# Australians at War Film Archive

## Ronald McRobert (Ron) - Transcript of interview

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## Tape 1

00:30 **Thank you very much for doing this. I'll just start with thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. We'll start with just a summary of your life from the beginning, and you could perhaps start by telling us a bit about where you grew up and your family.**

Oh, yes.

01:00 Where did I grow up. In many places.

**Just the details. Just roll off the places and where you were.**

Well, Basically I was born at Hurstville, New South Wales, Sydney. Good old Sydney. And early part was in Surry Hills. And then we went to the Eastern, what we used to call the Eastern Suburbs, which is say Randwick,

01:30 Kingsford, Maroubra and basically my boyhood was really in Maroubra.

**Who did you live with growing up?**

With my mother and stepfather.

**When did your father die?**

He died when I was about, the same year I was born. I was born September 22, he died in early December.

02:00 Tuberculosis, poor old bloke. 28.

**Did you have any siblings?**

No. Not fully, I was the only son there. I did have a half-brother later on, from my stepfather.

**So Maroubra. Take me on from there. Where did you live in Maroubra. What did you do?**

Oh. I lived near Royal Street, near Snake Park.

02:30 And I enlisted in the Army when I was, well, I was called up for the 'chocos' [chocolate soldiers, militia], when I just turned 19.

**Were you already working at that stage?**

Yes, I was working, I was working as a butcher of all things. Jobs at that time were pretty hard to get, Rob [interviewer].

03:00 **Chris [interviewer], actually.**

Chris. Sorry, Chris. Jobs were pretty hard to get and I fortunately got a job as an apprentice butcher, I suppose. I got into the army, of all things, as a butcher, and I'd only had a few weeks' experience as a butcher,

03:30 but I was good enough to do it, so that was it, and I was in that position, going around Queensland, I was on the Brisbane Line as a matter of fact, early 1942. The Brisbane Line, the Brisbane Headquarters was Toowoomba where the government and the authorities decided they were going to stop the Japanese from,

04:00 on the Brisbane Line and allowing them to come right into half of Australia and then deciding 'that's enough', they were going to stop them. Wouldn't have had a hope. And anyway, fortunately, they re-arranged their priorities and changed all that. That was in the '42s, and then we went further north.

**And so what was you role in the army at this stage? Were you still a butcher?**

04:30 Still a butcher, yes, in a supply depot, in supply units, Chris, and the supplying all the meat to the troops and picking it off the backs of trucks and carting it in, carting all these big hunks of forequarters into the makeshift camps, you know, and so forth and that was it, and then

05:00 fortunately coming back from, then going to the islands, Thursday Island and Horn Island, after so many, such a long time, I was fortunate enough to be in Redlynch, Redlynch camp, where I did an audition for a company, an

05:30 Aust Division Entertainment Unit, and was accepted by them, and I was lucky to get away because my Unit was already coming back, and going back to Sydney. So I was able to get into the army as an entertainer and gain a hell of a lot of experience.

**So where did you go as an entertainer?**

Well, around Northern Queensland for a start,

06:00 and then to New Guinea and to New Britain where I worked in various parts and that was on the, got to think of these parts, Wewak, out of the area and Jacquinot Bay, New Britain, Rabaul, and we were there for about eighteen months, I suppose,

06:30 all told, before we were able to come back home. There were so many troops still in New Britain that they were hanging on to us as long as they could to entertain the troops. There was only so much, so many boats able to bring them back and when we came back we came back in the holds of ships that had been filled with petrol

07:00 you know, and stinking of, terrible, terrible conditions. The army didn't care. It was OK for the big wigs to be up top, but if only the big wigs had been given some of the treatment that the poor soldiers had, they might have had a different view of army life.

**So how long did you spend in New Guinea all up?**

Well, all told it would have been, I suppose,

07:30 about eighteen months – New Guinea, New Britain.

**And that was during the end of the war and immediately after?**

Towards the end of the war, yes.

**How was the entertainment organised? Was it an army unit?**

Yes, yes. It definitely organised by, well, the person organising it was an ex-drummer, Jimmy Davidson, ex ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation], who was I suppose Colonel Davidson. He had,

08:00 we were based in Pagewood Studios, we used to call it Stalag 63, or something or other. That was, we would, so many others, well there were up to 20 to 30 groups who were out at one time, going all round Australia, particularly they were in the Middle East

08:30 and that area there, before Jimmy Davidson took over and it was quite a big show. I had the opportunity of working with Gracie Fields in Wewak, Cape Wom, and it gave me the idea, she was 43 at the time, she did the second half of a full show, 18, at least 18 numbers, in the open air, with flies falling into you mouth,

09:00 and all this sort of jazz you know, pretty hard. In front of 20 or 30,000 troops, pretty hard, and she was wonderful, and she was wonderful to us. I had the idea if I was good enough to be with her, I was good enough to be an entertainer, so that gave me the impetus to be a performer.

**So what happened when you were discharged from the army, then?**

Well, I came back and I was rotten with malaria, and I found I just couldn't work, and so

09:30 I used my nous and I got scholarships, under the Rehab Scheme, to go to the Con, the Conservatorium, to study theory of music, history of music, and singing and piano, and I got the whole box and dice. No trouble, I had talent. I was natural, I am a natural performer, as you will possibly see later on, blah, blah, blah and that,

10:00 well I needed that time to overcome the malaria, and my wife in her wisdom later on got me to have an operation. I had a bad nasal defect, I had a sixty percent blockage on my nose and I'm trying to sing, which made it rather difficult. I could sing like a bird in the islands, with the air's clear, but couldn't here. And so because of the malaria, I had problems but anyhow

10:30 I persisted and when I got stronger I did have that operation and that did help me somewhat. I've still got a weak nose, but that was another defect that I had. Apart from having a lousy brain, and all that sort of thing, I'm all right.

**So what happened when you graduated from the Con?**

I found

11:00 that I needed unfortunately another about six or seven years. I'd passed, I got degrees and so forth, but I found I needed another six or seven years to study repertoire. I wanted to be an operatic baritone, base baritone, and I could have been, but it would have taken to the age of thirty-five or something or other, and who was going to pay for that? I didn't have any sugar daddies or sugar mummies, or something or other, so I was buggered.

