was the physiotherapist his name was Reg Marsh
- 05:30 and we had some physical tests just prior to going away, you test your strength, endurance, lung capacity, see how many push-ups, chin-ups and dips that you can do and Reg Marsh was the fittest athlete at the Mexico Olympics. That included the likes of Mike Wendon and all that.
- 06:00 So I had a good teacher and he actually put me on a weight training program.
- What was the coach's name?**
- Well I had a couple of different coaches, Reg Woods was my original wrestling coach and then I had Reg Marsh, he'd been a physiotherapist and he actually put me on, showed me a weight training program.
- 06:30 See to be an athlete there is a lot of training you have to do as an individual, a lot of team sports they're fortunate to have sports trainers, physiotherapists, psychologists and to be wrestling its like being an individual. A lot of training that you have to do yourself.
- 07:00 Unlike the eastern block countries at the time when I was wrestling countries like Turkey, Iran, America, Russia and all the European countries it was like a profession for them. If you're a champion wrestler its like getting called up for national service, all you do is train all day
- 07:30 and I was talking to a Czechoslovakian wrestler when he migrated to Australia he trained at my gym and he was saying that he trained with the Russians and he said that in a basic day they'd do soccer in the morning, they'd do running, weight training, wrestling and they had physios there
- 08:00 if they had any injuries and they'd have psychologists there to psyche them up before they'd go on the

mat.

So what sort of training would you have? What would be your weekly training schedule?

I trained six days a week. Just before I went to Mexico, see I was only nineteen I had that much

08:30 going through my head, I had been in the Scouts and then having a job and then all this training. At that time there was about three or four different clubs in Sydney that had boys my weight. To be a good combative wrestler you have to have someone to compete against, you are only as good as the guys you train with.

09:00 I had to do a bit of travelling around the different clubs because there were particular wrestlers in different weight categories. If you were unfortunate to be in a club where there were only heavier guys for somebody my weight, being a flyweight you don't get any wrestling practice. I lived at Leichhardt and Bankstown was the best club at that time and

09:30 I had to, after work, catch a train out to Bankstown and wait for the gym to open, train and then catch a train home, living at Balmain I had to catch a train and a bus. I had a few late nights I didn't get my licence until I was in the army, my driving licence. What you've got to realise, with the Olympics

10:00 just finished, you hear about these people that have put in four years training, eight years training and they are training day in and day out in the same sport, when I went to Munich you've got to realise that I had a little bit of training in '69 in Sydney, two years in Vietnam and when I got out of national service

10:30 I got appendicitis two weeks after I got out of the army, in December I dislocated my arm, and in April we had the wrestling selections. So I only had five or six months and a couple of those months was taken up with injuries and that was the extent of the training I had just working up to the Olympics.

11:00 **It sounds like you were very busy in your late teens you said you were working, you were at Boy Scouts, you were training and you were doing wrestling training, how did you manage to fit it all in? Were you still working in the factory five days a week?**

Yes.

That was the sock factory was it?

Yes.

Then the boy scouts, when would you squeeze that in?

That was Friday. Then you had to fit in weekends, some weekends you'd be having Scouts and I'd have wrestling

11:30 tournaments around the various Police Boys Clubs and throughout that time the only facilities for training were Monday to Friday unlike today where you've got all these gyms and clubs that are open seven days a week in them days you could only train five days a week. On Saturday or Sunday I used to do a bit of endurance running

12:00 I used to do about a fourteen km [kilometre] run. When I say six days, five nights a week. See being an amateur in those days was being an amateur. I'll tell you how hard they were on athletes receiving money in them days, see Reg Marsh he had a practice, a physiotherapist practice in Bowral. Now the township took up a collection

12:30 for somebody to take over his business and the Olympic Committee found out that the township was giving him the money, they had to put it in his wife's name so that she could pay the person so that he could.....I mean you know, it was ridiculous and you see the endorsements andthat the athletes get today. An amateur in those days was a true amateur.

13:00 **How were you paying for all the sporting lessons, etcetera that you were having in those days?**

I was fortunate as the Police Boys Club was free, now, being a coach at three or four different Police Boys Clubs, the kids have to pay. When I was in Mt Druitt you had all these Aboriginal kids used to come along and they were made to pay.

13:30 We had one boy and two sisters from a family of nine and they had to pay money.

It wasn't like that when you were young?

No. The Police Boys Club was to keep kids off the street and in them days they had real Police running the clubs. Now in a lot of the clubs they have a token Police person that comes in once in a blue moon. Up in Hornsby if you want to use the

14:00 main hall you've got to put two dollars in the light box in the light meter, they've got a meter there for when you want to use the lights. A lot of Police Boys Clubs today if its an up-and-coming area where there is lot of gyms and finance the police are selling the clubs.

14:30 **I'll just bring you back to your earlier days, we'll discuss the later life later on today. What do you think motivated you to work so hard with your wrestling when you had such a busy**

schedule? What was driving you back then?

My mother was probably the turning point of

- 15:00 my career. She was there, she used to support me and like I said my Dad was an alcoholic but, I mean he was so proud of what I did, but you've always got to have that person there in your corner. I was fortunate to have good people around me. Good coaches. When I knew that I was good at wrestling
- 15:30 I had somebody there and when I was in the Boy Scouts I had a good Scout Master and it's the people in those organisations that give you the encouragement to be better than what you are. That's why years later I became a coach and tried to pass on
- 16:00 the things that I had learnt to young kids. I think it's that 'will of the wind' and I guess when I was a young boy at four I had polio and I had
- 16:30 metal braces on my legs and I was told by a doctor that I would never walk properly again and that I would have braces for the rest of my life and then years down the track I represent Australia in the Olympics. So there's a lot of things, coming from a family of hard knocks,
- 17:00 hard, being brought up poor but still having the family values. I mean that, it's that family bondship that makes it worth everything that you do.

Your brother wasn't having such an easy time back then was he,

- 17:30 **tell us about him and why you both ended up doing the service?**

Well what actually happened with my brother was that when he was young he got into a bad crowd and they stole cars and whatever and he ended up in Mt Penang [Mount Penang Training School for Boys].

Mt Penang?

Mt Penang is a juvenile justice centre. Once you get committed you get sent to

- 18:00 Mt Penang. At that time they had a lot of ex-military people running the youth works and they gave my young brother the option of doing six months or joining the army so he said, "Alright I'll join the army." so he went into the army at seventeen.
- 18:30 He went to Vietnam the year after me, so I actually joined later and he was in the army for a couple of years before I joined up. When I was younger after I did the Outward Bound course I was so super fit, and I was wrestling, training. My mother said,
- 19:00 "Why don't you join the army, the navy or something?"

How old were you then when she said that to you?

I was sixteen, seventeen. See at that time seventeen was the age limit for the army and when I turned seventeen I was almost thinking about going in the army but my love of wrestling was so great and when you're good at something,

- 19:30 I mean I just lived for wrestling. Then I got better and better and the ultimate was to be selected for the '68 Olympics, it was the pinnacle of your sporting career, it was such a going from living in Redfern
- 20:00 to representing Australia in the Olympics was just something I couldn't comprehend.

Were you doing the 'nashos' [national service soldiers] and then got selected for the Olympics ...in what chronological order?

Well you have to re-phrase that, I won the lottery for the nashos. I didn't join, I won the lottery. The national service was like a lottery system

- 20:30 and my 'lottery balls' fell out, so I had to go through all the psychological, physical and medical profile then you got called up. I did, I went to Kapooka, did three months down there, then I went to Holsworthy and I did a gunners course.
- 21:00 When you go through what they call recruits they have one night there when they have a list of options all the different units you can go in and it was only corps units like infantry, artillery, armour, engineers and you didn't have any specific job so when you got put into that slot and you did your training
- 21:30 then they allocated what you did, you know if you wanted to be a driver or a signaller or whatever. I got artillery, then I got infantry and then I got artillery 'cause everybody said, "Oh you want to be a physical training instructor." so that's how I ended up in artillery.

So when you won the lottery, the nashos, were you angry,

- 22:00 **were you sad or you said that wrestling was what you really wanted to be doing and this would have interrupted this, so what was your reaction to being called up?**

Well actually I was over the moon because, like I said, I had contemplated going into the army but the thing that kept me out was the wrestling. So I thought, not having had an education,

22:30 I could learn something in the army. So when I went in, see when you do your first PT [Physical Training] lesson what it is, is how many push-ups, how many sit-ups, its like a physical examination and then what they do is they work out who's the fittest and they put you in ranks

23:00 of fitness. All the unfit people were on the left and all the fit people were on the right and it went in order and I was the fittest and I was up the front and I was the smallest. There was me and two other guys that were about five foot two in the old scale and I was actually the fittest in my platoon, so I was up the front. Physical training

23:30 instructors ran the gym, everybody said, "Oh you should be a physical training instructor". I always thought, being in the Scouts and always the best, I thought that SAS is the best and I contemplated, well I would have liked to have done a carter course, but when you get slotted, when you put down your preferences

24:00 you end up in that preference, being a national serviceman, its hard to change your mind. I did the two years in artillery and it was eight years after I got out of the reserves I thought that there was something I missed in the military that I didn't attain, that level of complete.

24:30 **So you didn't tick the SAS box because you didn't feel that you would make the grade?**

Yeah well, leaving school at fourteen and then being them being the elite I thought that, having never failed at anything, I thought that if I had've failed somehow it would have....probably....you know....

25:00 I mean that at that time, see when you go to an Olympics people don't realise that its that one thing that brings everyone together, so army, Vietnam I mean that's a conflict, fighting other people ...its....

25:30 I'll give you an example. Years after I came back from Munich there was a Russian entertainment at one of the theatres, so me and my wife went,

26:00 I actually got tickets to go. So I wore my blazer from the Munich Olympics and in the lapel I had a returned servicemen's badge and at that time, the way communism was there was these people out the front, you know the hecklers, and this guy saw me go in with the returned serviceman badge and because we were fighting the Vietnamese

26:30 and they were pro-communist, see back in the sixties that hate against the communists, the whole reason we went to Vietnam was the 'Domino Theory' that China or the communists were going to take over Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and then come down to us and that way of thinking the people don't realise that I had

27:00 a blazer on with a coat of arms representing Australia in one of the biggest sporting events in the world and all they could think of, me being a returned serviceman, they don't realise that I fought a Russian when I was in Mexico I actually fought a Russian. He was second in the European

27:30 Championships and he just thrashed me.

That's some of the hard things that you had to face when you got back and we'll talk about those in more detail later on. Back to my other question, what did you think was going to happen to your wrestling career when you joined the nashos?

Well that was, like, put on standby.

28:00 I knew that wherever I went it would be quite a distance from a wrestling venue. Wrestling being a minor sport, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth there've all got clubs and although I was stationed in Holsworthy being in the military

28:30 it's a little bit hard to get to training venues sometimes. Not long after I did the gunners course I volunteered for Vietnam. Straight away I got sent to Canungra. So there's not a lot of time that you can go to a police boys club and do training when you've got all this army business and not having a car, I didn't get my licence until I,

29:00 actually I got my licence just before I went to Vietnam but when I came back I went over with a 'provisional' and I came back with a full licence.

So was joining the army also a way of getting out of working at the sock factory?

It was the military that changed my mind and not go back and work in a confined place.

29:30 The comradeship, you know the mates that you meet in the army. Everybody is equal. Doesn't matter if you're a lawyer or a policeman when you get thrown in the army, everybody is the same equality.

The fact that your brother was in the army did that influence you to join as well?

- 30:00 That was one of the other reasons that I went in artillery because I thought I might be put in, because he was in a good unit, he used to tell me all about his mates and stories and stuff andbut I ended up, what you've got to realise is that when you go in as a national serviceman what you're doing is you're reinforcing the regular army. Like in Vietnam, if you got selected to go to Vietnam and you had six months left in national service and you went to Vietnam, when you're six months is up they send you home, so that leaves a blank spot in a unit in Vietnam, so they send what they call reinforcements
- 31:00 and the reinforcements are made up of national service. So a lot of national servicemen, you do your basic training, your corps training, Canungra and you get sent straight to Vietnam and the only training you've ever done is all the basic stuff. It comes down to actually firing a gun
- 31:30 or learning how to operate weapons, it was all just basic principles, it was like a learning curve. When you land in country anything you learn in gunnery school is totally different.

Why didn't you join the regular army?

Like I say I was enjoying life

- 32:00 and I still had that apprenticeship and I was going really good with the wrestling and I thought that when you sign up, well if I didn't like it say three years, its like a contract once you sign it you can't get out of it.
- 32:30 The navy was six years and I thought, 'What if I'm claustrophobic?' and I got in and didn't like it?' But I got to enjoy the army. I had a few little bad experiences. When the put me on the PTI course, the physical training instructor's course,
- 33:00 I failed the course and when I got sent back to my unit the OC [Officer Commanding] of the company he gave me a good talking.

This was before you went to Vietnam?

No, when I came back from Vietnam we were stationed in Townsville.

Oh OK, well we'll talk about that after we've talked about Vietnam, we'll try and keep it in a little bit of order.

- 33:30 **The other question I have, at that time you were so busy doing your wrestling, etcetera, Police Boys Club, working hard, what about your social life? Did you ever have time to go out and have fun?**

No. I didn't have any girlfriends then. I met my wife just before I went to Vietnam, we were kind of seeing one another and then we,

- 34:00 I think we.....yeah I didn't have any permanent girlfriend. It was just work and training and there was nothing else for anything else. I come from a family of ten, you know there is other commitments like family commitments.

What like birthdays and what sort of commitments?

- 34:30 To have a social life or a girlfriend you needed to have time and money 'cause a lot of my money went into the family. When we first moved to Redfern I actually got a job selling papers, that was extra
- 35:00 pocket money for me 'cause I used to get clips and then they'd put me on a run and where I'd, that was good training for my later experience as a courier delivering parcels...well I used to deliver newspapers. I never drank before I went to Vietnam. The only experience I had with alcohol
- 35:30 was when I went to a jamboree near Melbourne one of the guys had a VB [Victoria Bitter]and I took a sip and that was the extent of my alcoholic experience. With my Dad being an alcoholic I just didn't take to it, it was only after Vietnam that I

When you were in the nashos you were living in Balmain at that time with your family?

Yeah.

- 36:00 **What was Balmain like...in that period?**

Well when we first moved there, my sister was working, when they started to go out to work we had more money coming into the family, so we went from the little house we had in Redfern to Balmain, it was one of those terrace-type houses.

- 36:30 Then I got selected to go to Mexico and at that time my sister and my mother become pregnant and she used to do a bit of work for some doctors and there was about four or five of them lived in this house and she used to go and clean for them. One of the doctors there, her name was Anne Noonan
- 37:00 and she used to work at Balmain Hospital and when Mum got pregnant and she had the baby Anne Noonan was the gynaecologist there. Anyway she bought this house in Balmain and it was a five

bedroom house and being with a big family and Mum working with Anne she said, "Oh do you want to move into my house?"

37:30 and we moved in there. So when I went to Mexico they'd moved house and when I came back we were in a different house. Balmain in them days was a hippy, you know the long hair, bell bottoms and that sort of thing and there was a lot of hippies used to live in Balmain.

This was the late sixties wasn't it?

38:00 The late sixties, you know the old Volkswagens and all the different coloured garments and long hair and things.

Tell us about Mexico then.

Well like I say it was one of the biggest experiences for me in my earlier years. We were over there for seven weeks because of the altitude.

38:30 We could only train for about an hour a day because as soon as you did something physical you'd be breathing for air. The Turks used to do two sessions a day and they were down to one and they were the elite, they won a couple of gold [medals] in Mexico.

39:00 The big experience for me in Mexico was to see all these other wrestlers and people from all the different countries and the friendship and the Mexican people....now where 'The Village' was is like Blacktown [Sydney] from the city, so if you wanted to go into the city

39:30 it was over an hour in the bus to get there. About on the outskirts of Mexico City, just across the paddock was the slum area and during the Olympics they had given all these Mexicans paint, to paint all their little, you know, and that brought me back to the days when I lived in Nowra with the rafters and the newspaper on the walls and the old tin roof.

40:00 We had a friend that was in the press area of the Mexico Olympics and that was at the back of the little village. So to get from the competitors village to the press village we had to walk through this little slum area

40:30 and the people were so beautiful. The entrance to the Olympic Village every day there were people there trying to get autographs and you felt like a star, although I mean you were a wrestler, wrestling at that stage wasn't a big sport, athletics and swimming, they were our biggest medal winners

41:00 and to walk out into the foyer and you've got all these people asking for your autograph, it was a big thing.

How did you go?

I didn't do....I got the Italian, he was the European champion and I got the Russian, who was runner up to him in the European championships, so they completely outclassed me.

41:30 The guy that come first, second and third in my division come from....the Japanese was first, Americans second and Mongolia third so theyand the Italian came fourth and the Russian came fifth, so I was kind of in a hot class of wrestling to start off with.

Tape 3

00:20 Like in Mexico I went to a bullfight and two matadors got badly injured and one got killed. It was in the press about the Aussies reaction to the bullfights, like it was something barbaric. And high profile athletes like Michael Wendon, like he was a solicitor some educated man, he called it all barbaric

01:00 but to me it was just like something that happened in your life. It's legalised in that country but here, its like if they've got pit bulls fighting down the road.

How did you get over to Mexico in '68?

01:30 What as in transport?

Yeah.

We flew. We left Mascot and we had a stop in Hawaii and then down to Mexico City. The altitude there you really didn't notice that much until you started to do something physical.

02:00 We were told a lot about the effects of altitude, yeah, we didn't find out 'til later.

How many do you think would have been in the Australian Olympic team in those days compared to the five hundred or something now?