11:30 So I got some clerical jobs and so forth, and I did that for about eighteen months or two years and then I decided to, the entertainment field, the variety field, was the best field to get into and so I just persisted, contacted agents and got work. I did, initially, when the

12:00 Amateur Hour, one weekly contest, and I got work from some of the people from that. Jimmy Mack, oh, Tommy Mack was the cove who got me that work and I went on from there. I had to go into one agent, I think Ted James, about fifty times out of fifty two each week to see him

12:30 before I got one job. But you see, that's the sort of thing one had to do, this is the entertainment business. Even then, it was far easier then, it's harder now. But that will give you an idea. People that think they can just walk into the business are kidding themselves. They'll get it for a while and then they're "Goodbye, mate, you've had it".

**Did you stay in that industry for a long time?**

Yes, I made it all my life,

13:00 and together with working in television, you see, which is the same field, yes, I worked the variety field. I, what did I do, I did, I was an all-rounder. I was able to accompany, and accompany odd-bods that didn't have any music, or accompany people that had music.

13:30 I was a reader or a lugger. Reader (indicates eyes) or Lugger (indicates ear). I could just do that and that was natural, no trouble to me. But also, too, I was also a straight performer, soloist in my own right, singer-pianist and also, too, in that time I got an accordion and I became an accordion act, singing/accordion act.

14:00 But I was able to do all that work.

**So what was some of the longest gigs you had in those kind of fields?**

Longest gigs? Well, what was my longest. Well, television. I worked there for four, five or six years. That was teleline, but that was for Fortune Advertising.

14:30 I also worked on the ABC and Channel 7. Ten really, and they started off a bit later on, Ten, but I didn't get on there. But that was the main work that I did. But also, too, I worked, we did spot work for, I would have done spot work

15:00 which is like one-night-stands, and that could have been in all round Sydney, but it could have also been, there were Festival jobs in the country, being sometimes flown there and that sort of job.

**This was live performance? The spot?**

Oh, yes, live. Straight out live performances. What else did I do? I also worked the television,

15:30 but also too I did work in City Tatt's. And possibly…All told I was in City Tatt's later in life, I had to give the freelance field away because family were growing up. Our family arrived a bit late in life and I needed to give my wife a break and I got into, well first of all for about

16:00 five years in Menzies Ford Room. Monday to Friday, where I was singing and playing the piano, and also it enabled me still to do freelance work on Saturday and Sunday, would you believe and that went on for almost five years, and then, straight away from that without a break, I got a job in City Tattersall's,

16:30 and all told I was there, would you believe, for about twenty five years. But almost eleven years full time. Six nights a week for almost, well, as I said, eleven years. And then I suppose I was working one or two nights a week. I'd had a break down in between there, but I came back to City Tatt's, but all told it would have been about twenty five years there.

17:00 That was my longest period of work I suppose.

**Was your breakdown due to work or other things from the war?**

I think it was due to, yes, I was having a lot of trouble with malaria. And the tension for the work is very, very severe, Chris. Very severe, and I had a bit of

17:30 bitchiness with some people, I'll leave it go at that, and that was troubling me and I eventually was able to overcome that. But the work, keeping up a high standard is very, very hard, one is expected to be always on top. Solo performers, having breakdowns,

18:00 including those who have never had malaria, and they peg out. It's really quite, quite the norm, not not the norm.

**A very stressful job.**

Very stressful. Yes, it is.

**You mentioned your wife. When did you get married?**

We got married when I was 28. And we arrived back from our honeymoon and I had five pound, I think.

18:30 I'd just decided, I'd seen my wife at a church function. As a matter of fact it was at Bell's Ballroom. Now, this is interesting. What in the hell is Bell's Ballroom. That's OK. Bell's Ballroom was the one that eventually became South Sydney Junior Leagues Club.

19:00 That's why Bell's Ballroom is important. And I was doing a church dance and I met her and apparently I didn't give her a chance to get away from me. And I just decided she was it.

**What year was this?**

That was, oh . . .

**How long after the war?**

About five years after the war, that was '51. We were married in '52,

19:30 I think that was right.

**We'll check those details later. And you had a family?**

Yes, we've got two wonderful sons, right there. They were a long time in coming. Ten years, as a matter of fact, before we were blessed with our first son.

**Any grandchildren?**

Yes, we've got three all told. One from the youngest son and two from the elder boy.

20:00 **How old are they?**

They're, oh, Alexander would be 14, December 28th of this year, and the others are four and six at the moment.

**Well, that brings us up to the present generation. That's great. That's a fantastic summary. I'll just stop the camera for a moment. Let's go to the beginning now.**

20:30 **Let's talk a little about your childhood. In the early days you were in Hurstville. Do you remember much about that?**

Absolutely nothing.

**You moved into the inner city.**

Yes. Short Street, Surry Hills near Flinders Street.

**Surry Hills was a rough area in those days?**

Oh, yes. Very rough. That would have been '22 at that time, I'm pretty sure because I can remember being there till I was about

21:00 five or six, in that part.

**Do you have any particular memories of that time in Surry Hills?**

I can remember being, I had one of the uncles who was a World War I veteran, at that time. '22, had to be WW1 didn't it. He had been gassed, poor man, in France.

21:30 He was a, I suppose, whether he was on an allowance I don't know. But he had been a cab driver, would you believe, driving a cab, and I can remember being on the top of this cab and driving down Flinders Street sometimes and things like that, you know.

**What sort of cab was that?**

That was a horse and sulky, you know, and the big, up on top, and just a cab, a horse and cab.

22:00 That was great. I can also remember driving a flivver down the footpath in those parts.

**What's a flivver?**

A flivver is something like a small car, with a little adjustment to it. Sort of

22:30 between a bike I suppose, with a seat, it was just one of those little toys that one used to, in that time, you know.

**Do you have any other memories of what you did for entertainment in the inner city?**

Well, no. But I can remember that

23:00 even in the Depression times that I was already, my mother and stepfather were, would… often had people around because I could play the piano and accompany them, even at 10 or 11, and play whatever keys that they needed and tell them, well, just play it, and

23:30 so they'd be able to have singalongs and all that sort of thing, that I was already doing sort of music naturally when I was 10, 11, 12, I suppose.

**Can you tell me what role the piano played in family entertainment in those days?**

Well, it was all, even for me, and for others it was all singalongs, around,

24:00 that was all the entertainment, television wasn't there and radio wasn't, I can't remember radio then, you know. It may have been there. Oh, yes. Radio was there, yes, but it didn't have much input. The entertainment was definitely at home.

**Did your family always have a piano?**

Yes. Yes.

24:30 I think they did, yes.

**Can you tell me how those singalongs would work? Who would come? What would you do?**

Well. People would come from west of the Black Stump to be able to sing and play and participate, you know. It was, I think when someone could play the piano people, you didn't know from Adam, would turn up and they'd be there.

**Did you have any other musical relatives?**

25:00 My mother was really musical, she was Irish/Irish. Irish Catholic/Irish Protestant. But Irish/Irish and she could, she was a natural singer and she could play the piano too, for a while. She did learn for a few weeks and she was going well but couldn't keep it going. Money, money, money.

**What did your mother and stepfather do? How did they make a living?**

25:30 My Mother was a wonderful milliner, a hat machinist. Wonderful. And was able to work even in the worst of times. My stepfather was a carpenter, but often wasn't working. My mother supported the family so much. My stepfather was English/English and was

26:00 all concerned in putting on an act. And that's one of the problems with some of the poor English people.

**What do you mean by putting on an act? Was he . . .?**

Well, he was always the greatest, but he didn't, he could have taken the opportunity . . .

26:30 My own father apparently had land in Blakehurst when he died, and that was the best part, one of the best parts of Sydney, and the best part, dearest. There was only very little to pay on it and my mother I assumed, when he died, because Jack Thurgood was a carpenter, he'd be able to put something on that property,

27:00 a garage, and live in that until they could build. But my stepfather couldn't do that. That was beneath him, you see. He was just like that, so he was one, better to forget him. He was a no no.

**What about your father's family. Did you have any contact with them?**

My father's family? Yes. Yes. My real father.

27:30 They were McRoberts. That was a stumbling block for me. One of my uncles was an MM [Military Medal] in the war and he, I was waiting, he knew my mother and waited for a suitable time, to come down and ask her to marry him. This is from my aunts. If the time was right.

28:00 But unfortunately, my mother was only 20 and she took the first opportunity of marrying Jack Thurgood. He was possibly a good opportunity at the time, looked a good opportunity, but turned out a very poor opportunity in the long run. And anyhow, my dear

28:30 uncle, Jack McRobert, he was killed by a snake. He was in Northern NSW. I think he lost interest in himself and the opportunity and that was that, and that was a big blow for me, I found later on. But I did have a good relationship with a number of aunts and with another uncle too, who were there too.

29:00 **Were they the uncles you mentioned? Obviously they were there from the First World War?**

No, the uncle that I mentioned, Bob Pobby, he was from my mother's side. He was another one. But I had other uncles too, from that side, too. So I did have quite a few people from that side and from my father's, real father's side.

**How old were you when you moved to Maroubra roughly?**

29:30 I was definitely eleven years of age. I can remember it.

**And what was Maroubra like in those early days of the thirties?**

It was, I don't think it's changed that much, really, now. I still think it's a… we got sick of that area because it's, after,

30:00 it's virtually a treeless area, and the silly idiots who were our forebears, cutting down all the trees, and that would be, and then making Paddington and Surry Hills just like all the parts of London, building them up close or something or other, and all those terrace places. Ridiculous,

30:30 without taking into account that this was an entirely different country. It took them ages to realise it, but they eventually did, and fortunately, we and the older people grew up and retained the trees in the northern suburbs, and that's why I'm so glad that we live in these parts and not in the, well virtually treeless Maroubra.

**How was the landscape in Maroubra in those days? Was it built up? Was it . . .**

31:00 It was, it's still a treeless and uninteresting compared to this part which we've got.

**It does have a beach, though?**

Oh, yes, it's a beautiful beach, yes, yes. A beautiful beach. We used to swim in it so much. It's a beautiful beach. It should have had far more vegetation.

**Was the beach a focus of your recreation in those days?**

31:30 Yes, I used to swim there as much as I could and also Long Bay, as we called it, which is Malabar. It was changed because of the sinking of the Malabar on the western side of the Malabar.

**What would you do when you went to the beach in those days?**

Well, swim and surf. Swim and surf. Just a matter of swimming in Long Bay, as it was there.

32:00 **Was there a Surf Lifesaving Club?**

Yes, they were all there, but they weren't that very prevalent. Not as prevalent as they are now, I'd say. But they were there. I can remember seeing the reels out and the lifesavers there. It was all males then. Not girls. The girls got a go later on, thank goodness. Give the girls a go, eh?

32:30 **Where did you go to school when you living in those parts?**

Mainly to Daceyville Public School. We were in Maroubra but it was fairly close to Daceyville, and I happened to initially go to Daceyville from a part where I was in Kingsford and I continued when I was eleven to go to Daceyville Public School and I went to Randwick High

33:00 for Third Year, and gave it away. In Third Year. I was an academic type, but I just couldn't study. There was a bit of trouble with the unhappiness between my father and mother. You probably want all this stuff, do you?

**Yes, tell us whatever you like.**

Unhappiness. Well there was absolute fighting

33:30 and mayhem and so forth and I had to get in between them sometimes and stop them fighting and things like that, and once I did get in trouble, a knife in my hand, you know, and my mother did stop then. She wanted and I probably don't blame her, because my mother, my stepfather was unreliable and playing, carrying on, you see.

34:00 **How did that affect you? Did it turn you into a tough young man?**

How did it affect me? Well, I was unable to study. My stepfather would stop me from reading books. Because he didn't read books and my mother didn't help me in that regard. I wasn't more than 13 and then she wants me to keep on studying. And I thought how the hell can I keep on studying when you haven't helped me in the first place?

34:30 So I got into dead end jobs and so forth and I left as soon as I was 14 in Third Year and got dead end, hopeless jobs, you see.

**Were you a slight build as a 14 year old?**

I was, yes.

**So were you able to stand up to your stepfather, at all?**

Well, in a way, he… I stood up to him but I was intimidated by him,

35:00 but I still stood up to him. I can remember him saying when I was eleven or twelve. "You don't does

what I does, you does what I tells ya!" That was his, that was a standard dialogue that he had, so what sort of a chance did I have with a chap like that?

**Did you do what he told you?**

No. No. I just, and also,

35:30 I didn't do, my mother was a bossy Irish/Irish person, who wanted, I would have finished up a bloody queer if I'd taken notice of her and so I just said, "Yes, Mum," and did what I thought.