There was three wrestlers and some of the minor sports, like diving

- 02:30 had one or two and there was a lot of sports that...like Judo, they didn't have Judo and a lot of the team sports like we didn't have representative soccer players. There was only just one plane so... Whereas they've just come back from Greece and they've got two full jumbo jets and back in them days
- 03:00 the recording of the Olympics was on page three or four of the back pages. There was nothing on the front page. I've got a lot of cuttings at home....rugby league came before the Olympics. You tell people that you've been in the Olympics it wasn't such a big thing way back then.
- 03:30 But as the Olympics escalated, the popularity, probably because the extravaganza that goes into the Olympics and the whole thing. I think what happened in Munich....the difference between Mexico and Munich was the friendship and the openness
- 04:00 of the Olympic Village, you could actually take visitors into the Olympic Village and show them around provided you've got a leave pass. In Munich you had to have special security passes and after the shooting unless you had a proper pass, you couldn't get in.
- 04:30 In Mexico I'd say it was the last of the 'friendly' games.

What was the opening ceremony like, did you go to that?

Yes. The opening ceremony was done in the day and it was only Sydney that they started to do it in the night time. All the Olympics before Sydney they've all been out in the open.

- 05:00 It was just fantastic all the countries marched out, back in them days all Australians used to wear hats to the opening ceremony. After Mexico they cut the hats out. I was warned by one of the athletes to take a raincoat. I said, "Why do you take a raincoat or a bit of plastic?" he said, "Well when they let the birds out, they shit everywhere".
- 05:30 As soon as they let the birds out you see all these athletes crouch down, I mean the birds just go mad, it's the opening ceremony and to have that happen to you... that was one of the proudest moments in my life to march in the opening ceremony.

It must have been quite a contrast from wrestling in little gyms in the Sydney suburbs to being in a huge stadium and cheering?

Well that's right, yes. Because we were only three wrestlers and in different weight categories, I was a flyweight, Reg Marsh was a lightweight and Wes O'Brien was a welterweight, so Wes was only a little bit heavier than Reg

- 06:30 so they could train together but I was about three weight classes under Reg so I had to get somebody else to train with. We actually got with the Koreans and they were fantastic people and I actually got to train with one of the world champion freestyle wrestlers from Korea. He was fifty-seven kilos I actually dragged
- 07:00 quite a lot of wrestling from that experience. We trained around, we trained with the Americans and the Canadian team and I had the misfortune to wrestle one of the Canadians and he dislocated his elbow and that threw him out of the Olympics and it would have been about three months ago
- 07:30 he came to Australia and he wanted to look me up. I went to one of the wrestling tournaments and he introduced himself and he said, "I'm the guy that you dislocated the elbow and put me out of the games" and that's the sort of friendships that you get from the Olympics, I mean it was a misfortune for him but being Olympic athletes it's that bondship that happens.

Did you have that similar sort of access to the Soviet and Eastern Bloc athletes or were they kept apart?

You get a lot of the big countries, the Americans let us train with them but they wouldn't let us wrestle the guys in our weight category. They actually gave us a couple of bouts and I actually wrestled one of the silver medallists from

- 08:30 the Mexico Olympics and I just couldn't...he's a guy that won a silver medal in Mexico and I actually wrestled him and he was far superior to me, not only in technique but strength and when you look at the training he must have got prior to the Olympics you think,
- 09:00 "Why am I in the sport when you can only reach a certain standard?" In wrestling the only way you can get proficient is to go to one of these top countries and train with them. It's something you just can't get in Australian wrestling. Our standard is only a certain level, the Russians the Americans,
- 09:30 the Japanese are on a totally different level altogether.

Did you get to have any contact with the Russians or the Czechs or anything like that?

Most of our communication was with, well we couldn't communicate in English with the Koreans but you pick up certain words. I had a little Pakistani wrestler

- 10:00 I was training with and a funny instance happened with me and the Pakistanis, see their Muslim and they walk around with their little fingers locked together like man and woman, and I was walking to the
- 10:30 cafeteria and this Pakistani came up to me and he hooked his finger into mine and I didn't know which way to look. In his country that's just friendship, but back in those days to be gay was like 'in the closet' type of thing, but they were just showing their respect for me being a friend
- 11:00 but you had to look around and make sure nobody else was watching.

You mentioned before between tapes that you indulged in a little bit of Mexican culture with the bullfighting?

We got invited to a couple of different events in Mexico and one of them was the bullfighting.

- 11:30 I've never ever been to anything, you used to see it on TV but they used to show....it'd be in one of the comedies with Bob Hope and that didn't really show the gory part of bullfighting. They had something like six bullfights and what really shocked me was the treatment that they incur on the bulls before the matador comes out. You've got the picadors
- 12:00 on horses and they chase the bull around the stadium and stick little things in the back of his neck. This is just to slow down the bull because he starts to bleed and then the matador comes out and he throws his cape around and he eventually kills the bull. While I was there one of the matadors actually got mauled that badly by the bull that he actually died in hospital
- 12:30 and there was two others got gored by the bull and there was one guy there they let the bull out of the compound and usually when the bull has been in darkness and they come out into the stadium, they prop and look around but this particular day
- 13:00 when they opened the stockade the bull came out and ran at the matador and the matador's reflexes were too slow and the bull ripped into him and he went over the top of the bull and it was later reported in the paper some of the athlete's reactions to the treatment of the bulls
- 13:30 and how the sport, I mean bullfighting is like the pit bull fighting that they have today, its cruelty to animals.

So you didn't think much of it?

Well to me at that time it was just an experience for me and

- 14:00 I guess being in the sport of wrestling, it was just their culture it was just like watching somebody's way of living. When you go to somebody's country, that was one of their favourite sports, pastime sports, to go to the bullfights its like us going to watch a rugby league fight or something.
- 14:30 Another day we got invited to a rodeo which was quite good and the Mexicans were all dressed up in the cowboy outfits and the mariachis and its like Sydney when the visitors came to Sydney everybody opened their arms and invited people to their homes and everybody is so proud of their
- 15:00 culture, it's a real experience.

This was obviously the first time you had ever been in a foreign country?

Yeah. The first time that I'd ever left Australia. When I look back on what I've done I've been quite a few places now, I'm like a globetrotter.

- 15:30 That's all pre '74 'cause after '74 nothing much has happened.

So how long were you back in Australia before you won your lottery? National service?

I got back in '68 and I got selected....

- 16:00 **Was it '69 or...?**

Actually that would have been prior to Christmas '69 because the process of getting selected for national service you've got to go through your medical and they give you all these tests

- 16:30 to make sure that you are psychologically sound and this sort of thing. I've still actually got my papers for my call-up at home but they're put away somewhere but having post traumatic stress it's hard to remember
- 17:00 where you put things sometimes. So I'm a little bit unprepared for this interview.

Mate, don't worry about that. You did you're first training at Kapooka is that right?

Yeah.

How did you first take to army life and you first got down there and hit the gates?

Well like I say it was,

- 17:30 because of my training in the boy scouts I thought this is like moving up a level, from boys to men and you actually doing men's things and there was a lot of things you learn in the army. The hardest thing for me was learning all the different drill, how to march. Being short I used to get picked on by a particular instructor
- 18:00 and every time I used to get this instructor, he used to pick on me. In them days they used to come up to your face and swear at you and call you inside out, I don't think they can do that now because of there's a lot of women in the army. My nephew has just completed his training at Kapooka and

18:30 they had females in his platoon. I really enjoyed the recruit training.

What did you like about it so much John?

I think it was just that regime when you do physical training and you're learning different skills and the mateship of being with other mates.

- 19:00 I actually thought that if I really liked the army, I was going to stay there, but after Vietnam things changed and I was glad to get out.

Amongst the national servicemen that you did the training with, was there any men or boys that couldn't take it?

Actually there was a guy that....

- 19:30 see at Kapooka they had a roster system and there was a whole week that you spent in the kitchen washing up and cleaning and you get people that, you might get somebody that's a solicitor or a barrister or a collar and tie and he's in the kitchen cleaning dishes,
- 20:00 it brings everybody into the same level. Everybody had a stint at doing guard duty on the main gate and they have a lock-up at the front gate and there was a young guy in there and he was on standby because he tried to commit suicide he drank a can or probably part of Brasso cleaner.
- 20:30 He wanted to get out of the army. During my time in the army the amount of people that wanted to get medically discharged, they were putting things on all the time. But ninety-nine percent of us wanted to be there or it was just a part of life.

21:00 Enjoy it while you're there.

How were you accommodated down there at Kapooka?

We had four to a room and the platoons were quite large. We had an officer that we didn't see much of, I think he did all the paper work,

- 21:30 we had a sergeant and a corporal and the sergeant and the corporal followed us everywhere. They used to get us up early in the morning and they'd give us all our chores to do. If there was something that you did wrong during the day you'd be out polishing the officer's god knows what.
- 22:00 That's where you learned about the real army, what the army was all about talking to them. We actually had couple of SAS instructors and I spoke to one of them and they were telling me about some of the things up in Vietnam and you'd think....

22:30 **What were they telling you?**

They used to do this 'sneak and peek' stuff, they'd sneak up on villages and reconnaissance type work but you've got to realise that here's somebody that's only ever done work in the boy scouts and you've got people out there that are trying to kill you. A lot of the guys in our platoon....

- 23:00 you always put infantry down the bottom of your selection because there is people getting killed and its something that....I used to watch a lot of war movies when I was young and the only thing you always think about is that the hero always died. The war for me was somebody died.

23:30 **It's always a bit cleaner in the movies isn't it?**

Yeah, yeah. After I got selected to go to the gunnery course as a gunner you thought, "If I'm going to do two years of this"....

- 24:00 You've got to realise that Kapooka was an eye opener and you really enjoyed it. See to me forced marches, PT [Physical Training], map reading, bush craft and stuff like that I really enjoyed that. When you go to artillery and you're spending days and days

24:30 in this little room and they're teaching you stuff about the guns and different things, it just didn't appeal to me. Where am I going to end up? I applied as a PTI but there was no vacancies.

25:00 **What's the relationship between PTI and artillery then, how'd you have to do one to do the other?**

Well at that time all physical training instructors where in the field of artillery. They've changed it now to the Medical Corps, you're actually teaching people things like physiology type things. So probably ninety percent

- 25:30 of all gunners are all athletes that want to be physical training instructors. They only run so many courses a year but at that time there wasn't so many courses run. Then they asked for volunteers for Vietnam and everybody's arm went up, so I put my arm up, I thought well, "Anything has got to be better than what I'm learning here" .
- 26:00 It's just not what I expected from the army. Not long after they nominated you to go to Vietnam they put you through Canungra and then, it's like a four week course up there and they've got you going almost twenty-four hours of the day.
- 26:30 By the time the four weeks are over you can hardly keep your eyes awake and you're so physically exhausted. There was a pommie [English] guy there and everywhere he....it was like he had two left hands...when we were on bush activities things used to fall out of his pack or
- 27:00 things would rattle and he was a bit of a slug and they rewarded him by making him do another Canungra course strait after and when he came back to the unit he was a wreck. I think he was a fairly athletic sort of a guy but when he came back he was a complete wreck. The funny part about Canungra,
- 27:30 when we finished Canungra and we came back to Holsworthy they had what they called a 'holding unit', the unit was there so as when someone in artillery came back to Australia, there time was up, there two years was up and they need reinforcements. We were in the reinforcements wing
- 28:00 of the school of artillery at Holsworthy.

Just waiting for a vacancy to come up?

Yeah, waiting. We were there for about two or three weeks and every day we waited in the huts for someone to come out and put us on parade and tell us what we were doing, for three weeks nobody ever come for us. So we used to go up and have breakfast, come back and sit in the huts just playing cards

- 28:30 and keeping ourselves occupied until one day this guy was outside the hut and the RSM spotted him and he said, "Who are you, come over here." and he found out we were in the hut and after that he had us doing 'emu bobs' and working in the kitchen.

What's an 'emu bob'?

That's where you go around picking up cigarette butts, papers

- 29:00 and you'll find that all military people are well trained emu bobbbers. Not long after that we got our papers to go up to Vietnam. It was funny because we went to South Head out at Watson's Bay and you have an overnight sleep and then
- 29:30 they drive you out to Mascot and then you board the plane in uniform and when you're coming into Malaya you've got to put a civvy [civilian] shirt on because we were not to be troops in that country and then when we got to Saigon, that's where the 'big show' was.

- 30:00 **Before you even joined the army and before you even went to Mexico City had you been following what was going on in Vietnam?**

You read in the papers about Australians killed, it's like incidents happen in Afghanistan or in Iraq you only hear the things where somebody gets killed

- 30:30 or there is some sort of terror thing going on. You heard about Long Tan [Battle of Long Tan, 1966] and things like that because there was Australians killed. The everyday life of the Vietnam soldier.... I remember just before I went in the army they had a documentary
- 31:00 where they went around the different people in the different units and that sort of thing but you didn't see the real horrors of war, what was going on there. When you went through Canungra they tell you all these things about booby traps and about everybody is a suspected Viet Cong.
- 31:30 You're going through the villages and you think, "Is that a Viet Cong there or...." It kind of put you on your toes. I went over there in '70/'71 but I was talking to some of the boys that went over in the earlier years and it was pretty hectic then.

In those earlier years when you were a civilian and wrestling and things were you interested in what was going on in Vietnam?

- 32:00 No, no.

It just wasn't part of your life?

No, no. I mean to me war was where....like I used to watch the John Wayne movies where somebody got...that 'Green Berets' movie came out just before I got called up for national service and you see

these guys and they're the elite of the country and they get killed

32:30 and you think....well ... If they're the best trained soldiers in the world and they get killed well...and it really confused me when I was in Canungra, they try to jam so much into you that you think well....

What were they teaching you at Canungra then?

33:00 The day was kind of worked out where you had the physical section where you marched, you had obstacle courses, they had things like map reading and then they'd be telling you about things...over four weeks they put so much into you that it was hard

33:30 to keep awake sometimes, you'd be going to sleep. They would be more or less exaggerating the worst case scenario about what might happen. When you lob into Vietnam you think, "Worst case, what's going to happen?" What was a bit of a shock for me I went through one of the villages on my way out to the 'Horseshoe' where I was stationed

34:00 and all these dead bodies were in this compound and they had all this white powder over them. Apparently there was some sort of ambush the night before and they killed all these Viet Cong and they were all....

That was a nice welcome, wasn't it?

Yeah, yeah. After all the things that they teach you in Canungra you know these terrorists, what the females do and

34:30 you always thing the worst case scenario until...

I know its hard to differentiate between what you think now and what you thought then but did you have any opinion about whether the Vietnam War was right or wrong or you just didn't care that much?

No, well being a patriotic Australian, like everybody,

35:00 all the servicemen that went to Afghanistan and Iraq all proud Australians that represent the country back in them days, as a national serviceman, that Anzac spirit was still there. We were fighting because the government said that we had to be over there and the stories that they told us when we went through Canungra was the 'Domino Theory',

35:30 that China would come down through Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia and you think you're over there stopping the 'red peril'. Years later, after reading some of the history of Vietnam, we should never have been there. When you read about seventy-three thousand Americans killed, that's a lot of people, we lost five hundred

36:00 and actually a good mate of mine got killed. When we went through Canungra he was in the armoured corps and when we used to do these forced marches we used to make up little songs and we'd sing this song, "You'll come home in a plastic bag, do da, do da," and he actually got killed and

36:30 what hit home with me was that his brother was on my gun. I was in Vung Tau at the time in the hospital when they brought his body in. He'd been on a, he was an APC [Armoured Personnel Carrier] driver and a helicopter came down for 'resups' [Resupply] and he jumped on the turret of the APC and the chopper blade was too close and it clipped him. He sustained severe head injuries

37:00 and he died and his brother, when I got back to the Horseshoe, his brother was packing his bags and I said, "What happened? You going home early?" and he said, "Yeah, my brother got killed" and that was his brother that came into the hospital when I was there. He come from a family of ten and they were Irish and he had to accompany the body in the C130 [transport aircraft]

37:30 coming back to Australia. That kind of really hit home what the war...some of the things that happen.

There is so many ways to get killed isn't there, when you've got this much machinery?

Yeah and when you read about the history about how some of the soldiers died, there a lot of them were by accident and a lot of them by the mines that they lay,

38:00 some were by accidental death, it wasn't only the war that killed a lot of people. Like all the friendly fire in the Iraq war and a lot of our soldiers got killed by our own men. That's the fortunes of war.

So why was it that you put your hand up and said, "Hit me for Vietnam"?

Well like I said

38:30 I thought that being in the scouts [boy scouts] and liking the outdoors when I found out what artillery was all about that I wasn't going to be a gym instructor, something that I loved and then you find out that you are going to be on a gun, or you're going to be put in a unit

39:00 where you might go out into the bush once a month or whatever, I thought well Vietnam has got to be better than this. So I put my hand up and all my mates all volunteered up and there was other

incentives probably the money and to see some other country, the experience of a lot of soldiers,

- 39:30 I suppose that's the ultimate to catch a lot of skills, isn't it? That's the reasons I put down. Just for the experience I'd been to an Olympics, to go to a war it's a totally different experience. Brought back a lot of bad memories for me because I'd had that traumatic
- 40:00 experience of being in the boys home. To be a national service and you're a 'reo'[reinforcement], what a lot of people don't realise is that you get units that train in Australia, they might do ...one, two, three years training together as a unit, they do all the jungle training, they do everything together, they work as a team....like the cycling team
- 40:30 that went to the Olympics the reason they won was they trained as a team, the hockey players, they trained as a team...a reinforcement is somebody that comes in like a reserve that comes in that nobody knows and that was a bit of a culture shock too. Landing in Vietnam and then being taken out to the Horseshoe and put with all these strange guys that I'd never even met before.

Tape 4

00:30 **Back in Australia, how did you get ready to go?**

The basic training and then there was the corps training. The basic training was done in Kapooka and at that time there was three training outlets, there was Puckapunyal, Kapooka and there was Singleton.

- 01:00 Corps training is where the different..., you've got infantry, armour, artillery, you've got the different units and what you do when your in recruits, you nominate what unit you want to go to and then after you get to that unit you can nominate what
- 01:30 position you want to be in that particular unit. It's not always that you get your first preference. There is a lot of guys that put in for artillery and they got infantry because that was their number two slot and they were short of infantrymen. So a lot of guys when I went through, because Vietnam was on, a lot of guys said, "Oh I'm not going into infantry, I'm putting in for something else".
- 02:00 When you get corps training like, they teach you the basic skills of being a gunner, what you do on the gun and the different activities involved around being a gunner. How the sighting of the gun, all the ammunition, the charge bag, safety,
- 02:30 and then they explain different positions in the artillery and this sort of thing and this goes on for about four weeks. I had a funny experience, the first day I got back, you did basic training, had a Christmas break and
- 03:00 then straight after Christmas you went to Holsworthy and then after the first day they put up a roster for picket duty. You do all your drills during the day and then there's seven guys get nominated for the picket, which is like a guard duty at the unit, out of the seven they pick the best first
- 03:30 and he has the night off. So what they do is they have a drill and the head sergeant comes down and inspects, or the officer or sergeant on duty that night, inspects the guard and picks out the best picket and then he has the night off. On this particular day we get the RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] and because we've just come back from holidays
- 04:00 all our drill timing was out of synchronisation and he blew us all up, he picked me as the best picket but because the drill was so bad, he made us do two nights. So I missed out getting the night off plus I had to do the next night and that was a bad experience. The RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major],
- 04:30 everybody shows respect for RSMs, usually they've got the deepest voice and they're so authoritarian that everybody respects them. After you do all that training, then they put out a selection on what you want and everybody puts down
- 05:00 some sort of skill that they're related to and if you don't fall into that category you end up as a gunner, its like being a foot soldier in infantry. When you get that allocation, when the training is finished, then they send you to a unit. Now just prior to sending you to the unit, because they want reinforcements for Vietnam they call for volunteers, so they take names down.
- 05:30 I think that it is almost one hundred percent of those that volunteered go to Vietnam. Then you go to Canungra and then you have to come down and just wait to go. So the process is like the whole army system, "hurry up....wait"
- 06:00 like you do all this training and you are fighting fit and ready for action and you have to sit around for another month or so. To me that changed my whole aspect of the army. Maybe I should have been doing something else. It's not my kettle of fish.

Why was that?

- 06:30 Artillery was too dull and I thought that going to Vietnam things might be different. Which was quite true. So when we got selected, they send you out
- 07:00 to Watson's Bay and you do a couple of days there for paper work and the last medicals and that sort of thing and then they take you by bus, so your family can visit you at Watson's Bay but when you go to Mascot you're virtually on a bus and you just leave with the boys.

So how was your mum and your family when they know you're going to Vietnam?

- 07:30 I think they were a bit apprehensive. I mean Mexico was different. I was the first one to go to Vietnam and I told Mum, "I'm in artillery and things aren't going to happen." but after Vietnam you hear about some of the boys
- 08:00 in some of the other units in artillery weren't as fortunate as me. It's a really good experience. We lobbed into, on route to Vietnam I think we had a stopover in Malaya because we were a military unit going to a war, we had to change out of our 'greens', we had polyester trousers
- 08:30 but we had to put a civvy shirt on while the plane was refuelling, that was a bit weird. We got to Tan Son Nhut [Airbase] and that was the real experience.

Did you arrive in Saigon first?

Saigon....Tan Son Nhut Airport and it's just the smell

- 09:00 of Vietnam and the smell stays with you for the whole time that you're there, until the time you leave.

Describe it?

It's that muggy, and there's a lot of rubbish in Saigon, they're not the most hygienic of people. Even when you go through the villages, we were OK out at the Horseshoe

- 09:30 it was civilised out there, whenever you went through one of the villages or wherever there was population of Vietnamese, there was just that smell and it doesn't leave your nostrils until you left the country. When we got to Tan Son Nhut we had to change aircraft, we had to get into a military plane because the airfields in Nui Dat
- 10:00 are not commercial. But flying into a war zone it had to be military. When I got into...a Land Rover picked me up and then they took me back to the unit and I got introduced to the battery sergeant major. The battery sergeant major
- 10:30 is a bit like an RSM, and this particular the one we had, his name was Alan Singh and he was a real authoritarian. Whenever you were in Nui Dat you had to have spit polished boots, starched greens whereas out in the Horseshoe, you can see in some of my photos, on a hot day some of us would only have underclothes on.
- 11:00 Totally different. There you could call the officers by their first names, there's no rank discrimination, everybody's equal, back in Nui Dat you've got this bloke telling you to keep in step, polish your boots, iron your uniform, it's like two different worlds.
- 11:30 **When did you find out what team you were going to be in? Was that in Nui Dat?**
- Yeah, when I got to Nui Dat. One of the guys, there was different positions and there was a position there for a batman for one of the officers in a forward position with the infantry, and I thought,
- 12:00 "That's what I want". They said, "Oh you're going to be a gunner in 106." out on one of the guns, I was on 'Delta' gun and when I got to the Horseshoe, Delta gun crew were on their two days leave in Vung Tau so they put me on 'Alpha' gun. One of the guys in Alpha gun I got good mates with,
- 12:30 he said, "Oh that George Gardiner." 'cause he was the sergeant on Delta gun, they said, "He's a real bastard." they said, "That's the worst gun in the battery." and I thought, "Oh what have I let myself in for?" So when they came back from their two days leave I went down and I got introduced.
- 13:00 With the guns in a battery in a static position, you've got all these sand bags that go around the gun and then just at the back of the gun you've got sandbags built up withand then you've got corrugated iron and that's your living area. On either side of the dome
- 13:30 galvanised iron and on top of the galvanised iron there's sandbags, everything's sandbagged and you kind of sleep on stretchers inside like a little cavern. There's about three lots of caverns with guys sleeping in, they call them 'hoochies' and
- 14:00 that's where you live and they've got a toilet block, the bulldozer just builds a hole in the ground and they put Perspex and they put the toilet on that, so it was quite civilised. They actually had a kitchen, and they re-built another kitchen because they'd been in the Horseshoe for quite a while.
- 14:30 In the Horseshoe we had 7th battalion and occasionally we'd get Americans come in because they had big guns, we had 105mm guns whereas they had 8 inch guns which are quite big and they're on tracks.

Were they right beside you?

No they were actually..., just imagine the shape of a Horseshoe and the entrance to the Horseshoe was in the gap

- 15:00 and if you go inside the Horseshoe there was a road that went around to the right hand side of the Horseshoe, artillery was on the right hand side of the entrance of the Horseshoe. In the front of us was a minefield and then further out was Dat Do, a little village and further over was the Long Hai mountains.
- 15:30 A lot of our firing was on the Long Hais. So when I got put into that gun crew I didn't know what went on. It took me quite a while to learn the different things, because you only learn the bare basics
- 16:00 of how a gun operates, the sighting of the gun, the elevation, the bombs. See with the bombs you've got a cartridge and seven bags of ammunition. Just imagine each bag represents a kilometre, the guns had
- 16:30 a seven kilometre range, so if it had to go two kilometres, two charge bags and that's the basic principals of how they used to operate. Some of the different bombs that you had, you had 'illumination' which is like a white bomb and then you had phosphorous, high explosive - high explosive
- 17:00 was the damp orange [?] and they had ..., all the bombs were stored separate and then you had the fuses and then you had the cartridges. All the cartridges had the explosive in them.
- 17:30 So when you had a fire mission whatever gun, if its fire mission battery then six guns go into action and then they're giving orders elevation, what charge and the bombardier relates all that to the gunners, they tell you what sort of bomb its going to be so you know what fuse to put on, if its illumination the fuse has got a setting on it
- 18:00 so that when they go up to a certain altitude they explode and pop out. One night there we fired two hundred and seventy canisters. So there was a big contact going on.

Do you know what that was about, what particular...?

No. What happened was, I think there was a sort of cordoned off ambush sort of thing and when it got sprung,

- 18:30 see they need illumination to see what's...if somebody might have got shot or killed or its usually after the action has happened that they need that illumination to see what's going on...yeah, that was pretty hectic that night. The daily routine of being a gunner is that
- 19:00 you get up in the morning and in the military everybody has got to have a shave.

What time would you get up?

Well that depended, you see being the gunner you're on call twenty-four hours of the day and you might fire a couple of times of a night time, like that particular night that went for a couple of hours,

- 19:30 not only did you fire high explosive but illumination. They used to fire what they call H & Is which was harass and interdiction and what they'd do is that army intelligence would allocate different areas around our perimeter
- 20:00 where there might be likely Viet Cong movement that would have to be cleared by the different army units where they were, so imagine if you're a Viet Cong walking along this track and all of a sudden this bomb comes falling on you, well this is what harass and interdiction was and it could happen any time of the day or any time at night and the big thing was they had a 'fire mission' battery this was when they needed all the guns
- 20:30 'cause they might need artillery support to cut off the enemy.

How were your ears? They must have taken a battering themselves?

Yeah well you get used to it, you're supplied with ear muffs but if you're sighting the gun you virtually had to have one over....we used to put one finger in our ear and get all the coordinates

- 21:00 in the other ear. Then you pulled the.... I think the worst experience for me was, we left the Horseshoe, they sent one of the guns out bush, there was our gun and an American gun, the American gun was an eight inch on tracks and that was right
- 21:30 next to us, probably about twenty metres away and they probably supplied long range shells, whereas we were 'short' and what happened was... and if they had a fire mission during the night you'd be sleeping and the recoil of a gun travels forward of a gun, you don't hear all the vibrations
- 22:00 at the back of the gun its all forward, even in the Horseshoe whenever somebody had a fire mission everything used to travel forward. When these eight inch guns went off your stretcher would go about two or three inches off the floor and it was terrifying.

22:30 There's a lot of nights that you don't get any sleep.

What about your daily routine apart from when you got up, how would the day run for you?

Typical military, a shave and a shower, breakfast and three men could operate a gun

23:00 so you send half the crew up and then the other crew. So there was always somebody there if there was a fire mission battery. They would have communications in the mess so that if suddenly there is a fire mission and you're half way through breakfast you have to run back to the gun. There was always maintenance,

23:30 not only did you have to clean the gun, you had to clean your weapon and all the other weapons that you had. We had an M60 [machine-gun] an M79 [grenade launcher] and those sort of things and when you went out bush you had to take that arsenal with you. I was talking to a guy that was in 'Coral' [Fire Support Base] and he said

24:00 when he went through Canungra they only used the old machine guns and he said they had never fired an M60. Later on they bought the M60s and when the gun was getting over to Vietnam and we had some at Coral, some of them didn't know how to fire M60s. This is what I'm saying about reinforcements, you don't always get that sort of training

24:30 that a regular soldier gets, or if you're a lucky nasho. If you go into the unit before they leave Vietnam that's when you get that experience and the bondship with the men is closer too.

We'll talk about that whole issue. First of all from a training side what had you not been trained in when you got to Vietnam, what didn't you know when you got to Vietnam as far as training goes? You mentioned before about the gun? You hadn't fired before etc?

25:00 I'd never fired the gun. Never touched the gun.

When you were back in Australia?

Never touched the gun. Everything was new. They took us out to the firing range and they had other gunners, qualified gunners, fire the gun and we just saw all the procedure. Imagine you had a hundred guys on the course you can't all have a turn each.

25:30 **So you were a gunner that had never fired a gun?**

Yeah. They give you a setting and they say, "Minus three or minus four" or whatever its on you've got to...I was never too crash hot in mathematics and you've got to do these calculations,

26:00 and when he's giving you these calculations and you've got to put them on the setting and they've got surveyors that put out posts and, the scope...and of a night time they're like barber poles, red light and you line up half way between and that gives you the angle of the gun.

26:30 **So what else when you got there weren't you prepared for training-wise, apart from not having fired the gun and the mathematics you found difficult, what else did you find challenging because you hadn't been trained here?**

To be a gunner there's not a lot, like I spent six years in infantry,

27:00 in the army reserves, being an infantry soldier there's so much to learn, a lot more than being a gunner. Because if you're just the basic gun number its either, load the gun, site the gun or pull the trigger. So I mean there is not a great deal.

What about getting on, you said that being inserted into a team

27:30 **where you didn't know the blokes and having to get on with them in a really tense environment, how did you find that at the Horseshoe? How did you get on with everyone?**

Oh well everyone would start to talk to you, it's the same as everywhere you know. Now it's going to the Vietnam veteran functions and you start to talk, you're all on the same level.

28:00 So when you start to talk to different people, some of them you get closer, some of them not, but usually there, you learn a lot of things from people. What I dreaded was the sergeant, like I didn't like people that were, that experience with that guy running the boys home, if you get authoritarian people like that

28:30 they can demolish your psychological....

And what was he doing to you that was upsetting you when you were doing your work at the Horseshoe?

That's where the mateship came in, you started telling jokes, I'm one of those people, I can blend in.

29:00 I found him to be the best sergeant. He had our gun operating, we were always the first in action. The reason being, was that people respected him because he was a real professional. The reason that other people didn't like him was that everything had to be right. I remember we had a fire mission where

somebody....

29:30 We were firing illumination and somebody accidentally grabbed the bomb and when he saw it was going to go in and he picked this bomb up and he threw it over there...he was really hostile but you've got to remember that if that had went in there, it could have killed some of our troops.

30:00 His professionalism, people respected him. Because we started to work as a team, we went on our two days leave in Vung Tau together and you know ate and slept together....you know everybody really became very close friends. People that you respect, you respect them

30:30 because they are professional. Being a champion, you've got to be the best. Do you understand what I am saying? If you're with somebody that's elite and you can see somebody leading by leadership that way you give him so much respect and this is what I did for our sergeant.

31:00 **The first few days that you got up to the Horseshoe did you have a hard time? It must have been a bit challenging?**

It was like, being on the fire mission, I didn't know what was going on. One of the blokes said, "Fire mission" and this guy said, "It's your first day, just watch what we do". It was a whole different thing,

31:30 you actually see them putting the rounds in. But eventually you find your way around. They had the control room where all the messages that come in and they had all the surveyors that work out all the directions because with a gun you've got to get the elevation,

32:00 distance and then, depending on what you are firing, not every bomb is going to land exactly the same because of the type of charge that goes in. It's like when they call for a fire mission it's, one round for effect, if the infantry are coming under attack you fire one round to see

32:30 where it lands, if that's close to where they are then they'll say, "Fire mission" everything is set on that angle and all the bombs land in that pattern. The whole concept of being in artillery and then you learnt the

33:00 intricate parts of what goes on, it's quite fascinating you know.

You mentioned that being a nasho and being inserted into a team was very challenging, why was that so, why do you say that?

Well like I say its like being an alien.

33:30 When people do things under stress, there's that bondship that builds but if you've got somebody that comes in from a different team, you're not a team player and a lot of people put you out the back.

And is that what happened to you?

34:00 Well I don't know, the things that they've learnt. There's a whole heap of things that, like when they went up in Townsville, they'd go out on exercise and everything that they did in Vietnam was rehearsed, so every time they went out bush and you go in and set up a fire support base

34:30 right down from scratch they'd know everything. When you come in as a 'reo' you don't know the first thing to do. Out bush with that one gun on its own, you could see what happens. From the loading of the stores to putting the gun on the back of the truck to go out to this support base

35:00 this little tractor that goes around and creates the gun bay, you haven't got time to build up all the sandbags so all it is, is a rough gun bay so that if you come under attack you've got some cover from the enemy and can return fire. Then you've got to set up a cover

35:30 where you sleep under you've got to fill sleeping bags, wherever you go you've always got to have trenches so that if the mortars come in you've got somewhere below ground so that you wont get hit.

How often would you go out bush? You had people out on patrol I guess?

We did two. When we left the Horseshoe, we went out bush, out near the rubber plantation

36:00 and the other time we went to Bridget, now Bridget was a support base at the bottom of the Long Hais and from where Horseshoe is, it was to the left of the Long Hais and it was a support base where they had infantry, the seventh battalion, they had mortars there and they had one gun and this one gun was like a Meccano set [a childhood construction toy with numerous parts], a World War II

36:30 type thing, its like a Meccano set its, the guns that we had in Horseshoe were just one piece this you could take the barrel off and just about clean everything separate. The reason they needed that gun there was to get at the back of the Long Hais or where we couldn't get with the other gun. That was in the sand dunes

37:00 because Bridget was right near the beach. It's like being in the Middle East in the sand desert. You had to wear boots everywhere you went because if something happened you had to be ready for action. Totally different there.

Why was that?

- 37:30 Well actually I had a mate who was an engineer and he had to go and defuse a bomb in one of the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] posts which is the South Vietnamese Army and there was a mine that needed delousing and I went through basic training with him and then I met him over there, and he was telling me, like I said there is only three needed
- 38:00 to operate the guns and if it was quiet you'd go and ask the sergeant if you could go and have a talk with the boys 'cause this guy was working with infantry and a lot of infantry units had engineers for the delousing of mines and things. He actually introduced me to a North Vietnamese soldier, NVA [North Vietnamese Army], now they had what they called 'chu hoys'
- 38:30 there actually North Vietnamese Soldiers they'd captured, indoctrinated and they work for the allies and it was funny this guy, when the mate was talking with....like somehow they communicated with this, they had an interpreter, and this North Vietnamese soldier, he had this, he was like Audie Murphy [much decorated WW2 legend] with all these decorations,
- 39:00 he'd come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and attacked all these American bases and he was actually working for us as a forward scout and him being from North Vietnam, see they are educated people compared to the South Vietnamese and he used to go to the local village and he was like an outsider and he'd get into fights and, I mean this is something
- 39:30 you hear about, being isolated on a gun position you don't hear about some of the other things that are going on in the war and actually being in this support base you could communicate with other people from the other branches and you hear about what's going on.