**Why do you say that?**

Why do I say that? Because she was domineering, and Irish people can be domineering.

36:00 You've just got to read McCourt's book on the Irish, how the mother was the backbone of that family and the father was the drinker and the no hoper and so forth, but poor man, he probably couldn't get work, and it was probably symptomatic of so many men that couldn't get work there, and so forth. But thank goodness

36:30 for the women that kept those families going. But my mother was of that ilk. But she just wanted to control me absolutely and she just wanted control, control, control which just wasn't on, but fortunately I could see that.

**So how did you react to that?**

By saying "Yes, Mum." And doing what I though was right.

**Sounds like you turned into a bit of a troublemaker in your family in a way?**

No, no. I wasn't.

37:00 I was the one in between the two. I sorted out the troubles for them. I was the peacemaker and even my younger brother, my half brother came along when I was 14, 15 and I was still the one who was able to, I suppose, to sort things out. Because if I'd had half a chance, even 10, 11 or 12, controlling their finances,

37:30 they would have done very well, but they were no hopers with handling money and I was the one that could have really helped them if they'd listened to me. They listened to me to a certain extent.

**Do you want to tell us about the time you got a knife in your hand?**

Oh, well that was when we lived in Kingsford and that caused my, I think it was the cause

38:00 my mother and stepfather decided they had to do something to try and get on with one another. And they'd been living in 539 Anzac Parade Kingsford and they took, decided to get me over to Adelaide to relatives in South Australia and I was over there for a couple of months in the school holidays, which was a great break for me and where I went

38:30 to my uncle, was a head of the Remounts, which was the horse Remounts, which was still going then, that was in the early '30s. And we went around the Mount Lofty Ranges for a couple of weeks, and I was a lousy rider when I started off but a very good rider by the time I finished you see. In the saddle seven days a week for two weeks, it was, you see one soon learns to ride and

39:00 it was a great experience for me. When I got back I found they'd moved to Royal Street, Maroubra. They were making a change and so forth, getting away from the place, possibly to a change in their attitudes, and that worked for a while, but I was unable to, I had no intention of doing regular study and so forth.

39:30 I just couldn't study under those conditions of fighting and so forth. Because it was just impossible.

**Was the incident with the knife what sent you to Adelaide, or did that happen when you came back?**

No, that happened whilst, before, that was in 539 Anzac Parade, Kingsford, and that was one of the reasons, I would say, why I was sent to Adelaide.

# Tape 2

00:30 **So when you say you couldn't study any more, what did you decide to do?**

Well, I just went out and got whatever jobs I could get. I remember I worked for a jewellery company. In Sydney, who had headquarters in Railway Square. For the life of me I can't remember their name, but they were, the owner

01:00 of that turned out to be a big racehorse owner. I can't remember his name.

**And you were doing what in the jewellery?**

I was just a clerk. A clerk, and I got all various jobs like that and I also worked for a crowd in Rosebery,

01:30 or somewhere, DH Solway. It was a dead end job and so forth and things like that, and then I eventually got a job with a Jack Thomas of Pagewood, a butcher, and there I was going great guns and I was called up for the government six months training course,

02:00 or two months or whatever it was. And then they decided I was in the army and that was it and I... So I decided at nineteen I just had to get my mother's permission to join the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. Well I may as well have joined the AIF as been, as been just a

02:30 National Service character, you know, and I thought that carried better, not better standing, but I just made an effort to, well just to join the army.

**The war had started by that stage.**

Oh, yes. That was, the war started, the war had been going in Britain and so from '39.

03:00 The war started in the East, with Japan, in early December '41.

**What stage did you join the CMF [Citizens Military Force]?**

Oh, I joined the 29th of the twelfth, '41, just a couple of weeks after Japan entered the war.

**So when the war in Europe started you were in the butcher's shop, is that right?**

Yes. Only for about nine months there

03:30 and I was only a butcher, straight out butcher, for about, working a few hours a week, for five or six or seven weeks, but I as a better butcher than a lot of the country people, would you believe that? They used to hack meat and I was even taught quickly how to cut meat.

**In the period of your teenage years, before the war had broken out, this was the Depression.**

Yes.

04:00 **Was it a difficult time?**

Yes it was very difficult. I think I mentioned before to Brett, mentioned before, anyhow, I can remember that in Kingsford, I would give our poor dog Jack, I called him Jacko after a bit of funny business on my part, called him after my stepfather, so I called him Jacko.

04:30 Whether it's a term of endearment or otherwise, I leave you to judge, so I called him Jacko. It's hardly an endearment was it? And I would give him quite secretly a biscuit, and it was the last biscuit on the plate, and that sort of thing, so things were tough, yes.

**Did you stay with your mother and stepfather after you'd left school?**

05:00 Yes, I did stay with them, but fortunately for me, the army came along so I was able to get away from them. Fortunate!

**Did your status in that family change when you were out working on your own?**

My status? Yes, well I did become more independent and my

05:30 mother sort of lost it, I think she lost a sort of a backbone, because I was able to bolster her to a certain extent, but then again he, the stepfather got a job fairly quickly services, not the army service

06:00 but it was sort of a civilian service, and that was as a carpenter, and that involved going, or he finished up around Queensland way, building hospitals and so forth, so he was away a bit so I think my mother had a break then, true.

**Did you mother ever consider leaving that marriage?**

Yes. She did, but unfortunately she put it to me to leave him when I was about fourteen,

06:30 but I didn't think it was my right to tell her to leave him. Because my mother, in all was far likely to blame me if things went wrong because she left him. So I said, "It's up to you to decide," and my mother was indecisive and she just didn't know her own mind.

07:00 I would have left the blighter if it had been me but I didn't think it was my right to tell my mother to leave him. After that the son came along, another, her second son, who's the first son of my stepfather. No, not the first son because he'd already had an illegitimate son

07:30 on the ship when he was coming over, which came out, which was another thorn in the side, you know, so there's some ducks and drakes there.

**What happened to your half brother?**

He's still going fine. He's Harold Thurgood. He was considered, he's a bush lawyer, but he represents

08:00 people that need representing, and he's able to represent them very well. He's had certain, a certain deal of trouble in that he's fought the police on the breathalyser, and he's beaten them a number of times. He was called the Radar Expert, Harold Thurgood.