Did it change your mind about the war, what you thought you were there for, etcetera?

It was just a break.

- 40:00 When you had to go to this Arvin [ARVN] post my sergeant said, "You can go" and you had to go with, everywhere you went you had to carry a rifle and we went down to the beach and we all stripped off and we had one guy stand picket and the rest of the guys had a swim and we changed and we went into this little village and after Canungra
- 40:30 you hear about all these VCs [Viet Cong] and when we were out on the beach anything could have happened to us, or when we went into the village anything could have happened to us. You feel like, the Australian army train you that way you are confident about, like even if something happens you are ready, you're prepared.

What was the village like that you went to?

- 41:00 I've actually got photographs of, like their markets, they've got everything on the street on the main. You can't distinguish if its rubbish or food that they're selling. Fish, well you've got flies all over them and being an Australian and a lot of them
- 41:30 don't speak English, see the Vietnamese there are like a rural type people whereas the North Vietnamese they're like industrial and are more educated and talking to Vietnam Veterans that have gone back there, Vietnam is modernised, its like twentieth century but in these little villages its like going back to one of those poverty stricken countries in Africa.

Tape 5

- 00:33 **John you started a little bit to describe the gun position up there in the Horseshoe and you said there was a little bit of a dugout, what facilities did you have around the gun?**

We had the gun bay. To one side of the gun bay you had containers where all the bombs

- 01:00 and the cartridges were kept so that they didn't get weathered. Then out the front they had a pole with one of the cartridge containers in the ground and that was where, if you wanted to go for a wee, that's where you went. At one stage
- 01:30 the ablution block was in front of us and then they rebuilt another one at the top of the Horseshoe. If ever you wanted to go for a 'number two' you had to walk kind of half way up the mountain side to go to the ablution block 'cause it was like multi use by the 7th and the artillery. The sleeping bays were galvanised iron and you had two
- 02:00 mattresses, two sleeping possies [positions], and I think there was about three or four bays and about two in each bay. What happened was that sometimes you'd get a forward observer party and to give them a break from being out in the bush all the time you put them on a gun

02:30 just so that they were away from what they were doing all the time, out on the sharp end if you know what I mean. That way, I was talking to one of the guys that was in the FO [Forward Observation] party, he used to tell me about some of the things they used to get up to on it. It was some very interesting stories.

So you would always sleep next to the gun would you?

03:00 Yeah. Always. You're on duty twenty-four hours of the day. The only time you were away from the gun was if you had your two days rest in Vung Tau or you went on your R & R [Rest and Recreation] or something happened to you and you had to go to the hospital. That was the only time that you away from the gun.

How many was in a gun team for a '105'?

03:30 Between seven and eight, like I say if some guy was away on leave you might have five or six but you only need about three people to run the gun.

What was your role in the gun crew?

We used to chop around, the only job that we didn't do was to give orders

04:00 which was the bombardier or sergeant. Every day you'd get a resup of ammunition, if you didn't fire much you didn't....every day they were updating you, you had to have X amount of bombs and cartridges,

04:30 so every time a truck came in you'd be there breaking the boxes open and then you had to get rid of all the rubbish and so there was things to do every day. At one stage there to break the monotony, I got a fitness book sent over to me from Australia and we started a little circuit program.

05:00 So a couple of the guys from the other gun we'd come over and I'd put them through a circuit. Sometimes we'd run around the inside of the Horseshoe, get permission of the sergeant, just to break the monotony of sitting there, man and the gun.

When you had to get all that ammo off the truck and break it up and stack it, it must have been hard work in the heat?

05:30 Yeah well they didn't have fork lifts, so everything had to be man-handled and like some of those, they're very meticulously boxed. You've got a wooden box and then you've got thick cardboard cylinders that had everything in, you had to unload that and

06:00 then you've got a box with all the fuses. See the bombs are useless unless you've got a fuse in, so the bombs used to come all in one piece but the things had to be packed separately. The bombs, sharp end up, placed upright that way you got more in, and you had all the cartridges stacked. Every time there was a fire mission

06:30 they'd tell you how many charge bags you had to....with the discarded....see the charge bags were cordite and its like, if you ever see those fuel tablets, you put a match to they just light real bright well with cordite that's exactly what happens. We used to burn them off,

07:00 they used to accumulate and we used to lay them in a long row and put a match to 'em or a hexiblock to them and as soon as they ignite they go up in flames. When we had the toilet block down to the front of where we were, we used to clean the ablution block out, throw a few charge bags in, bit of petrol and throw a match in

07:30 and that used to clean out theso they wouldn't smell all the time. One night we had a big fire mission and we threw in too many bags and it blew the toilet to smithereens.

Blew the shit out of it?

Blew the shit out of it. Yeah. I'll tell you a funny story, this guy came back from his two days

08:00 down at Vung Tau, while you're on the gun they allow you two beers a day, so when you go on leave you really hook in, and this guy had false teeth and he was that hung over the next day that he had a chunder into the box and his false teeth fell out so he's there with a fishing line

08:30 trying to get them out, otherwise he would have had to go through.... I mean little funny stories like that....You kind of look back and laugh.

In a fire mission, you've got all those bits stacked up, the cartridges, the bombs, the fuses, the cordite bags, how does it all get put together when a fire mission comes in?

09:00 If they say HE [High Explosive], with HE all you do is put a fuse on, it's only the illumination or the phosphorous that you have to put a timer on.

So when you're firing HE those fuses are just contact fuses or?

No...just imagine that they're like a pointy projectile with a thread on it and on the top of the bomb its got a thread

- 09:30 and you screw it on and then when that reaches a velocity and on impact it explodes. We had a fire a fire mission one day when it prematurely exploded over a village and we got a bit of flack back from that. It was probably something to do with the fuse.
- 10:00 They're supposed to go on impact not in the air.
- So those fuses wouldn't be put on until you had a fire mission?**
- No.
- It must have been fairly frantic work when a fire mission came in? To get it all slotted together?**
- Yeah. Actually we could've put the fuses on before because
- 10:30 its been thirty years and maybe I can't remember, because they couldn't explode until they make contact with the ground. With the charges you need the primer at the back to set the charge off, that creates the propulsion to push the projectile out.
- 11:00 **So you'd have to get the brass case and put the charge bags inside that?**
- Yeah.
- And then the bomb went on top of the cartridge case?**
- Yeah, and then you push it up the breech and then everything is sited and then, "bang".
- When those shells are prepared and they're all together and you're ramming**
- 11:30 **them into the breech, how much does that weigh that whole thing together?**
- Probably ten or fifteen kilos. When you get the fire mission they tell you what it is, you've got a couple of guys fixing the bombs up and they put them, we had like a pallet off the ground, so they were put on so that we were ready
- 12:00 like straight away and we had guys fixing them up. When we fired those two hundred and seventy canisters we had to bring ammunition from, some of the other guys had to transport the stuff down to us and then we had to open it up and, you know, that was a bit frantic that night, that would have been the most hectic night that we had.
- 12:30 **So you had a production line going?**
- Yes, exactly. Its all clean work and like I said, my sergeant was spot on, so as soon as he started shouting orders everybody knew their job and, "bang", "bang".
- I suppose after a big fire mission you'd have a bit of cleaning up to do with all the brass and....?**
- 13:00 When they bring the trucks around and everything goes on the back of the trucks and everything gets disposed of somewhere else. You can imagine, the Viet Cong booby traps and things, a lot of the surplus stuff left over had been stolen and used to make VC weapons, so they try and minimize
- 13:30 that by carting all the rubbish away and getting it disposed of somewhere. I don't actually know what the procedure was. When we used to go through the towns we used to throw lollies and things to the kids but then when they captured Viet Cong or there was an ambush they'd find
- 14:00 army rations and then orders came out that we weren't allowed to do that sort of thing. It went on.
- When you were firing quite a lot of rounds how hot would the gun barrel get?**
- One time we fired that many that our gun seized up. What happens is you've got oil, like a hydraulic type of oil, and apparently
- 14:30 that's what happened, we had to cease the mission and top the oil up. That's all part of daily maintenance but it's the same as if you fire a machine gun too much, you've got to change barrels. The same thing with the gun.
- When you were firing on a fire mission, how many rounds do you reckon you could get out in a minute?**
- 15:00 Probably about four or five. They get the orders and they might say, "Five rounds, fire for effect."
- 15:30 and you just keep putting them in and you fire your five and that's it. It's not like in World War II when there was 'hordes' of enemy and you've got to kind of keep it up. It's a bit hard to rate how many you can do. You've got to take into account the orders and if they say, "Ten rounds for effect." you could probably gauge it that way as you've

16:00 already got the orders and its just a matter of keep loading the same thing in and then the guy sights the gun and then you pull, so its as fast as you put them in 'cause as soon as he puts it in and he pops it out there's a guy sets up the gun and then they load and while he's loading the gun has already been set up. It wouldn't take that long but

16:30 when you're in that sort of situation you don't think about those sort of things.

Were the guns in pits or were they just sitting above the ground?

They were above the ground and like I say surrounded by a bunker which was probably a bit over, with me probably up to my chest

17:00 but with a normal person probably up to their waste it was just enough so that you got cover if you had enemy fire. In front of us we had barbed wire and then a minefield. At one stage of the tour there was a bulldozer down there bulldozing 'em. I think that was after, see I was over there in '70/71

17:30 but a lot of the minefields they found were useless and they found that the Viet Cong were stealing them and using them on us, that's when they started to get rid of them. There was more Aussies getting killed 'delousing' them, than there was laying them or walking on traps they used bulldozers in the big areas.

18:00 They had big rollers on them and they'd just roll over them you could see little sparks fly.

So how far away was your gun from that wire?

Probably about thirty metres or so. Yeah it would have been about thirty metres.

18:30 They had pickets, like for security of a night time, they had pickets all the time. I think 7 Battalion operated during the day and when they went out on patrol artillery took over. In the observatory posts we had starlight scopes and they were magic you could see everything.

19:00 It was quite interesting nights there, when you look up at the stars you'd see the Southern Cross and over there, because you don't have the pollution, the clarity of the stars it was like being back home, out in the bush.

Do you know if around that perimeter any chemical defoliants had been used or were being used?

19:30 Where I've actually got photos, I imagine probably to some extent there would have, probably down where all the minefields and that were but I've actually got photos of the Horseshoe and in the wet season, its green, its like there is green grass everywhere and in the dry season its just like a crater

20:00 and that's what it was and there is nothing. The two pictures of exactly the same spot. Most days you'd get the C130s flying over and you could see this mist of spray and we were told that it was to kill the mosquitoes but I've heard other rumours that it was the Agent Orange.

20:30 Spraying it in that form, it helped to keep the foliage down. I mean that's stories that you hear after. Being like a nasho, the only stories we heard was about what was going on, on the outside was when the sergeant had an 'O' group

21:00 which was a meeting and he'd get his orders from the boss and he'd say such and such happened here and such and such happened there, so you wouldn't know what anybody was doing. It's like you're on your own.

In the gun areas and your sleeping areas was it a problem when it rained?

21:30 We were lucky and we had a couple of carpenters there and they built with the ammo boxes, proper flooring and we created guttering so when the water came, it flowed away from our living areas.

22:00 The only frightening thing about being in that little confined spot, was one day we had a crape which is one of those little funny snakes that they've got over there and he got under one of the sleeping bays and we had to pull everything up to find him because one bite of them and you're dead. That was a bit horrifying looking for them.

Just another way to get killed in Vietnam?

22:30 Yeah.

Did you feel that you were a bit discriminated against because you were a nasho?

Oh well nearly everybody was a nasho. You could always tell a nasho, he'd be counting down how many days he had left. We had guys that were in the unit; after they did their corps training they went straight into the unit

23:00 and when they went to Vietnam they might have had six months or whatever and as soon as their time was up, a lot of them 'pulled the pin' and went home. Some of them signed on for that little extra period probably to get the two medals but I think it was just that sort of thing.

During your time in the army did you ever think you were discriminated against because you were Aboriginal?

- 23:30 Like I say, we had all different nationalities and everybody was treated normal. I used to have a moustache and a lot of people thought I was Italian. When they'd ask me I'd say, "No I'm of Aboriginal descent" and they'd say, "How come you're not dark?" If you look at the Australian government years ago
- 24:00 they tried to breed out the Aborigines byyou know. When white and black mate together the colour fades and that's why the 'lost generations', when you see that with those little Aboriginal girls, they had a white father and they got taken away so that they got
- 24:30 brought up to 'think white' instead of Aboriginal. Eventually the class would be....its not like Negroes they've got very strong blood. I've got a mate that's white Australian, married a negro girl and his two boys are negro and there's not one bit of Australian in them.
- 25:00 It's like family, you get so many ethnic people, they were discriminated more than the Aborigines, everybody was a 'wog' whether they came from Poland, Germany, wherever.

You never felt that people actually abused you because you were Aboriginal?

No, no.

- 25:30 Because of the population of Aborigines, a lot of people didn't come into contact with, there's some people went to school and never saw an Aboriginal in their life. If you understand what I mean. Back in them days Aboriginal, Aborigines have got their own identity now and they all own the place whereas before
- 26:00 they used to just live in their little, on their missions. It was only those ones that left their missions or where they were brought up and they integrated that you get an outcrop of Aborigines all over the place. Before it was kind of isolated and it was only people that lived near Aborigines, and you'd probably find that they discriminated more.
- 26:30 **You said that you got a bit of a training group going for a bit of a jog around there. It must have been pretty hot to be doing that sort of thing?**
- Yeah. Like I say it was just a way of, not everybody was alcoholics. Most days I'd give my two cans away, because like I said I never drank before I went to Vietnam.
- 27:00 On a really hot day I used to drink one and give the other one away. You find that when people, when they were on their two days leave that's when they used to let their hair out.

What did you do on your two days leave going to Vung Tau?

Oh the same as everybody. What happens when you get your two days leave,

- 27:30 you go back to Nui Dat and then you get your civvies that you're going to use in Vung Tau and then you climb on a truck and they've got like a convoy and it goes around all the other units and you get dropped off and there's probably three or four trucks and they all head towards Vung Tau. The good thing about Vung Tau is you don't have
- 28:00 to carry a weapon anywhere, everything is handed in and you could move around. They usually put on a party for you with forty-four gallon drums full of alcohol, they've got a swimming pool, a big barbeque but if you've been out bush for a while a lot of times you head straight into town because it's the female companionship
- 28:30 that a lot of people miss and that's where you kind of get introduced to the girls. It was funny, it was my first visit there and I'm only five foot two and the Vietnamese are only small people and they thought that I was number one because I was short and women were fascinated with me because here was what they call 'uc da loi'
- 29:00 which is 'red rat' for Vietnamese and here's one their height, like all me mates were well over five foot eight or nine or six foot.

What's the business with 'uc da loi'?

On all the Aussie trucks we used to have a little red kangaroo and the Vietnamese used to think it was a red rat

- 29:30 so they used to call it 'uc da loi but it means red rat. That's what they used to call Aussie soldiers 'uc da loi and you're either number one or you're number ten.

Number one being the best?

Number one being the best and number ten being the worst.

When you said there was forty-four gallon drums of alcohol and stuff, where was that being

put on for you?

- 30:00 That was in Vung Tau and it was the army's logistics centre where they call them the 'pogos' the people in administration, Q [Quartermaster] stores where there are a lot of your supplies and stuff come from there because they had the dock there
- 30:30 and everything they needed in Nui Dat was transported over there. It was the recreation centre too, they had the Peter Badcoe Club [soldiers club], they had rooms there and then they had the R & C [Rest and Convalescence] centre in Vung Tau 'cause it was a little bit further into town so that
- 31:00 if you couldn't get out to the Peter Badcoe you'd go to the R & C and usually there was a spare bed where you could prop for the night, that's if you didn't end up with the girls which most people do. They had a curfew on every night, so you had to off the streets, if you weren't off the streets the MPs [Military Police] would come and haul you in.

So tell us about these girlie bars then?

- 31:30 Well I got a shock because I've never witnessed anything like that and when you go into these bars, see how these women make their money you've got to buy them drinks, they call them teas and you think they're actually drinking alcohol but it's probably tea or watered down drink.
- 32:00 Every time you buy them something they get a profit off that drink and if you take them home out of the bar, so much goes to the 'mama san' of the bar and then she gets so much. If you're going to take a woman home for the night, you agree on the price before you leave and that's where the bargaining comes in.
- 32:30 The first time I took a girl home, it was a room about as big as this and there was a double bed and there was mattresses and other beds and a little cooking area, she had her mother and her father there and two or three kids and you say, because I come from a family of ten,
- 33:00 "My God what's happening here?" You know that you can't back out because she's already jumped in this little Lambretta and she's taken you through all these streets and you don't know how to get back to anywhere and if you go out onto the streets you could get shot by the Mps [Military Police].
- 33:30 She pulls a curtain around the bed and that was my first time with a bar girl.

So you were actually in the same room as her family except for the curtain around the bed?

Exactly. Yeah.

That's enough for you to get performance anxiety?

It happens to everybody even the married guys and they say, "There is no way I am going to sleep with somebody with my wife home".

- 34:00 There was a funny story about this guy who went home and he come back and he had VD [Venereal Disease] and he's never slept with any of the girls, he got it off his wife. Those sort of stories go around. Even some of the married girls....
- 34:30 if you got a regular girl and you never got any disease, nine out of ten times you'd go back with her. Its just part of the those two days out of a life where you're every twenty-four hours of the day, you're kind of on call and there's those two days
- 35:00 where you can let your hair down and you can go and get drunk. Because you're young you can go and do those sort of things. Sometimes when you look back you think there is no way, like morally and all those things. Like I say I never drank before, but I used to get drunk.

- 35:30 **So when you went on those little two day jaunts what would you be drinking, beer or something else?**

Beer.

And you'd hook into it pretty big?

Yeah, yeah. I used to try and pace myself. You'd have a couple before you left and went into town because it was cheaper to drink on the base than it was in town. Beer was nothing, it was like fifteen cents a can

- 36:00 if you drank at one of the bases. If you go into town it's a little bit more. Another thing too was the currency, while you're in the military system it was what they call MPC which is Military Payment Certificate and you got like paper notes probably like a dollar or whatever
- 36:30 and smokes were like ten cents a packet, beer was like fifteen cents a can, I mean you could drink and smoke yourself stupid. When you look at the wages you got, then it was a lot different to what people are making today. It was quite cheap.
- 37:00 **What about the girls, what sort of cost would they be?**

Anything from ten to thirty or forty dollars a night but then you've got different types of girls. If you got a Eurasian girl, you've got to realise that the French were there before us, and then you get young girls that have a French father

- 37:30 and Vietnamese and some of those are really attractive and their prices were a little bit more than the average girl. There was one time I went into this place for a massage and I ended up with more than a massage and I lost my dog tags and the only way I could find them was to retrace my steps and I back to this massage parlour and this little girl there gave such a good time and she grabbed me
- 38:00 and she had me dog tags, I ended up going with her for the rest of the night and that was the sort of thing that happened. Like I say when you're young and you're in that situation, even these soldiers in the Middle East and places in Europe there was always those sort of women to service the men.
- 38:30 **Were you warned about disease issues?**
- Oh yeah. Guys used to always talk about the black rose which was if you got this type of VD it was like a death sentence, probably like AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome]. There was condoms around then but
- 39:00 Believe it or not there was only a small quantity of guys that were on our gun that got it.
- So condoms were made available to you if you wanted them?**
- Oh yeah, yeah. The reason that you go back with a certain girl is because she is clean. You can tell they have a shower....used to be funny, this girl had a big vat of water
- 39:30 and every time you finished you went out there and she'd be washing you down and you'd go back in, probably half way through the night you'd go back out there. There was this girl; one of my mates hooked up with her sister and her mother and father were there and the next morning they had fish and rice and
- 40:00 there was no communication and then because she treated you well, if you go back to them you might take her perfume or something like that and she kind of regards you as hers every time you go there but one time I went there she was with one of her other regulars.
- 40:30 **So you'd sometimes give the girls presents as well as just straight cash if they were....?**
- I suppose, I mean that it was just a physical thing. To me east is east and west is west and probably the language barrier and all that sort of thing. You sometimes think, "Would I have married one of those sorts of girls?" and you think, "No there's too much of a gap in between".

Tape 6

- 00:33 **You went to Hong Kong for R & R [Rest and Recreation] at one point didn't you?**
- Yeah I did.
- Tell us about that trip.**
- Oh that was beautiful there. The first day there, they have a reception area where you go and have a few drinks and stuff. It was funny because when I went through Canungra one of the guys from the armoured regiment
- 01:00 APCs it was his last day and my first day and he was broke and my nickname in Vietnam was 'Killer'.
- How did you get that?**
- Everybody found out I was a wrestler and the only thing that they could relate to wrestling was Killer Kawolski he was a professional wrestler and that's how I got my nickname.
- 01:30 Even to this day, guys I know from Vietnam still call me Killer. They said, "Hey Killer can you lend us ten bucks" and I was drunk and he was drunk and I said, "Yeah, here". And then when I got back to the Horseshoe a couple of weeks later he rolls up in his APC and he says, "Where's Killer?" and they said, "Oh he's down on Delta gun down the front" so he drives his APC down there and he says,
- 02:00 "Killer, here's that ten bucks I owe you". Funny 'cause after Vietnam he worked in a bank as a teller, I've met up with him and he was telling me that that after I saw him at the Horseshoe, he ran over a mine and he ended up in hospital and he's still got scars and that today.
- 02:30 I see him every year at Anzac Day. That was quite funny then. You've got your choices of hotels that you can go in and I went into this hotel and it was quite good and like all hotels, because I was on my own you can go out and do what you like
- 03:00 and I was there for six days, I think it was seven days and six nights. It's the army that arrange for your

airfare there and your airfare back. What happened was, when I got back to Nui Dat they were going to charge me with being AWOL [Absent Without Leave] and they made all the arrangements for the ticket 'cause

- 03:30 I should have been back there a day earlier, somehow they ballsed up the ticketing. It didn't worry me at the time because it wasn't my fault.

What did you do in Hong Kong?

Well most days I kind of walked everywhere. I went over to the New Territories, I went around all the different sights and everything. I got friendly

- 04:00 with some of the English speaking Chinese in some of these department stores and I met this guy and I got talking to him and he gave me some good advice and when I got a bit lonely, I wandered in there again and, "How are you going?" you know because it was somebody that you could talk to. He was going on a picnic, he and some friends, and this particular day and I met him at the ferry

- 04:30 and we went over to this island and I met all of his friends and we had a barbeque and everything. He was a fantastic bloke and you wouldn't believe it in 1974 when I went to Istanbul, we had a stay in Asia, so I went to Hong Kong and me and my mates are walking along this street and I bumped into him again .

- 05:00 After all them years, it was only three or four years and we got to talking, he didn't work in the department store anymore and he said after we'd had a bit of a conversation, he said, "Do you want a girl?" and I looked at him and here's somebody that had worked in a department store and then he's turned into this sleazy guy that's wanting

- 05:30 to sell me some girl for the night. I was married at the time and I said, "No, no, no, I'm married". I thought what happened to you? See there's one good experience and then down the track his lifestyle must have changed, something must have happened. The only problem in Hong Kong was, I used to get drunk every night and I'd be up until one, two or three o'clock

- 06:00 in the morning at different night clubs and then the next morning I'd be up at six o'clock in the morning, I was on a sort of burn out.

Why would you have to get up at six o'clock in the morning when you're on holidays?

Well you want to see things. If you sleep in, that's a wasted day.

Were you getting drunk because you were so affected by what you were seeing and you wanted to drink it out of your system? What was happening there do you think?

- 06:30 It was like being back in the normal world. Yet you knew that you had to go back to the other world and anything could have happened there. When you're in a war zone you could run over a mine or anything.

- 07:00 You hear about all the things that have happened to Australian soldiers in Vietnam and this is in the back of your mind and when you go on your leave you kind of want to forget those sort of things. It's the only way you can....its just like a release. Looking back over the years that's what has caused my problems today

- 07:30 because when things start to get too much for you, you go and hit the bottle 'cause you're thinking of what....you know....although I've got to that stage of elitism as an athlete, there was always that time when....after Vietnam I was almost a wardrobe drinker, I always used to have a bottle of something in the wardrobe.

- 08:00 There's a lot of things you don't let your friends see, a lot of bad habits and a lot of things that you deny that....

Taking you back from Hong Kong when you went back to Vietnam, you had some incidents at one of the rubber plantations where you were working with the American army, can you tell us about that and what happened then?

They weren't too far from us.

- 08:30 The only problem with that...I found the Americans, being of Aboriginal background, like I talk to some negroes and because of that stigma they've got in their own army, they weren't very conversational.

Is that because you were trying to speak to them because they were black and you were black and you thought that you might have something in common?

- 09:00 It's just Aussie sort of thing, we talk to everybody. You see a lot of movies with the class discrimination in the American forces particularly in World War II, where they weren't allowed to fight. You had all that 'black power' and that sort of thing back in them days. You get a lot of those soldiers that were probably conscripts

- 09:30 that didn't want to be there, like us. It was hard to make friends with the Americans.

What about the white Americans were they more friendly to you?

I didn't have much to do with them. Apparently on one of our leaves down in Vung Tau, I was supposed to have got drunk and we started a fight with some Americans.

10:00 **What about?**

I don't know but my mate said, and he was there, it started with some white American soldiers and some negro soldiers stepped in to help us. Then the MPs come and you know....

10:30 There was some times that you write yourself off when you drank too much.

Was there many fights between the Aussie soldiers and the Americans, violent confrontations?

No not many. Most of the guys, we'd be doing our own thing. We'd be only after one or two things, alcohol and women. One of my mates got busted for smoking marihuana but he'd just got a packet of smokes off the side

11:00 of the street but some of the smokes were 'funny' smokes. Somehow he'd got the wrong packet and the MPs came and they smelt the marihuana and they hauled him in. That's a court martial.

What happened to him?

Oh he got out of it. He pleaded innocence. There was another mate of mine, see I only did eight months because the unit

11:30 I was in had already done four months, before I got there. I had the option of staying and doing the full twelve but I wanted to get back and do a bit of training for the next Olympics, so I came home with them but one of my mates that stayed on, he went AWOL in Vung Tau and when they caught him he was there cleaning

12:00 the back yard with toothbrushes and they had him doing all these funny jobs but he went a little bit off the rails and went AWOL. When I got picked to go to Munich, I found out he got killed he was in an accident, not an accident, he was a bookie

12:30 and somebody tried to rip him off and my mate punched him up and the bloke got him later with a knife when he wasn't looking.

This happened back in Australia?

Yeah, yeah.

Taking you back to Vietnam was there anything else that happened there of significance that you can remember?

With the artillery boys it's like day in and day out,

13:00 monotonous. One day was no different to the next. The only days that were different was like when I went to 'Bridget', that was good because it was like a bit of a vacation. We were firing the guns all the time over there, when we went out to that plantation and we got back we got sent to Bridget and when you're moving

13:30 there's a lot of work goes into it, so you bust your guts loading everything on and then you've got to unload and reload by the time we got back to Horseshoe, we were like zonked out. Then we had a fire mission and the bombardier read one of the instructions wrong and we put one extra charge

14:00 in there or something there was just a little mistake. He lost a stripe over it so, you can't afford that sort of thing.

Was anyone hurt over it?

No, no. It was just fatigue. It was not long after we'd travelled. It takes hours to load and unload all these things and then when we get back we're straight into action,

14:30 straight away, and then he was...because sergeants and bombardiers have got a lot of responsibilities, its their job to run the gun and I think he just read the instructions wrong and we instead of putting three in, we must have put four or something like that. I'm just recalling that, I know he lost a stripe over that.

15:00 **What did you think of the American soldiers that you did soldier with, how did you find them as soldiers?**

You hear a lot of stories about them. You know like I said we have those H & Is, harass and interdiction well they came up with this concept, they had like these little heat detectors

15:30 and they were kind of dispersed all around the countryside and they monitor heat and the alarm would go off, they had a radar set up and everything, and they'd have a HI [harass and interdiction] on that position and then they'd go there the next day and they'd find a dead cow or dead pig, so theoretically

they were good

- 16:00 but a lot of the times...then there were other times we'd have H & Is and the infantry would come across skeletons from when our bombs landed on these Viet Cong unexpectedly. That's what it was all about, to keep the enemy on their toes because they mainly used to work in the night time. Most of their movements,
- 16:30 all the infantry went out and laid ambushes and that. Until I went into commandos, I didn't learn a lot of what was going on with infantry because the only infantry type training I had had was basic training and Canungra and in Canungra they tried to fit what you might
- 17:00 learn in twelve months in an infantry battalion, into four weeks. You're going flat out all the time. It was funny, when I joined the reserves a lot of what I'd learnt as a national serviceman helped me get through the commandos.

What about in your downtime when you were at Horseshoe, what would you do there?

- 17:30 We used to listen to the radio, the American radio.

What sort of songs did they play?

A lot of country and western, Neil Diamond and that sort of stuff. Used to read magazines and stuff. The day was kind of taken up with maintenance on the gun

- 18:00 and then stores would come in and gradually, there was things that you were doing all day. Even half way though unpacking ammunition, you might have a fire mission. Its like, "bang, bang" all the time and there's nothing worse than you think I'm going to have a nice sleep and then 'Charlies' [Viet Cong] got a gun up the back of you, is firing over you.
- 18:30 They were lucky, the last gun, see they were staggered, any gun that's in front of yours, the sonic vibrations travel forward, the guns have got a shield on them and the guns in between...you'll see in one of those pictures there. So that anything
- 19:00 in front get all the recoil. Even if you didn't fire the gun in the night you know everybody else did.

So you couldn't sleep through that?

A lot of times you couldn't put your earmuffs on because you had to listen for them to call you.

What kind of magazines would you read? Were they girlie mags or... do you remember what they were called any of them?

- 19:30 Oh yeah. A lot of the names were Swank and Gent and Playboy and I think Penthouse was around then. A lot of them American magazines. They were all American, you wouldn't get many Australian ones. The American ones had better pictures and better stories as the ones in Australia were all censored.

20:00 **Were you talking to your family much?**

Only to...there was no such thing as a mobile phone. The only way you could communicate was the letters. A lot of my photography was in slides and I had slide projector at home, so they used to have a slide night at home.

- 20:30 I used to address all me photographs; they used to go to a lab in Melbourne and then re-addressed to home. All the folks would be up looking at them.

So you took lots of photographs while you were there?

Oh yeah.

What kind of camera were you using?

I had a Pentax, I bought that in Hong Kong. I had that right up until about

- 21:00 five years ago went into a canyon I put it into a plastic bag and I had it wrapped in a couple of plastic bags and in the canyon you go under water and through all these plastic bags, water got into it. I took it to a camera place and it was shot. Otherwise I would still have it today. That's how reliable the Pentax Reflex was.
- 21:30 If you see some of those photographs on 'one thousand' [setting] you can actually see the projectile coming out of the barrel that's how good it was. I took the camera to Munich and because I hadn't used it for so long, when you put the film in I didn't put the lip far enough
- 22:00 and I thought the film was going around and I'd take a picture but because it didn't actually get in the slot and it wasn't going around. Instead of checking up I thought there was something wrong with the camera. There was something like three rolls of film and apparently I was doing the wrong thing all the time and it was only a couple of years later that a mate showed me

22:30 when you load the camera not to do that.

We'll just take you back to coming home from Vietnam. How did you get home?

We flew.

What were your feelings coming back home?

It was a relief. When I came home and I had a bit of leave then I found out that I had to go up to Townsville,

23:00 that was a bit disheartening. I thought a lot of the nashos that were on my gun when they left Australia, they were getting out of the army. I was coming back and didn't know what was going to happen and after I had the break in Sydney, see they didn't use aeroplanes like they do today, we had to catch the train

23:30 and there was two days in that train trip up to Townsville and then when I got there after a few weeks probably maybe a month, I was told that they were putting me on a Physical Training Instructors course in Manly and I thought, "You beaut". I think it was about three or four months there.

24:00 **You had to stay in the army to what point? You weren't able to just say....**

I went in in September '69 and I got out in September '71.

So there was a certain period that you had to do? You had to do two years?

You had to do two years.

The PT instructor's course was what you always wanted to do wasn't it?

Yeah but I found, see I'm a one sport person, I do

24:30 physio-cardio physical stuff, but when you've got to know the rules of basketball, how to play cricket, run athletics and all that and after coming back from Vietnam, we had a few guys that used to like having a few drinks. My aim of getting to Sydney was so as I could go back and do a bit of wrestling training for the '72 Olympics.

25:00 The whole time I was in Sydney, for three or four months, I didn't go to one wrestling club because every day you'd be doing so much PT. It's like what we were doing in recruit training. Instead of doing one class, I had six or seven classes of PT the same thing day, in and day out. You were playing basketball

25:30 and cricket and football. And leaving school at fourteen there was a whole lot of physiology and that sort of thing and that's why I joined the army reserves because I got such a roasting from the OC because I failed the course, being an Olympian it kind of,

26:00 being an elite athlete, I didn't want to ever be a failure, to have some wacker telling me that I was failure. That wasn't enough. I had the last laugh when I got selected to go to the Olympics. The bastard failed me, so here I am I've come eighth in the world with five months training.

26:30 But I had to prove that I wasn't a failure in the army, so that's why I joined the army reserves.

That was later on?

Later on, yes.

So that PT course you didn't end up passing that?

No.

OK and that was because of the academic side of it?

The academic, but as far as the physical side of it was, I was probably the fittest like cardio wise my repetitions, the circuits

27:00 was far in excess of the other people. But I'm not a strong swimmer and there was a swimming component of that. So its like you're going into a medley race, there's some things you are good at and some things you're not and when it all evens out. I think that it all boiled down to the fact that I just wanted to be

27:30 back in Sydney and I only had a few months to get out of the army.

So tell us how you ended up eventually leaving.

When I got back to Townsville over my years of being an athlete, I had these tonsillitis attacks and I got tonsillitis very bad and they ended up putting me in and the doctor said, see at twenty-three they said, "Oh your tonsils have got to come out" which is, for an adult,

28:00 not very nice. Back in the seventies when they took them out it started bleeding and then all I

remember I had my mouth open and they were putting bread in there to soak up the blood and it was really horrific. Like I said all these things that happened to me leading

28:30 up to being selected to be in Munich. Its like as soon as I get up, I fall down, I get up, I fall down. The failure of the PT course, getting my butt kicked from the OC, and then getting tonsillitis and then getting out of the army and no medical cover

29:00 and I got appendicitis and then just prior to the, I was wrestling with someone a bit heavier than me and my arm hit the deck and my elbow got dislocated then I had to get rushed to the hospital and I couldn't do much training and you get all these Olympians that have four years training

29:30 getting up to the Olympics and here's me with about five months.

How were you selected, who picked you out, how did that happen?