08:30 He has been in the papers, he's a bit of a firebrand, but he's a very brainy chap who has my mother's brains, not my stepfather's brain, although my brother had a fine grandfather. The grandfather on my stepfather's side was a very fine man, who told me,

09:00 this is my step grandfather, who told me when I was about nine and a half, in a Cambridgeshire accent, "Don't take any bloody notice of him, Ron, he hasn't got any bloody sense. He's too argumentative." Did you get that?

**Uh huh. It's a big difference to the language your stepfather used.**

Yes. He was a very placid, and he was disappointed in his son, very disappointed.

09:30 **You mentioned your mother was Irish/Irish. Does that mean she was Catholic/Catholic?**

Catholic/Irish. Catholic/Protestant rather. I've got to get it right.

**What was her role in the church? Anything?**

Well, yes. She was Protestant from the church in Holy Trinity, Kingsford, which is the church right on from Bell's Ballroom.

10:00 The church had the chance of buying Bell's Ballroom, but unfortunately they didn't. They thought it would be too much trouble for them to control it. But now they've got a big massive building almost on top of them. So that's how stupid they were. But my mother was in that church, that was the Anglican church there. But on the Catholic side, my, was Monaghan, and

10:30 Monaghan was really Catholic – really Catholic, Catholic, Catholic.

**Who was Monaghan?**

Monaghan was my grandfather, and my mother was a born Monaghan, who became, the name was changed to Cobby, to Cobby for the Protestant side,

11:00 she became a Cobby.

**So her father was Protestant and her mother was . . .?**

No, the father was Catholic. The father was Catholic Monaghan.

**OK, I understand. Did she have a particularly strong religion?**

Well, I think she tried to but I think my mother was always mixed up with the fact that she was unhappily married. That was her chief trouble

11:30 and she'd bring it on to, unfortunately I had to face that music, you know. The being unhappily married. She was unhappy.

**Do you look back at your childhood as being an unhappy time?**

Well, happy for a while, but mostly unhappy, yes, because it was two factions. A man who just didn't have any guts or go,

12:00 and a mother who had to work, not only to support me, but to support him, because she was working so much of the time that he wasn't working. He was president of the Unemployed Association of Maroubra, but didn't work himself. He was that sort of person.

**How did that difficult childhood form you as a person?**

12:30 Well, it made me very quiet and subdued, I suppose, yes. It's taken me a while, it's taken me until, It's taken me a while until I got my. . . what really got the Irish back into me was when my name was changed back to McRobert. This was in '77.

13:00 We had been overseas in '76 with our boys, three months overseas in the November, December, January holiday breaks, which you know, the winter time over there, in England and Europe, and we went to, amongst other places, oh, got to remember,

13:30 to the capital, Edinburgh, and we saw where a lot of my forebears had passed away. Three of them were pilots, Spitfire pilots. They were Macs, McRoberts, and they had lost their lost, they'd been killed and

14:00 another one had been killed, and I found out later on that they were the hierarchy of the McRoberts

clan, and I found out from some New Zealand relatives, New Zealand aunts, of whom I was the head of the clan here, in New Zealand/Australia, they said that it was such a shame

14:30 that my name was still Thurgood when I was up in the class, up in the clan, and so many had lost their lives and anyhow it gave me, when the boys arrived, it gave us the impetus to realise that to change the name and so forth, which we did do,

15:00 with the boys approval, because they knew that Thurgood was just the stepfather's name and McRobert was my birth name. So they wanted to straighten that out, so that was straightened out. So that really, '77, that really brought up my pucker on the Irish bit and gave me, I think, more substance to speak up and to realise what I was.

**And yet?**

15:30 Otherwise I'd have been a bit of a sad sack, I think.

**As you said, you were a quiet young man and yet you were a talented performer, at the same time. What sort of performances did you get up to in your early days?**

Well, I must tell you, how do people become performers? Well, even Russell Crowe, amongst others, admits being a shy person. I mean so many people, my friend, admit in their honest dialogue, to being really shy.

16:00 It's not the Cassius Clays or Muhammad Alis that are bombastic and so forth, and he's a proper no-hoper that cove, as far as I'm concerned, and I know too much about him, say that, and realise that they are shy and have to overcome it. And that's what I had to overcome too. And it's a natural progression, from being a shy person to becoming a performer.

16:30 **How did you control that sort of desire and outlet in your younger years when you were growing up?**

Well, I had, because of problems at home, I did have a speech defect, I was a very big stutterer. And how did I control that? I had to gradually think about it and breathe,

17:00 breathe, breathe deeply and study about it and work it out for myself, how to stop stuttering, and that was, I suppose, mind over matter, and I did eventually control it, but it was a problem, a problem from my shyness but also from the troubles from my mother and father there.

**Did you mother and father make you want to get out**

17:30 **into the world? Did you have ambitions to escape that situation?**

Well, no, I felt responsible for my mother, because I wanted to help her, because she hadn't had a fair go, and I wanted to support her, even though it was bedlam and, but I had to go out when I was, when I came into the army, and when I came back I was rotten with malaria and so my mother just had to look after me.

18:00 **What did you want to be as a young man?**

I decided, didn't know. I could have been, I did Rehab Courses, and I was told I could do, become a solicitor, or lawyer, anything like that, because I had that ability, but I didn't know if that appealed to me,

18:30 possibly I could have done that, but I found that I, after the war, that I couldn't work with malaria so I decided quickly that I would study singing and music and give myself a chance, a few years study, and then see what I could do. So I did that.

**Just talking about before the war for a moment.**

19:00 **Did you have an opportunity to study at the Conservatory before you went to war?**

Yes, I believe I would have, from Daceyville, I would have been given a chance to apply for the scholarship there, because they realised I was very talented and did give me that opportunity to study, but my mother, "Oh, you can't make anything of music," or something or other, "there's nothing in that." So she wouldn't allow me to,

19:30 possibly didn't want me to go to the Con, to get away from home. She wanted to control me.

**But also it was the Depression.**

It was the Depression, but she didn't want me to be too far out of her sight.

**How did the people at Daceyville know you were talented, then? You were shy. Did you perform at school?**

Well, I was also in Cubs and Scouts and going to bivouacs, and things I can remember

20:00 at Pennant Hills, we used to go to Pennant Hills there, and we used to have singalongs, and I can

remember two or three times going there and all of a sudden, they were singing, all of a sudden they would stop singing and I would find myself there either singing, for quite some time they would just listen to me singing and not make any reference to it,

20:30 but they just allowed me to sing.

**What sort of songs would you sing in those days?**

Oh, it was stuff that would have been the current pop songs I suppose. I can't remember what they were. But also, too, I was in the choir at Holy Trinity, but even at 11, 12, 13, I wasn't given the chance

21:00 to be a soloist, because we had youngsters, 14, 15, 16, whose voices hadn't, somehow or other hadn't changed, so they were still the soloists. So I didn't get the opportunity to be a soloist there, but I had the opportunity to study, so that was good, so I was singing there, and I was playing, I'd been taught the piano up

21:30 till I was 11, 12, 13, and so forth.

**You mentioned you were in the Cubs. How did you feel about the British Empire, growing up?**

I suppose I felt very, very British at that time. And I had a stepfather who was very, very English and very much down on the Irish. I thought

22:00 these horrible Irish people, what have they done to England, and so forth. Then I eventually found out what the horrible English people had done to Ireland, too, you see, so I, eventually it was a 'wake up, mate', you know.

**So growing up you felt more English than Irish. Can you explain that to us?**

Well, how I felt? My mother didn't mention Ireland that much to me, but it was my dear aunt,

22:30 who brought in, my aunt from my father's side, real father's side, who mentioned the Irish side. The Irish/Scottish, side. I'm Northern Ireland, you see, that Irish side. So, she made me aware of Ireland, and made me think about it and so forth, which I did do, and too,

23:00 when we got over to Ireland, I was very pleased to see, we went to a place, it was in Dublin, it was O'Shea's, and it was a real, right in the centre of Dublin, and apparently in 1913, 11th November, 1913,

23:30 I think it was, that the Irish Republican Group met there to discuss the Republic, but that was the 13th November, 1913. The war started in August, 1914, as far as England was concerned, so that wasn't heritage or trouble, or terrorism or anything like that, they were entitled to form that particular republican meeting,

24:00 and amongst the people I can remember there was the Great O'Reilly, that's the only name that I can remember there, but it made me think, 'These horrible Irish', according to the English, 'what they'd done.' And they were trying to become a Republic long before the war started, so they weren't terrorists, or anything like that, and so it gave me peace of mind

24:30 as far as Ireland was concerned.

**Well, what was your knowledge of that First World War?**

Well, I can remember my poor uncle who, my mother sometimes looked after him, he was continually in trouble with sickness with the being gassed, and really, he'd often have to go into

25:00 Randwick Military Hospital then at the time, which was still going, now it's Concord, but then it was Randwick Military Hospital, and we'd often go and see him, poor man, and that was one of the things that brought it home to me that it was the war, the gas, the Germans gassing the troops in the front line, and he was one of the people that got that.

25:30 They never mentioned the war, and so forth. My other, Jack, whom I'd mentioned before, Jack McRobert, who was waiting to ask my mother to marry him, he was in that war too, but he apparently escaped the gas. He had been in Gallipoli and France, too.

**How did you know about this growing up, if they didn't talk about it?**

Well, I knew about it

26:00 because of seeing my, this poor uncle of mine really in trouble, and poor man, he would, what he would do, he'd become a binge drinker. He'd take so much money, so much allowance, he couldn't work, and then he'd go and have a bender, have a binge, and this is where I could understand people, later on,

26:30 doing binge drinking, because they had reason. He wasn't doing it because he was weak, he was doing it because he was so bloody sick with the troubles of the gassing that he needed, that was a respite for him, and so he did that continually, you know. And I can remember him coming,

27:00 gradually getting home, when it was trams at that time, in the '40s and 50's, trams till 1961, going

along Maroubra, 1961 going to Maroubra. That's a memory bit for you, early 1961, going to, walking home. We had a long way to walk from the tram stop to Royal Street Maroubra,

27:30 and crawling on his hands and knees to get into the house. So I can remember the plight that these, not only him, but so many people must have gone through. That made me realise what a terrible time they must have had.

**Did you think that war was a terrible thing because of this? How did you think about war?**

28:00 Oh, yes. I knew it was a terrible thing, but I realised right after Japan entered the war, and one just had to be in it. I know so many, and I had the brains to have been able to escape it, by getting into the Reserved Occupation in the early part, before I was called up, but I couldn't, just couldn't do it.

**Was it something that you thought about when you became a butcher, that it was a Reserved Occupation?**

No, it wasn't a Reserved Occupation,

28:30 but I knew I could get into a Reserved Occupation, I know one chap who'd already gone through as a butcher and left and got into a Reserved Occupation as a munitions boxer and was able to escape the call up. I could have done that, could have easily done that, I was told to do it. But I couldn't do it, that wasn't my style to do that.

29:00 **I had it in my head that butchery was a reserve, but obviously you joined the army as a butcher so I had it wrong.**

No, not at all.

**What were you doing at the time when news of the war came through? Can you remember hearing about the war starting?**

The, starting in Japan, or starting in Europe?

**No, 1939, starting in Europe.**

Oh, (cough)

29:30 that's the thrombocytosis. It leaves one with a cough, the bloody thing.

**If you need to stop and have a cough, you can feel free.**

No, that's all right. Well, I think I was in one of those dead end occupations, but for the life of me I can't remember. I was only 16 or 17, you know.

**So, did it make you think about going to war at the time, when you were in one of these Reserved Occupations?**

30:00 I wasn't even in a Reserved Occupation.

**Sorry, dead end occupations.**

No, no, I was just trying to better myself all the time, you see. But too, I do remember that I was an avid reader, and I can remember, this comes back to old Field Marshal Blamey, a proper no-hoper. Why? Because, I bet these people cut this out. Why, because he was the, in charge

30:30 of the Victorian Police Force about 1936 or 1936, the one in charge, mind you, and I can remember an item in the Herald. I think it was the front page, '36 or '37, or may have been '38, anyhow, where he was caught in the street in the nuddy, he'd been trying to get away from his own forces. He'd been in one of his brothels,

31:00 one of his brothels. So he was dismissed, he resigned, as Commissioner of Police. And yet only so many years later he's in charge of the army. That should never have happened. And the authorities can have a go at me if they wish.