It's a process. You have state championships and then you have Australian championships and then the winner of the Australian championships, see there is ten divisions and what they do in the two Olympics that I went to they sent three wrestlers, so out of

30:00 ten wrestlers they have got to pick three of the best. So twice I've been the best of the best but in Montreal it was a political thing, I came eighth in Munich and they nominated me number five.

So you won the Australian competitions and you won enough to be selected for the Olympics though the natural process back then,

30:30 **and who was training you at that stage to prepare for Munich?**

After I left the army, my coach for all those years, I'd been away and he'd started to fall out of the wrestling.

31:00 I had to go elsewhere, mainly to get wrestling partners, mainly in Bankstown and then I had another guy he was a two time Olympian and he won a gold medal in the Commonwealth Games, Jack Jamison, he gave me a lot of coaching. He used to live at Glebe and when I used to live in Balmain, I would come over to Glebe,

31:30 so I would get coaching off him on Monday and there was a couple of brothers used to be coaches at Bankstown and I used to go over there on Tuesday and Thursday and then I used to do all my other training in the gym and doing a lot of circuits and training and often going around to other clubs.

Did you always have the Olympics in mind, at that stage is that what you had in mind that you were training for?

Oh well Mexico, I'd already been there.

32:00 See when I came back I got married.

How was that?

Well it was unexpected. Me girlfriend Yvonne that I had known since she was about ten, she fell pregnant, we got married, my eldest daughter she's thirty odd now.

32:30 My mother got a bit upset because I didn't tell her that that's my wife. That kind of created a bit of friction because I was so embarrassed to tell my mother. I think that that is the worst thing that ever happened to me in my life. I didn't tell my mother that my girlfriend was pregnant.

33:00 **She didn't like Yvonne?**

We were a close family and I think that it is just that I never told her. My mother, when I went to Vietnam, me being a Queens Scout and she's got me on this pedestal and after Vietnam even she

33:30 used to tell everybody how much I'd changed. I didn't want her to think that I was this sort of....its like when you do something good all your life and....

You didn't want her to be disappointed in you?

Well I didn't know how to tell her. See people face failure in different ways

34:00 and sometimes you think you've failed yourself. What's happened to me now, I'm still seeing psychiatrists because an elite athlete and trying to be a winner all your life and then when you hit the wall its good to have the support from family and things.

34:30 Its just that you think you're bomb proof.

So you weren't planning on starting a family that early on ?

No, no. I felt that I wanted to do all these other things.

Was Yvonne a girlfriend before you went left for Vietnam?

Yeah, yeah. We were writing to one another before. But I'm still with her,

35:00 still happily married. She's put up with a lot but she's never, ever denied me being involved with the wrestling at least that way she knows who I am.

You mentioned that your mother thought that you had changed when you came back from Vietnam.

Yes.

In what way had you changed? What were people saying?

Because I was always shy and respectful

35:30 I think it was just certain mannerisms. That sort of thing. You can tell somebody's changed. Like there was a lot of things that I didn't do and when you come back and you are doing all these other things.

36:00 **Like drinking and smoking and...?**

Yeah. With the smoking, I used to only smoke when I used to drink and then when things got too far for me down the track. I only ever used to smoke in the garage or whatever.

How were other people like your friends and family or the Australian public once they knew that you had come back from Vietnam, did you have any bad experiences from people saying, "why did you go over there?"

36:30 I was too ashamed to tell people that I'd been to Vietnam because of a lot of the publicity with the My Lai massacre and some of the, mainly from a lot of the things that the Americans had inflicted on the people.

37:00 Those sort of atrocities filter back to being a soldier over there. Like I was telling you, when I went to that Russian theatre. To have somebody try, like the people that were anti-communist in those days they were real radicals. When you look at it, if you read the history of

37:30 Ho Chi Minh all he wanted was a united Vietnam and the Americans trained him in jungle warfare and he came back and kicked the French out. He wanted to have one Vietnam because he was pro-Russian and the Americans wouldn't have nothing to do with him and they're the ones that helped him kick the Japs [Japanese] out.

38:00 **So you understood why the protestors were hurling abuse at the soldiers back in Sydney or did it upset you?**

I think a lot of that was with the Afghanistan thing too. Not long after Vietnam, Russia went into Afghanistan and then you had the Americans supporting the Taliban. Every conflict you look at, see America supported Saddam Hussein

38:30 when they were fighting the Iranians. America creates her own problems.

For you personally coming back from Vietnam, what was your personal experience of how people treated you because you had been over there?

Unless you said that you said you went to Vietnam...like I was saying it's like the Olympics today, the Olympics in my day it's like, "I'm an Olympian"..., "oh, that's alright".

39:00 An Olympian today you're like a big superstar. You look at all the people that were at the airport, I mean sport's come a long way. Like Vietnam in them days, its like soldiers that came back from Afghanistan or its like some of the ships that came back from Iraq,

39:30 there is a lot of people there to welcome them and everything but it is only because of the media hype and that...but back in my day there was so much negativity that there was no hype for us and that's why it took us years and years before they had that welcome home parade and that was the only thing that made veterans kind of, I shouldn't say proud but....

40:00 we went over there because our government sent us and in a way it was for our country. Going over there because we shouldn't have, that's a different sort of That's politics, it's like the people that didn't want them to go to Iraq but see now people are saying that we've got to support them when with us....

40:30 like they [dock workers] went on strike with the ship Jeparit and we couldn't get supplies over there. It wouldn't happen today, that sort of thing wouldn't happen today back in them days things were totally....not only the Olympics but the wars.

00:31 **I just wanted to clear something thing up first. You said that at one point when you were in Vung Tau that you'd been in hospital?**

Yeah. They used to come around for medical inspections. Spot inspections, on your feet and your body because over there, because of the hot temperature, people used to get funguses growing on them. I got some funguses growing on my feet and they had to send me down to Vung Tau

01:00 to have a minor operation. So I was in Vung Tau for a little while. That was the only time.

How was the hygiene up at the fire base by the way?

Oh it was pretty good. They were fortunate to have a tank there, so you can have a proper shower. You turn the tap on and, I mean you weren't allowed to stay under there all day,

01:30 but you can have a quick shower whereas when we were in 'Bridget' they had the little canvas bags. You get a jerry can and you filled it up with water and you pulled it up and then opened it. That was our shower facilities over in Bridget. Different standards. Everybody had to have a tub every day.

That was the rules was it?

Yep.

So you had to have a wash daily?

02:00 Hygiene, yes.

I also meant to ask what was the food like up there in Vietnam?

It wasn't too bad. When we went out bush that time, we had a ten man ration pack. You had to do all your own cooking.

02:30 In Bridget you ration packs for breakfast, and lunch, and for dinner; they used to bring a helicopter over with hot boxes. Everybody used to have a hot meal every night. But the food in Vietnam; they had a catering corps there. It was basic sort of food.

03:00 We used to get a lot of American rations but sometimes it wasn't too crash hot. You had your two 'dixies' [tray] because sometimes you'd get desert, so they used to fill one dixie up with food and you might have peaches or something. Then you had to wash them, you had to wash them all yourself

03:30 and all they were was board type tables and stools. It was just a way of keeping out of the weather and the cooks had somewhere to cook because they used to cater for quite a few guys. What they did was quite good for what they had.

You didn't have any complaints about it obviously?

04:00 No, no.

You mentioned that you were writing to Yvonne while you were over there? How often would you write do you reckon?

Sometimes you'd get a bit lonely and you'd write a letter and send it off to somebody. I used to keep in touch with my brother 'cause he wanted to know what was going on.

04:30 They followed us after we left.

And what about you mum or your dad, would you write to them?

Yep. I'd write to Mum and Dad in the one letter. I used to always let them know what was going on.

And how often would Yvonne write back to you?

05:00 I used to get a letter at least every month and there was other friends I used to write to. Then you'd get all these girls from the newspaper, the Vietnam Vets would say, "Oh lonely soldier." what they used to do was bring around all these letters with all these addresses.

05:30 Some of the guys, just to fill in a bit of time, used to write off and become friends with these people.

These would just be random members of the public who would volunteer to?

Yeah. You know how you got emails to...well it was like a mail system. People would want to talk to some soldier and they'd send their address and you'd write to them and we always got replies back.

06:00 Some of the other guys that were singles, they did that sort of thing.

Did you look forward to the letters from home, from Yvonne?

Yes it was always good to know something was going on. I think the hardest thing for me was the Commonwealth Games thing from Edinburgh. Arthur Tunstall bought a boxing team to Vietnam

- 06:30 and he brought it out to Nui Dat and they had a little bit of a display and some of the athletic guys got in and had a few rounds with them. Mostly SAS guys. Arthur actually came out to Nui Dat because when he got to Vung Tau
- 07:00 he specifically asked for me. So he came out to Nui Dat and they brought me in especially, from the Horseshoe and then he had a movie camera and he took some shots of me and then, when he went home, he had them developed and he went around and showed me wife and family, well my Mum and that.

- 07:30 Because I was in Vietnam, I missed selection for the Edinburgh Commonwealth Games. I never went to a Commonwealth Games; I only went to the Olympics because in between I was indisposed.

So how did you feel about missing your chance to go to the Commonwealth Games?

Mum sent me all the cuttings out from the

- 08:00 finals and stuff. I was a bit disappointed because in a way, I had a chance of going. The trials, when I went to Canungra, the trials were that weekend after Canungra. I asked one of the officers, I said, "Listen",
- 08:30 because they had guys that were in Brisbane and they had transport back to Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and I didn't know who to get permission off to go to stay in Brisbane, and compete in the games....if I'd have got selected for the games, I would have pulled out of going to Vietnam. But four weeks out in the bush and not being on a wrestling match,
- 09:00 not knowing how much you're going to weigh, not having any equipment or gear, I kind of dismissed it and probably, it was meant not to happen.

But you had that contact with the Commonwealth Games team when they came and visited you in Vietnam?

Oh yeah, it was great, yeah. Seeing Arthur Tunstall,

- 09:30 I've been involved with Arthur Tunstall since Mexico '68 and he's virtually been to almost every Olympics as a boxing manager he was even, I think I saw him in Sydney, he was involved with the boxing there. He has always been a high official in the boxing team over the years and he was actually an insurance broker. So anybody on the Olympic team
- 10:00 that was new on the team, that's how I got to know him closely 'cause after the Mexico Olympics he said, "John, I'm coming around to your house." come around to sign me up with insurance and I've known him ever since.

You said that Vietnam had changed you and given you some problems later in life. What aspect of the Vietnam experience was the most stressing for you?

- 10:30 There was a lot of things. It affects different people in different ways. You've got to take into account...
- 11:00 you hear so much about that Agent Orange and all these guys with anxiety disorders and things to do with the nervous system. You wonder how much the chemicals they used in Vietnam affects the veterans for all these years. Being an elite athlete and you're getting all these anxiety problems,
- 11:30 you wonder what's happened. I think that's a lot of the reason sometimes, you can't put your finger on it. It's hard to put the blame on hitting the bottle all the time, it's only now that I get a lot of help from the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service. They've put my life into perspective. I'm starting to do a fitness course with Diabetics Australia, I see a psychiatrist every month, I see a counsellor with the
- 12:00 Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service so it helps get you back on track.
- 12:30 Mainly with the alcohol. If a lot of people weren't helped by these organisations, you look at the Reveille on any RSL [Returned and Services League] newspaper 'Vietnam Veterans dead aged fifty-six, fifty-seven' - all under sixty. Yet you see a World War I
- 13:00 digger, one hundred and five and World War II diggers still alive in their eighties, you don't hear too much of Vietnam Veterans living too much more than seventy.

So you can't really put your finger on what you think about the experience that affected you?

Well I didn't see a lot of traumatic things that make you...like infantry.

- 13:30 Then there is always those other things there. Like war affects people in different ways. You see dead bodies and that sort of thing.

When you were firing the gun for example did you ever think about who it was landing on?

It would only affect you if you see the end results.

- 14:00 That would only happen if you went out and investigated every bomb you dropped. When you hear

reports about infantry coming across dead bodies found in a crater, you're in a war zone they are the enemy. See you get desensitised

14:30 with war. It's kill or be killed. It's like the stigma of being a soldier. Doesn't matter... if you look at some of the real battles that were fought in Vietnam the end results tell the tales. Everybody works

15:00 as a team and that's why they are so successful in the end results. It's that team work. Some people are in the wrong spot at the wrong time.

How did you get on with the infantry blokes when you were in Vietnam?

Oh I really only met one of them on R & R, he was in two battalion

15:30 and he spent six hundred bucks on nothing. I went over with him and I came home with him and I said, "How did you go?" 'Cause we were in different hotels and he said, "I spent six hundred bucks" and he had nothing to show just women, drink and having a good time. A lot of people went to Hong Kong to buy with the discounts.

16:00 If you wanted sex and fun you went to Bangkok or Taiwan. You had the option of going to Taiwan, a lot of my friends all went to Hong Kong. My brother came home but I thought well, I'll be spending the rest of my life at home, I might as well see something different.

16:30 **Was it just that you never really had any contact with the infantry while you were in Vietnam because they were operating well forward of you?**

Yes. That's right. We used to all eat in the same mess. They had messes at different companies, I don't even know what company's were out there. It's just that you don't really know anybody

17:00 and they've got their own shit to worry about.

Do you reckon the infantry guys ever bagged you guys out because you were back behind the wire and they were out in the sticks?

No, I don't think that that sort of thing went on over there. There was a lot of FOs [Forward Officer] that worked with infantry and it was because of their accuracy that it got them out of the shit.

17:30 See that sort of stigma, Australians...I suppose they'd call us 'Pogos' being in a support base but we were in a little...because we were in our own little action, the same as APCs they've got their own little action.

18:00 Infantry would have to be the most respected....he's the sort of soldier that everybody sort of respects, we might call them 'Grunts' but deep down everybody respects them. They're the ones out there doing all the hard yakka. That's why I joined the army reserves,

18:30 I just wanted to see what I missed. You can't duplicate what happened over there that was the real thing.

We'll talk about Munich a bit now. You got selected for the team to go over to Munich, tell us about the arrival over there.

19:00 Just prior to us going to Munich, we had a Pakistani gold medallist from the Commonwealth Games, they nominated him as a coach and he trained us for a couple of weeks in Melbourne.

19:30 Since I got out of the army, I've worked for myself and I had a wife and a little girl and we were living with Mum, there was no such thing as the dole, so if I had any time off there was no money coming in. So that couple of weeks down there and seven weeks in Munich,

20:00 that was seven weeks without pay. A lot of athletes get sponsored now. We spent one week in Melbourne and one week at the Cerberus Navy Depot and the PTIs there let us use their gym, they had mats down for us so we'd do

20:30 wrestling training in the morning, afternoon and in the day time we'd have the navy PTIs put us through all these exercises and things like that and by the time the one week was up we were really fit. We caught a plane, they flew us from Sydney to Melbourne and then from Melbourne we went via Darwin

21:00 over to Munich. We lobbed into Munich, when you're over in Europe during that time of the year no-one ever told me that the sun comes up at about four o'clock in the morning, or three o'clock. I didn't have a watch and I used to always get up when the sun come up and I used to get up and I would go

21:30 running for a few weeks and then I'd come back and everybody was still sleeping and then I'd be making noise and the manager said, "Why do you get up so early?" I said, "It's only about five or six o'clock" and I was getting up at three o'clock in the morning because the sun was up. So he gave me a watch,

22:00 so when I got up in the morning I looked at the watch and thought, "It's too early to go training".

What was the athletes' village like?

In Mexico, just imagine a block of flats say about ten floors, and

- 22:30 say about four or five per floor that was Mexico. In Munich it was like one big block, one big block of flats and underneath they had like a pool area, sauna, spa and all that sort of thing and like different countries occupied different sections, it was like a big strata type thing.
- 23:00 Like all flats, after the Olympics they sell them as units. I remember in Mexico, it got to the stage that we had beds in the hallway and I used to grind me teeth and when I was in Mexico they kicked me out of the room, put me in the hallway 'cause I used to grind me teeth of a night.
- 23:30 But in Munich they were more spacious sort of rooms. The training area in Mexico, the training area was inside the Olympic Village which meant that we only had to walk about fifty metres, in Munich we had to get on a bus
- 24:00 and it had to take us to this university-type place. It had all these mats set up and you were allocated different times. So what they do is they slot you in with different other countries and that's how you get competition. We were lucky to have the Koreans again, training with the Koreans and I was beating this little Korean and that little
- 24:30 Korean ended up beating the American. I ended up getting that Italian again, the one I was telling you about. He beat me something like twenty points to nil in Mexico and in Munich he beat me by one point. If I'd had more than five months training I might have been
- 25:00 just that little fraction better. That would have got me third or fourth place at least. Its something you think back, if I'd have had just that little bit more training. Now one of the young guys I trained for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, prior to him going to Sydney he trained under a Russian gold medallist down in the AIS [Australian Institute of Sport] in Canberra.
- 25:30 If I would have had those facilities and coaches it would have opened up a lot of windows. The newspapers actually did a story on me because my Scoutmaster leaked it to the press, that here I am married with one child and not getting any money,
- 26:00 there wasn't any support. Now if everybody put in a dollar you might end up with twenty thousand. Back in them days like I say, the Olympics wasn't as big as it is today.

What was the opening ceremony like in Munich from your point of view?