**No one's going to, I think the knowledge of Blamey's other affairs,**

31:30 **it was quite wide spread amongst the troops in the Second World War.**

Also, too, later on, I know I wasn't in the Middle East, but I know Lady Diana was in charge of the brothels in the Middle East. That's the Lady Diana. I think I've got the right name. She was the wife. So they were having a merry old time running the brothels in the Middle East, so they were a nice twosome, weren't they?

32:00 **But, before you joined up you wouldn't have known much about Blamey, but did you know much about the army?**

No, but I had my doubts about the status of the army. And I knew that so much of the, so many of the people that got into the army in the early part were often no-hopers that became captains and majors and colonels and so forth because of whom they knew

32:30 so that there was a lot of, a lot of trouble. I can remember once I was on the so-called Brisbane Line, we were doing supposed trench warfare and we were given a job of training, of stopping one particular group from coming down. You would consider this part,

33:00 well it was something like New Guinea, it was rough country, well you're in a part and you've got to camouflage yourself and be still and stop an approaching people from coming in. Well, the approaching people had my captain, he would eventually become a major, would you believe, coming down to take over our particular parts. Well, I was able, somehow or other, I had four or five or six, people,

33:30 I just took charge, I was the top private, I suppose. I just took charge and organised these particular people, and I challenged them and the other crowd couldn't see me and I stopped that 'war', because by taking over the captain and so forth, and the other troops. And because they hadn't seen me. And so that was it.

34:00 And rightio, that cove was quick to leave that unit. Well, it didn't do me any good because I'm still the private, you see. That's what I thought about the, I thought what a lot of no-hopers they were in that, amongst the army to be controlling it.

**How did you feel to be called up to the CMF?**

Well, I just accepted it because I realised it was on

34:30 and I just had to take it like a man, a nineteen year old man and take whatever happened, you know. And then when my mother realised I was in the army whether she liked it or not that she may as well allow me and signed me up for the AIF. She had to sign me up because she was my major premier partner, premier one in control.

35:00 **What were your reasons for wanting to join the AIF as opposed to the militia?**

Well, I thought I had to make an effort, and the militia might not have been called to go overseas, and I thought that I should go overseas.

**How long were you in the militia before you were able to join the AIF?**

Well, I suppose it might only be about four, five or six months.

35:30 As soon as I got permission.

**Was there any discrimination against the CMF at that time?**

Only a little bit, only a little bit.

**What sort of things would happen?**

Well, we, for instance, when one joined, when the CMF, when the troops were called up and we went to the Show Ground, we would have the,

36:00 going to the Show Ground from, walking from Moore Park up to the Show Ground, we would have the well, they weren't necessarily soldiers, we would always get the "You'll be sorry, you'll be sorry," but that might have been for the AIF people too. But, "You'll be sorry" that was a standard thing to soldiers just joining up, "You'll be sorry."

36:30 **Can you tell us about that in more detail? You went down to Moore Park to join up, is that right?**

No, we went to, when I was first in initially, on the 29th December, it was at Kensington Oval, that was for the, for my particular group that were joined up.

**Can you describe what happened when you joined up?**

Yes, well, I know I can remember,

37:00 and this has been lost. I know I was classed, I know as an A3, because of my nasal trouble which I think I mentioned beforehand. They did notice it, and I was told in no circumstances could I be sent overseas. Anyhow I didn't say anything about that. But later on I found out that

37:30 that had been omitted from the records and that didn't show, so that's something that the people might want to, if their game enough to have a look at it, that the A3 run really showed, because it definitely showed from memory, this is from my memory, and this was in the enlistment period.

**So there were medical tests. What happened on the enlistment day?**

On the Enlistment day we were just accepted and allowed to go home and we were called up.

38:00 I can't remember if it was the 31st, or the 1st, but we were called up after, perhaps on the 1st or the 2nd, around about that time, we may have been given a couple of days before we were called up to go to the Show Ground.

**Is this the AIF or the CMF we're talking about here?**

I'm talking about the CMF.

**And what year was that? 19?**

That was '41, '42.

38:30 **Start of '42.**

'42, yes.

**Was there a particular tension in the air, do you remember joining up? Japan had just entered the war?**

Yes, there was tension. The, quite early in the piece in early January, February, March, what I can remember, so many people, this is the civilians would even, because they were scared out of their wits,

39:00 would even go as far as, would you believe, as far as the Blue Mountains to get away from the Japanese and all this sort of jazz. They were, so many people just had butterflies in their stomach, it just was amazing. And people left, Rose Bay and so forth, people could have bought all those units for a song

39:30 in Rose Bay on the beach, you know, for next to nothing, and things like that, if they'd wanted to. But it was mayhem. People were, so many people were scared and so many people were just digging in, but that's, I suppose that's people.

# Tape 3

00:30 **Ron, you mentioned that you were an avid reader. Can you tell us about early influences and books?**

Yes, yes. Well, when I was given a bit of a go I was reading, yes, well, Rafael Sabatini's Tales of the Scottish [actually Spanish] Main, you know. The Errol Flynn books,

01:00 do you know all those books? And they were part and parcel of the things that were going on then. I was reading Geoffrey Farnwell books on English in the 18th and 19th century, The Broad Highway, The Amateur Gentleman. See I can even remember the names. Amongst other things, I found them very interesting,

01:30 reading into the style of life of the 18th and 19th century people. I was interested in all sorts of things. The Sabatini books were blood and thunder and so forth and they were very interesting. Also reading Newman's, book by Newman, can't remember his name, but he was one of the top MI5 persons at the time and I was reading all his books.

02:00 I can even remember reading a chap by, My Country by a Chinese chap whose name I forget but he was a current book. I was reading general literature that was 12 or 13, wanting to improve myself, improve my knowledge.

02:30 **Was there an element of escape from the family circumstances?**

Oh, definitely. Definitely, yes. Unfortunately for me, my silly stupid stepfather tried to stop me from reading books and so forth and that gave me the idea that he was stopping me from doing that, how in the hell could I study further once I'd reached 14 or 15. So that was the catalyst that stopped me from studying further.

03:00 Unfortunately. I wanted to study but knew I would go crazy trying to study in that household.

**It seems extraordinarily heavy literature for a 14 year old. How did you get on to that?**

Well, I went to the library and got the books, and I had been given some books. I'd also written

03:30 books on the Indian massacres and so forth in America, and general works, also as I mentioned before, quite an avid reader of the paper, that's how I got on to the old general's business, you see, and how I can remember it, because it's just in my memory. I've got a good memory.