- 26:30 Being a lot more mature it was a whole different thing. The stadium was different; it was later on in the afternoon whereas Mexico they had it in the heat of the day. In Munich they had it a little bit later in the day, so you didn't get that intense heat. You notice that at all the Olympics now,
- 27:00 they don't let out the doves anymore. If you look at Melbourne, Rome, Tokyo, Mexico, Munich, they used to always let the pigeons out. That's why you always see that big silk sign with the dove, you know from Sydney, they had that big silk dove, well that's the symbol of the Olympics now.
- 27:30 The seven weeks in Munich, you see things in a different perspective when you're a bit older and me and the other guy, Ray Barry, it was reversed, he was only one division up from me so me and him had someone to train with, whereas the other guy was a couple
- 28:00 of divisions heavier and me and Ray were teaching him how to wrestle. I mean somebody that had won selection and here we are teaching him advanced moves because his coach didn't teach him anything. For him to get selected, he had good ability and he beat the guys on the day but only on basic sort of moves,
- 28:30 in the Olympics he couldn't do 'leg grape-vines' or anything and me and Ray were teaching him a little bit more advanced wrestling. We got friends with some gymnasts and they showed us the gymnastic venues; we went to the athletics. With your pass you can get into
- 29:00 the athletics any time of the day when the athletics was on because most of the competitors make up a lot of the...you know. They could have used a lot more of them in Greece because a lot of the grandstands in Greece were half empty. The Greeks aren't as sports minded as the Sydney people.
- 29:30 We wrestled in the first four days. Now I got right to near the semi-finals, everyday you have to make weight and I've only ever tried to make weight once and when you've got to do it twice and three times and every day you've got to weigh. What happens now in the Olympics when you weigh in on day one, that's it. You don't have to weigh.
- 30:00 You get guys that dehydrate themselves and they might rest Tuesday and the Monday they weigh in, come Tuesday they've re-hydrated and they've put on all this beef and then they don't have to do it. But in my day, every day you have to sit in the sauna, pull off that weight.
- 30:30 By the time I got to wrestle in the semis, I had a Romanian, I was so dehydrated I tried me best and I got a couple of points on him first up and then he just went ballistic, I think he should have actually

come fourth but he had to pin me to actually get that extra....but I wouldn't let him.

- 31:00 It was funny his coach had come around the night before with a bottle of wine for my coach, to try to bribe my coach to tell me to lie down, that would have got him a medal. You are there to compete, to do the best you can.

You'd won a few bouts to get that far?

Yes. I was lucky.

- 31:30 **What was your final ranking in the competition?**

Eighth. We started on day one and we finished on day four, I've actually got a cutting from the newspaper, "Our only winner from that day" but when all the competition started, I had my first win on that day...you know, it had, "John Kinsela,

- 32:00 our only winner on the day" I've got that, that's there. When I finished competing and I kind of let my hair down and I had a few drinks with some friends. In Germany, the Germans were very arrogant, especially the Bavarians

- 32:30 and if you didn't speak proper English, they couldn't understand you, like if we spoke Aussie slang they couldn't understand us, yet they could speak perfect English, so we had to, if we wanted to talk with them we had to slow our talking down, so they could understand us.

- 33:00 **Tell us about that fateful night in Munich.**

Yes, well I had a few drinks with some of the people there and, see I just lost my train of thought there, see what the Germans did they imported all their volunteers and workers, its like Australia, we had the best volunteers. See every Olympics they get the people

- 33:30 to do more and more work but in Germany, all the workers were all foreigners, there was hardly any Germans there because they let, like the Turks used to do all their menial sort of work, so they sent out all these circulars and all these people from universities come there because they were really fantastic people. We used to have little

- 34:00 conversations with them and we were actually drinking and then all of a sudden the AK47s [assault rifle] went off and I thought..., cause in '70, I was in Vietnam and you heard the odd AK47 go off and I thought, "My God that sounded like a gun" and I said, "This is the Olympics,

- 34:30 this is not Vietnam" 'cause I kind of, you know you kind of shake you head and.... The next day....

So on that particular night you didn't take any further action, you just...?

No, I just thought it was fireworks. Like somebody had let off some firecrackers or something. I went to bed....

- 35:00 **There were no sirens or....?**

No security....

No evacuation or anything...?

No, and then the next day the wrestling manager said there's been a disaster happen in the...telling us about the Israelis and then... I mean the day after

- 35:30 I competed, the games shut, which is...you know 'the games to be closed for a day'. That puts a lot of people out of, see people psyche themselves up and when you're train of thought, its like that Brazilian runner, his train of thought was...when he was taken out.... Imagine losing a day

- 36:00 when you're all psyched up and you've got your weight right and that sort of thing.

So what were you told had happened?

We were told there was terrorists because in them days there was a lot of terrorist stuff going on, like the Irish and the Arabs and we thought it had happened over there in the Middle East or in Ireland.

- 36:30 To have that happen in the Olympics, which is supposed to bring everybody together, it completely shocked me. After that I gave up wrestling for two years I thought, "If this is what they think of the biggest sporting event in the world, that brings everybody together, what's the world coming to?"

- 37:00 **Because a couple of the Israeli wrestlers were killed in that attack or the Israeli wrestling team members?**

Yes that's right. My manager was Dick Gerard and he won a silver medal in London '48 Olympics and he went to four Olympics and he was actually good friends with the Jewish wrestling coach, knew him personally

- 37:30 for years and I think he actually wrestled him in his younger days. When you're in international

competition for that many years, you soon earn a lot of friends and he said the coach had died and some of the other wrestlers, that could have happened to us. Imagine what happened

38:00 with us going to Afghanistan and they took it out on the Aussie athletes. That's what I think could happen.

And because it was particularly some wrestlers who'd been hurt, do you think that affected you a lot?

Yes well I just... 'cause I was a bit shattered after Munich.

38:30 I went to one Olympics, I fought in a war, and I went to represent the country again and I got the best placing that I could get and then all this happened and

39:00 then there was a lot of publicity about.... My wife got a bit furious with my scout master who let the press know that us not being too well off, money-wise.

So there was a combination of...?

Of a whole lot of things. I think, when I got back I thought, well I'm not going to let my family go through

39:30 all that again and then there was a combination of what happened in the sport. In '74 I was talked out of coming back and then I actually won selection to go to Montreal and then the politics come into it

40:00 and I dropped out. I never really dropped out because I carried on coaching, so I carried on you know. See the sports will die unless you get people to coach, and wrestling is dying at the moment. There is a lot of people that represented in the Olympics that haven't bothered to put any time back into the sport.

40:30 The government sponsored them to go to these games, people put a lot of money into it and then they give up the sport. I mean that is the future of things. That's why the Olympics is getting bigger its because it's the people from in the sports that are putting back into the sport that make it bigger.

Tape 8

00:30 **Did you go to Turkey in 1974?**

Yeah, well Jeff Jamison.... we approached ATSIC [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission], see I wasn't going to go because of the time spent over there and getting the money to go would leave too much of a burden on my wife, so I had

01:00 to save up enough money 'cause Yvonne was working, so we had enough money to survive because we were living on our own then with Megan, but Mum was looking after Megan while Yvonne worked. I was over there for about four weeks.

When was ATSIC established, it hadn't been around for that long then had it?

01:30 Well Charlie Perkins, like I said, he had the foundation in the '60s.

Oh and ATSIC is the same, it is a follow-on from that?

Yes just a follow-on from that. When they eventually got into Canberra, you look at the amount of money that ATSIC gets, it would be cheaper for them to give every Aboriginal a million dollars and say, "That's it".

02:00 Then they could abolish ATSIC but there is too many corrupt people in ATSIC, there is a lot of people that have misappropriated money and they're still in the same jobs. Whereas they would have got a criminal sentence if they were in a white organisation. I was fortunate to get some funding from ATSIC

02:30 that paid for accommodation and airfares and stuff. But people don't realise that when you take four weeks off work, its not like I was working for a boss and had four weeks holiday coming, when you work for yourself, which I've done all my life, its gets a bit of a burden.

What was your job then?

03:00 Courier. See when I got out of the army I couldn't stand to be locked up again. Then down the track when I got a bit restless when the anxieties started to set in and I found that the driving was too much and that's when I went two years in the public service.

Well tell us about Turkey. What was the four weeks over there like?

03:30 Turkey was, I always told my wife that if we ever had a boy we'd call him Bulla or Abdullah after one of

those famous Turkish wrestlers, when my Olympics started, Turkey used to win all the gold medals. The reason all the other countries developed freestyle wrestling

04:00 was that they got a Turkish coach. In actual, Turkish wrestling is probably the hallmark of all the top wrestling countries. When I was in Turkey, the Turkish border is on some Russian states and you've got the people that are just over the border from Turkey, the Turks call them Turk-Russians

04:30 and they like to be called Russian-Turks. When they won a gold medal the Turks all put down Russian-Turks, you know Turkish-Russian.

What were the games called?

The Freestyle Wrestling Championships. Freestyle is where you can use your legs,

05:00 whereas Greco-Roman is upper body, so you can't touch the legs. In freestyle you can touch the legs and you can do the throws and all the different combinations that go with it. That's the first time I've been to a world championships. We were fortunate to train with a, the Turkish government actually supplied us with a Turkish interpreter.

05:30 One of the guys that came over with me was a Yugoslav and he was a Muslim from Albania and he spoke Turkish, we had this Turkish guy speaking English and we had me mate who could speak Yugoslavian and Turkish. If we were talking to some Turkish people that didn't understand English...

06:00 it was funny because in a lot of the hotels there, because of World War II, there was a lot of the German influence, there is a lot of architecture and hotels that are all, its like when you go to Vietnam a lot of the French style architecture. If you go to a lot of Asian countries their toilet is a hole in the ground,

06:30 you probably heard about that in certain parts of Greece they always talk about the 'hole in the ground'. When I got off the aeroplane at Istanbul I go into the toilet and I'm looking for the toilet and there's this hole in the ground. After you've been sitting on that aeroplane there's no way you feel like squatting down.

07:00 I said, "Stuff it, I'm waiting until I get back to the hotel".

You were a fit man you should have had no problem?

When you leave Hong Kong, you fly across, we were flying across Bangkok, New Delhi, it's a long trip.

Tell us how you went in the competition.

07:30 I didn't do too good because I got a Russian who'd won a gold medal in '72, he won at a lighter weight - he went up a weight class and he ended up coming second in the competition and then I got a Japanese who won the gold medal in '76 and he was unbeaten leading up to

08:00 Montreal and he won the gold medal, he beat the Russian. It was pretty hard.

But you had a good time there basically though?

It was a bit of a culture shock. You go on the street after seven o'clock there is no-one on the street. They are a very friendly people, its like going back,

08:30 the seventies in Turkey was like being in the thirties in Australia, everything was so old fashioned, everybody drank tea, all the Turks smoked, a bit like Greece I suppose, the way they talk about Greece. There was a lot of Islamic people, we went to the big mosque 'Hagia Sophia'. I actually learnt the history of the mosque was that it was actually a

09:00 Christian mosque before it was a Muslim mosque. There's a bit of history there.

So when you came back, you decided that you would keep up the wrestling, when you came back from Turkey?

Yeah, I trained hard and I won selection for Montreal but there was a little bit of politics in the sport.

09:30 See how it started, NSW [New South Wales] voted for a, when they come to nominate whose going to be the manager, NSW nominated a guy and he should have got it, but what happened was the Australian secretary or the President of the Australian Wrestling Union also from NSW he wanted to go,

10:00 so what it did was it split the two NSW votes and the Victorian won, and when he won he just rigged all the bids so that South Australia and West Australia voted with him. We were kind of out-voted all the time because there was Queensland and NSW and those votes were split between the other...

10:30 and that's how I got nominated number five. The guy that I was telling you we taught how to wrestle in Munich, he was number one.

Did that upset you?

Oh it did. But what upset me most was that after Montreal, I've never seen him at one tournament and he hasn't put anything back into the sport, and they say he's a millionaire now. He was a plumber and

he bought the old houses

11:00 and renovated them, but he's put nothing into wrestling. Same with that Dick Gerard, he was my manager in Munich, he was a millionaire from the cabs. Champion athlete, he put a bit into Victorian wrestling but ... The politics in the wrestling

11:30 between NSW and Victoria, its completely demolished Queensland and its got to the state where a lot of top coaches have fallen out. It's no good for the sport. The only way we're going to survive is by all these imported wrestlers coming here and getting involved with the club and it's the only way we can build back up to where we should be.

How did Yvonne feel about you leaving wrestling?

12:00 Well I never really left because I went to coaching.

You went straight into coaching after that?

A while after. See after Montreal I started coaching again. I eventually did a coaching course because sport recs started to bring qualifications in, you had to be an accredited coach to teach people fitness.

12:30 **Sport.. what was it called?**

Sport and Recreation. So I had this sports specific but being a two times Olympian, like there is nothing you could teach me that I don't know about wrestling, but all the theory about physiology, all those things that I should have learnt in the PTI course, I went in depth

13:00 into that and when I passed the course, then in '96 I did a fitness leaders course because I, when I was working at Cobham which is a juvenile justice centre, to teach the boys how to lift weights, I had a level two for sports certificate which is exactly the same as the sports leaders training but because they are different documentation....

13:30 See the sports recs specific for sports, sports training is to teach people off the street. When you teach athletes you're teaching them progression with somebody off the street you're teaching them from scratch and potentially dangerous exercises and that.

So when did you do your first sports and recs certificate? When was the first time that you passed that?

14:00 About '85.

OK so after the Montreal episode then you went into coaching but it was quite a while after up into the eighties that you went and did that special sport and recs certificate?

Not long after Montreal, the weightlifting coach from Burwood

14:30 was the weightlifting manager from Munich and he was in charge of the Burwood Police Boys club and at the time, I was training at Burwood and he asked me to do a couple of nights a week, he'd give me petrol money, to come over and coach at Burwood. So I was doing two nights a week at Burwood and I was doing a couple of nights a week at Bankstown.

15:00 This is what my wife put up with.

Did you get paid for that coaching there?

Only petrol money, ten dollars, and that was only from the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK raffles and stuff.

So what was it that made you go in the army again, the army reserves?

15:30 There was a big ad on TV because they wanted to build the reserves up again. There was a display for the commandos, anyway I rang up and the recruiting office, being a courier I could drive around, and I said, "What's the qualifications to get into the commandos?"

16:00 and they said, "You fit?" and I said, "Yeah" and they said, "We've got a recruitment thing on such and such a day, come over". So I went over there and one of the young guys I coached, I talked him into coming, he was living with me sister at that time and you had to do so many push-ups, chin-ups, a two k run and you had to do

16:30 a swim in the pool and when you passed that, they said every Tuesday night and that's when we got uniforms and all that stuff. Because I had already done two years, I didn't have to do recruit training, all the other boys had to go and do two weeks straight, what we did

17:00 for three months, they did for two weeks out at Barnier [?] Barracks, only the basic principles. Now if you join the 'ready' reserves, you have to do the basic three months type thing, you have to do exactly what everybody else does. If you go and join the commandos, you have to go and do the same selection course for SAS as you did for commandos.

17:30 Things have changed.

So you missed having to do the actual training?

As a recruit. But I had to do IET training which is Infantry Elementary Tactics. There was guy, Harry Whiteside he was SAS, he still had to do the same training.

18:00 All those years he spent in the army he still had to do it. There were tests that you had to do on the way. Its like the Green Beret [Special Forces] qualifications and then after twelve months, and you pass all these tests, plus all these physical tests, you get your 'green beret'.

Can you list some of the tests that you had to do to get the green beret?

18:30 The hardest one for me was you had a rope suspended across the hall and it was about ten foot high and you had an SLR [Self Loading Rifle] on a sling, over your shoulder and you had your basic webbing, water bottles and everything filled and you had to crawl across the top of the rope and then you had to drop down

19:00 at arms length and then you had to do a regain pull yourself up and lift your leg up and then pull yourself back up on the rope and then pull yourself over the other side. The disadvantage I had because I've only got short legs I'd get back up on the top and because my legs weren't long enough to give me that extra

19:30 balance I'd keep rolling. I must have had about five or six attempts at that and you only had to do it once. The other one was you had to climb up to the roof and down with your hands and your boots, they were two of the physical type one and then you

20:00 had to do a swim, you had to run two ks with full gear, in so many minutes and that's the same in SAS as in commandos. You had to do a nine mile run and a twenty mile run. So you had your twenty miler and then you had things like map reading and

20:30 weapons, you had to load...all basic infantry things. When you got your green beret, then you could apply for parachute. Every commando had to be parachute qualified.

Was that scary?

What they do,

21:00 day one, you jump out of the back of an aeroplane, the only training they give you is how to release your parachute because what they do is they drop you into water. So when you jump off the back, the parachute deploys and then you land, and just before you get to the water you release your parachute. The basics of parachuting is exiting,

21:30 what happens mid flight and how you land. The reason they get you to jump on day one is, anyone that balks at the door is scared of heights and all the other training involves heights. When they teach you how to exit the plane they teach you how to exit C130s, which are 'Hercules',

22:00 'Chinooks' [heavy transport helicopter] and then you do exits out of C130s, see C130s have got side doors or you can go out the back. The good thing about side doors is that you can get two parachutists out there at one time whereas out the back there is only one. A lot of that is do with,

22:30 they teach you how to use your cape pulls. What the simulation for exiting the aircraft is they've got a flying fox and they teach you how to jump off and when you land they've got what they call a 'polish' tower but it wasn't working when we were there so we used what they call a 'fan' tower,

23:00 its like a big fan inside a cylinder and the heavier you are the faster it goes, so therefore it doesn't matter how heavy you are, everybody comes down at the same speed. There was this Maltese guy and he was actually scared of heights and he was bunched in the middle of all these guys

23:30 and they just kept pushing them off and he was that terrified they were going to kick him off the course. He used to hesitate at all these things.

Who was Steve Finnane?

Steve Finnane, when he joined the unit he was a QC [Queens Counsel] barrister and he represented Australia in Rugby Union.

24:00 Me and him were pretty good mates 'cause me being an Olympian and he knew a few of my mates and a fantastic guy. Believe it or not he applied for SAS and he went and did the cadre course. They said with his qualifications he could have been an officer being a QC and he eventually passed the cadre course and

24:30 some of them had two trips to Vietnam and three or four marriages.

What's the cadre course exactly?

The cadre course is what they call a selection course for the SAS. It's over so many weeks

- 25:00 and there is different things that they mark you on, like...psychology, your physical, your map reading, your bush skills, there's different components and they mark you on different levels. Because of this little graph, I actually got hold of one of these graphs, see I was in a recruit platoon,
- 25:30 teaching recruits and we were given this kind of stuff to work on our people. You could be the fittest guy but psychologically ...some people have thresholds and the SAS look for people that can go beyond that threshold. Like pain barriers and things
- 26:00 like that. They might take you for a ten k run and they might tell you that there is a truck at the end of the ten ks there is no truck there and they say, "Get back to base and be back there in such and such a time". A lot of people that are athletes they psyche themselves up for that ten k and put everything into it and get there
- 26:30 and they're completely shattered. You get those people that have got that mental toughness that can go that extra inch. It's like a certain breed of person, somebody that is a natural that doesn't have to train because he has just got that thing. Do you know what I mean?

I know what you mean. Did you do the cadre course yourself?

- 27:00 No I only went to commandos. See in 1983 I was nominated Commando of the Year which was...you've got all these people from different walks of life, barristers, solicitors, police, officers
- 27:30 and to be named Commando of the Year was, for somebody that left school at fourteen, I achieved what I failed as a Nasho. That's what I had to prove to myself. I actually said to one of the cadre staff, "I want to do the cadre course" and at that time I was in my thirties and he said, "Oh John, how many kids have you got?" and I
- 28:00 said, "I've got three" he said, "You want to go home and think about it. It's six months away from the family" and as much as I thought about it the family always comes first and that's the way it's always been.

Would they have accepted you at the age of thirty plus?

Oh yeah, there's a lot of mature, probably because of my background too.

- 28:30 There was a guy in one commando company and he was close to his forties and he passed the cadre course and they said what can we teach you, see he was an ex paratrooper from Great Britain and it was just the prestige of being in the SAS. At that age, see when you're young
- 29:00 and you're about nineteen or twenty and there's things that... .sometimes it's a bit hard to teach older people especially specialist skills. I was a bit lucky, for demolition I got a hundred percent, for small craft handling I got ninety-six percent, I left school at fourteen with no mathematics,
- 29:30 I had to get people to teach me how to do the formulas but its just practice and practice and ...

Were there many other Vietnam vets [veterans] in the commando course like yourself?

Yeah, yeah. About four were SAS guys that did 'tours' [of duty] and we had another guy he was

- 30:00 in the British Paras [Parachute Regiment] he did a tour of Ireland. We had two British Paras, and then we had a lot of policemen and prison warders. We actually had a guy that was a supervisor in Long Bay Jail and our sergeant in the commandos was a prison officer under him.
- 30:30 In the jail he was the boss but in the reserves it was vice versa. So you get all different walks of life in the reserves.

Why did you decide to do the reserves, you'd already been to Vietnam, you knew what real war was like, what motivated you to sign up with the commandos in 1978?

Just something else that I had to prove to myself.

- 31:00 I think that went down in my records because.....when I went into the commandos they got my army records and it was just a remark that I got from one of the OCs
- 31:30 because I don't know what that physical training instructor put down for me but I think he bagged me a bit because I failed the course. All they had to do was to give me a couple of more points and I would have been a PTI. I think I got a bit of a ragging from them and that would have gone in the report
- 32:00 and that OC he was an SAS and he went to Vietnam and he was army intelligence this guy so he would have got all my 'intel' [Intelligence] But see I proved them all wrong I ended up Commando of the Year. No it was just something that I had to.... I don't let things get me down.
- 32:30 What's happened to me now, I am starting to get on top of it.

We'll talk about now in a minute and how that's affected you now. There was one other

incident about a fellow falling off the Harbour Bridge, can you tell us about that, when you were in the commandos?

Actually we had a couple of bad, see I was in the mountaineering section and we used to do all out mountaineering down at Mount Arapiles they run all the courses down there.

- 33:00 See in commandos all the instructors were SAS and the mountain leaders were from SAS most of them had been to the Royal Marine Commandos and done their nine month course, so they were pretty good mountaineers. On this particular day,
- 33:30 it was the third last day in the course because the last day you do 'roping' off The Gap out at Watson's Bay, so we abseiled down the pylons, we get permission off the Council and so they set up ropes and we abseiled down the pylons and then,
- 34:00 this is at North Sydney, under the Harbour Bridge they've got walkways and what we do is were doing freefall ropes and what they do is tie a rope to a girder and the girder would be about that wide and then we'd abseil off and do a free fall
- 34:30 if you know what I mean. We set up this tension rope off the pylon and we were doing 'slides', you put cardboard under your shirts and lay on top of the rope and you have gloves on your hands and you put your boot over the rope
- 35:00 and you've got one leg down for balance and what you do is you slide down the rope and the cardboard stops you from getting burnt. If you want to slow yourself down you use your gloves, so you're on the rope there and if you fall off you hit the deck. What this 'wacker' did was, he was an officer and he thought, "Oh I'll put a bit of a stunt on" you know so what he's done is
- 35:30 he's got this rope about as thick as this and its 'manila' and manila has got a certain breaking strain and when you put knots in it and you add speed and velocity it reduces the breaking strength. What he's done he's wrapped the rope around his stomach and he's had it running down the inside of his trouser leg and around his boot so he's got
- 36:00 knots up the top here and he's got knots down around his boot and he's connected a carabineer on to that and he's hooked himself onto the rope so as he's sliding down on his belly he drops off and then all of a sudden he's dangling on the.... because down the bottom they have a couple of brake people there to stop you, so he's come screaming down
- 36:30 and he's probably about twenty metres from the end and the rope broke and you can imagine he's upside down doing about thirty to forty miles per hour and what he's done is as he's fallen he has kind of landed on one side of his body and shattered every bone in his body, his arm, chest, leg and he ended up,
- 37:00 he's got a permanent limp now. Went into severe shock and they didn't have any counselling in those days and the next day we were abseiling off The Gap. That's like war; you've got to keep going on. I actually took photographs but I never got the negatives back, so I haven't got any shots of it.
- 37:30 Then we were down in Mount Arapiles and we were doing this, a pitch is equal to probably about forty metres, and in Mt Arapiles they've got a six or seven pitch climb and up about the fourth pitch one of my mates fell off and he's
- 38:00 slammed into the cliff and he's smashed his head, he had a helmet on but the side of his head, it kind of caved in his skull and then they had to lower him down and because we were on the left hand side of him we had to come across and give assistance because they had to lower him and then we had to ...it's a hard process.
- 38:30 He ended up with iron pins coming out of his skull but he ended up going back and he did the same climb and he conquered it.

So what do you think it was that gave you Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? When did you become aware that you might be suffering from PTSD?

A lot of things happen to you and it was only

- 39:00 my mates that put me onto Vietnam Veterans, St Marys.

How long ago did they do that?

They did that in 2001.

Very recently?

Yeah.

So it was much earlier on that you started to get depression though?

You know when I told you that I went to the public service in '95 in '96 I left driving

- 39:30 because I felt something was happening to me, I couldn't concentrate on the road anymore. So I thought maybe a job change and I did twelve months security at the art gallery and... see a lot of things carry on with you in your lifetime and this.... what people have to realise is that being Aboriginal, we're nomadic people, we've got
- 40:00 to be on the move all the time. But being locked in a room like the boy's home and then the Horseshoe and then the art gallery, I ended up I got a career change and I went over to the juvenile justice and then I started locking boys into rooms. After twelve months it got too much, it got too much, so I went back to driving. What was happening was
- 40:30 I would work three days and I'd get three days off and that's how it worked. Having all them days off, I got too bored, one of my mates rang me up and said do you want to do a bit of part time driving so I went back to part time
- 41:00 driving and when I thought because you know what juvenile justice is, you've got kids in there was a big fight out at Cobham a little while back, there's a lot of stress there and while I was in there three of the boys that I had in there, the three of them are up for murder, they were teenagers when they were in Cobham.
- 41:30 **Did you find that very confronting because you were an Aboriginal boy yourself and knowing what they had to go through there?**
- We had one guy that tried to commit suicide, so we put him in one of the rooms with one of the other Aboriginal boys, and when they try to commit suicide they're on twenty-four hours watch and they have one person specifically just watching them.

Tape 9

- 00:32 **How did you start to realise that things were getting on top of you?**
- I was drinking more, I had mood swings, there was a lot of things.
- 01:00 Being a driver, I'm what you call a binge drinker. I can't afford to lose my licence, so I confine my drinking to Saturday and Sunday. Then I start all over again on Monday. See when you're working ten hours a day and there is a lot of other baggage that you're carrying from things in your life,
- 01:30 when you reach a certain age, you just can't handle it anymore. When I was talking to one of my mates on Anzac Day and telling him some of the problems I have, he said, "Listen, we need to get you to Vietnam Veterans St. Marys and get you to see a psychiatrist" and that's how they got me to see...I started of with Dr. Westrent at St John of God
- 02:00 and when he left, I got Dr. Smitman and she's really good. Because she was new and she was asking me different sort of questions, I found out, see my anxiety levels were very high and I said, "Listen I don't think them tablets are working" because I was talking to some Vietnam veterans
- 02:30 and they were in St John of God because their medication wasn't working. Sometimes you've got to get it changed, things like not sleeping well in the night, loss of concentration, forgetting things, drinking. I gave up smoking when I was in St John of God but then when I came out I thought,
- 03:00 "I'm not like these other blokes, I've got to get back to work." so I didn't have a drink, didn't have a smoke and then my doctor told me to get off the anti-depressants and then when I thought, "Oh yeah, I'm going to beat this." I got worse, I felt as bad.... the reason I went into St John of God was to get myself well
- 03:30 and get back to work and when they said, "Get off the anti-depressants." I thought, "Yeah I'm going to get good". Then [Doctor] Westrent rang, and see, he didn't make an appointment for me to go back and see him and he said, "I'll sign you off for two months at work." so I had two months to get over it.
- 04:00 When he rang me I was worse than when I went... see I was really good when I got out of hospital, you know I thought, "I've given up the drink and the smokes." and you then think that with all that positive training that you get you think you're going to be good. Then things just kind of went backwards.
- 04:30 When you start to have sort of panic attacks and you start the ball rolling over and over again. I went back and saw Westrent and he ended up putting me in a depression thing out at Penrith. I went there for three months, its only supposed to be
- 05:00 for eight weeks and what's that, two months and I was there like three or four months. I said, "When do I finish this?" and they said, "Oh when you think that you're better". It's like the film 'Ground Hog Day' the same thing over and like coming back to the cycle again. So I thought that's not working, then I got Dr Schmitman I told her and she put me on medication and I started to function
- 05:30 a bit better and then I got on the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service and I'm just starting to...I'm not

really a hundred percent but I can't survive without the pills. I'm on a fitness class with Diabetics Australia so that's going to take care of the fitness

06:00 side of things but I'm borderline diabetic. I've got a counsellor that's helping me control my drinking. I'm almost a teetotaler now.

And you think a lot of this is due to your military service?

When you talk to all the other vets, it's exactly the same thing.

06:30 There's a lot of guys suffer really bad PTSD because they saw a lot of horrific things but then you get all the other Vietnam veterans that still all suffer from Post Traumatic 'Anxiety' Disorder and they're all on pills

07:00 so there must be something upsetting the system or something that caused it. When you look at what happened to all them vets after the Gulf war, a lot of them committed suicide and

So you notice similar symptoms or similar stories amongst your fellow Vietnam veterans?

Yes. Then you read Reveille and things like that and you read about the desalination

07:30 plants on the ships were affected by the Agent Orange in the water and there has been a lot of sailors that have died prematurely even before they reach sixty and they're Vietnam veterans, so you're talking about chemicals. It's a combination of a whole heap of things.

How did your condition affect your family life?

08:00 I must admit I'm a quiet drunk, so I don't get abusive or want to fight people. If I'm watching TV I've got to have everybody quiet or I've got to turn it up or go and sit in

08:30 a room on my own, because people.... I can't concentrate on too many things going on. If a heap of people come to my room I go into the bedroom. I just can't concentrate on too many things.

Did it ever cause any breakdown between you and your wife or you and your kids?

My wife has actually done a few of the courses that

09:00 they run for Vietnam veterans and we're on a five day lifestyle, Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service are putting one on up at the central coast which is run pretty successful for Vietnam veterans. That's where the husband and wife, they learn skills how to cope with one another. There's a lot of

09:30 broken marriages from the problems that Vietnam veterans have and I've been fortunate that a lot of my mates have got good wives that stuck by them with all the problems they've got. Then you get the other guys that have been married two or three times.

10:00 How much support do you get from the system?

Well with the Vietnam Veterans I'm a TPI but what they call a TTPI, temporary TPI and I've got to be reassessed after eighteen months but that's put a lot of pressure on me

10:30 because you know that mentally and physically you can't get back to work and because of somebody that gives you a one hour diagnosis with all the reports from psychiatrists saying that you can't, you wonder how the system works. I'm thinking that because I say that I'm an ex-Olympian that they must think that I'm superman that's going to come back and come good.

11:00 Your body can only take so much and because there's a lot of other things that have happened to me, my wife had cervical cancer in 2000, me Mum died in 2000, we had the Olympics in 2000, me brother died under suspicious, you know a

11:30 drinking problem, there is a lot of other things in my life and your body can only take so much and its like an elastic band when you stretch it up it can't ever come back normal again. I can't function without tablets as much as I hate it, I tried to get off them and you get all these wackers saying,

12:00 "Oh no, that's too much." but when you can actually sit down and concentrate and talk to somebody rather than being a nervous wreck, that's the difference of the tablets. A lot of the veterans that I've spoken to we've all got the same sort of problems.

12:30 Have you found the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service helpful to you?

Oh they are great. They get me involved... I actually took a couple of guys abseiling with me being the way that I am I feel that I might forget something but all those years of not only being a mountaineer in the army, but also a social climber,

13:00 there little things that you don't forget. But the responsibility of teaching too many other people, I don't really want to do that sort of thing.

How have you celebrated Anzac Day over the years?

I usually go into town because I've got a few mates in there and we meet and have a few drinks and end up down, we used to end up down The Rocks

13:30 but because they stopped you from drinking on the street put barricades up, we go down to Circular Quay, a pub near there, Macquarie Place. They've got pipe bands and it's quite good, its like a family affair. My daughter ever since she was a young girl my Mum used to bring her in and then my sister brought her in

14:00 and now she brings herself in. Some of the other Vietnam Veterans their children come in and it's like one big happy family. Some guys you don't see for twelve months, I've got a mate that works for Vietnam Veterans St Marys and I see him every couple of days.

14:30 **What he's in, the counselling service or what?**

No he's a welfare officer in Vietnam Veterans St Marys, like I call in there every now and then. I've actually let my membership lapse but I've rejoined again because a lot of guys that I meet at fitness program they're all members there. They run activities

15:00 like You only see Vietnam mates on one day of the year but since I've been doing these different programs run by VVCS [Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service] because you're involved with other vets you feel like you're not on your own. Although we didn't serve together, it's like a mateship.

15:30 A lot of the fitness programs carry on with the vets, they still meet and some of the lifestyle programs, there's about four of the guys from the lifestyle programs on the fitness course, they're like old mates you go fishing together and this sort of thing. Remember that a lot of the people that you served with might have come from Western Australia,

16:00 South Australia and it's only the odd one or two New South Welshmen [resident of New South Wales] that you see on Anzac Day. A lot of your original mates unless there is one big reunion where you all meet, it's kind of forgotten.

You mentioned to me earlier in the day that there was a point when you were called up for national service where you volunteered to go to Vietnam for money

16:30 **or for whatever other reason there was, that one time when you stood up and put your hand up, any regrets about that now looking back on it?**

No not really, I just regretted, I went in the wrong unit. Maybe I might have been all my life I've been a part time player

17:00 like I reached the pinnacle of being a wrestler but compared to other countries, I was an amateur and being a nasho its like you are only a part timer and being in the army reserves, although I was I there for six years, I was only a part timer. Maybe if I'd have put a hundred percent into being one thing,

17:30 I suppose what I regret is, if I'd picked a different unit I might have been good at one thing. Well I suppose I was the best in wrestling in Australia but not in the world.

You're setting yourself pretty high standards there.

When you're talking about people wanting to win the gold medal that's what it like.

18:00 You think that if I could have had that extra training what would I have been like? It's something that you just look back on. 'Cause I thought if I would have had that little bit of extra training I might have beaten the Italian and got another place up. It's all looking back. I've got no regrets about Vietnam,

18:30 it was two years, it was an experience. The only failure I had was on the PTI course. I think that representing Australia in Munich kind of hit that on the head. When I was Commando of the Year in '83, that's not too bad

19:00 considering that most of our courses were all regular army run. I think I've done well but I'm just starting to get on top of what is happening to me now, 'cause I've got some good people looking after me, as long as you've got good friends and good wife and family and you've got somebody there to look after your health

19:30 because I mean, the longevity of Aborigines is probably sixty-five and I'm fifty-five. I hope I can beat that record. Being a Vietnam veteran and you look at the Reveille sometimes you think that if I don't get help now that could be me.

20:00 **Alright John I'll wrap this up in a minute but any final message you want to leave on the archive about your service or anything, I mean you've said a lot today but if there is any final thing you'd like to leave behind on the record.**

Like I said some of the best time I ever had was in the army reserves.

20:30 See I missed the mateship of Vietnam but because I was in a different unit, there was those physical challenges, it gave me something to excel in. Its like, with my life I've got to have one challenge after

another, I try not to let things beat me

21:00 but somehow I think that the clock's caught up on me, but I'm not letting it defeat me that's for sure.
That's really all I've got to say.

Thanks John.