04:00 I can remember hundreds of thousands still, of tunes, just in my head. I've got a natural memory.

**Did you keep a diary at the time?**

No. I didn't.

**You didn't?**

Probably just as well.

**Were you writing anything yourself at that stage?**

No, it’s just all in my memory. You see, my memory’s pretty good, even for 80.

**Moving a bit forward again, I was wondering about**

04:30 **how you were finding early military life, in the military discipline. How did you react to the army?**

Well, I realised that I just had to take it and make the most of it. I absolutely hated queues, and the queues meant you had to queue up for practically anything, lunch, dinner or Q forms.

05:00 I hated all that razzamatazz. But I realised that I had to, I’m an individualist but I just had to subjugate myself and take it, and realise goodness knows when I would get out of it, but here’s looking forward to the time when I was free again, and so when the opportunity came for me to get out of the army, I got out as quickly as I could. I could have gone

05:30 to Japan, and easily become a corporal or a sergeant or something or other, because of my experience and I had the ability and know-how but no thanks, I’d had enough of the regimentation of the army. You see, even as a performer, I’d been a solo performer, because I didn’t want to rely on the

06:00 other people, and I couldn’t rely on them in the early part because I had troubles myself with sickness. But I knew that I could control that, but I knew with these younger odd-bods, who were drinkers and druggies, in the main, they were wild people at those times, thinking they were smart, who unfortunately

06:30 were knocking themselves about. So I made myself a solo performer, and possibly I would have gone further if I’d joined a group. Or organised a group. So many wanted me to become a groupie but I just couldn’t take the unreliability of other people. I could be reliable even with malaria or even Dengue Fever. Come hell or hight water, I would do it,

07:00 and I’d get sick later on, you see, but that’s me, but other people even with drink and so forth. They were no-hopers.

**Early army life in the militia. It’s not exactly creating an environment for encouraging creativity. How did you find outlet for your creativity when you joined the militia?**

We just had to do what was being done at the time, and

07:30 I was quickly accepted and put into a supply unit at North Sydney depot, which is still going I think, opposite the park there. North Sydney depot, and put into that park – I can’t remember the name of it - and became a butcher and so forth, and I had to do the butchering in that unit.

08:00 **What creative outlets did you have outside your military life?**

Oh, virtually none, but later on in the islands and so forth, and in the other parts once we were settled, it was, there were definitely, there were concerts and I was always one of the kingpins of the concerts, because I was a singer/pianist, you see, and able to play for other people so

08:30 I was a king pin of those shows and so forth, yes.

**How often did you practice in those early periods 1939, or 1940, ‘41 when you joined up?**

Oh, didn’t practice, just played. There wasn’t any practice.

**How did your mum feel about your joining the army?**

Well, she couldn’t do anything about it so that was that

09:00 and when it became time for me to join the AIF, she couldn’t do anything about that, so she agreed that she may as well just allow me to join.

**Can you tell us a bit about your basic training in the AIF?**

It was a very, very little, really. Because we were quickly, I was put into a supply unit and righty-o,

09:30 we were… Then later on we were joined various groups and went to Horn Island, Thursday island, Horn Island, that was in ’44, and came back in ’45, I was fortunate enough to get into a concert party, but, and then I did have time to practice and so forth.

10:00 That was, yes, yes. That was a real basis. That gave me a basis to do something and did help me in the long run because I gained great experience amongst fellow performers, who were experienced and they quickly, all of them quickly helped me, and I learned from a mentor, Frank Lamprell, who… you mightn’t think walking on stage and walking off is very important.

10:30 It is. It’s things like that, and being natural, which some people never learn, like Cassius Clay, one of my pet hates, as you’d probably realise by now, that was just a boon to me. And I, they thought a lot of me. I was considered one of the top

11:00 pop singers in the concert parties. If not the, I was considered one of the two top pop singers amongst all the people, amongst my peers anyhow.

**Before you became a performer and joined the entertainment part of the army, you obviously had to go through basic military training. Can you describe some of those training exercises you were put through in the AIF?**

11:30 It was just a few days, at the showground, it might have been a week or two, if that, of basic military training, marching, I think. I don't think we even had a gun then, anyhow, and I was quickly transferred to this place, within no time, to this place at North Sydney. And I was in this particular group.

12:00 Very, very, very little army training, thank you very much.

**So you were swept fairly quickly into the entertainment section.**

Into a Service Section, ASC Unit, ASC. Army Service Corps.

**Can you tell us a bit about the ASC and what you were doing in the ASC?**

Well, it was simply had to be a butcher and that was the sum total of it. And very, very, little.

12:30 Well sometimes we had to do special parades, sometimes we had to, even in the islands we had to sometimes have, well, we had 303s and that was it, and when going into the hinterland, going into the Maprik sector on a particular show

13:00 of the troubadour group, this was in '45, to Maprik, we were there for a week or two, we did, we performed for the troops on the front line there, and we were on the front line ourselves, and well then we always had to have guns and so forth, but apart from that very little,

13:30 and we had guns in Cape Wom, and in New Guinea, that's 303s. Yes, we had our own guns. They were used very little.

**The staple food of the army was the bully beef. What does a butcher do in the army?**

Well, there was cutting up the meat. Sometimes there was beef to be cut up,

14:00 sometimes there was, I was a, mainly in a Supply Unit, supplying the other units. My job was to cut up the meat and to supply the units, and that was that, and then I was transferred to other units that were being supplied themselves.

14:30 And then it was a matter of, no, I was mainly supplying units, until I got out of that and became, got into the concert parties, and I was the performer.

**I just want to clarify the sequence of events. Did you go to Horn Island, and up that way, before you joined the concert parties?**

Yes, yes. I was in Horn Island as a supplier,

15:00 in the ASC Unit, as a supplier of meat for all the units, including the air force were there and the artillery were there, and what is it, the ground forces were there. They had to have people in those islands to stop the Japs, Japanese, from bypassing New Guinea.

15:30 So they had real combat troops in those islands, and they had to have supplies and we were the suppliers of those units.

**Can you tell me about Horn Island?**

Well, Horn Island, yeah, Horn Island, that brings back memories. Makes one think about it, doesn't it? It's got an 'e' on it anyhow. That was rather a dull place, I can remember at 21,

16:00 I went down to the sea, and that was to the, just before the sea and that was the quagmires which were there, to the swamps, and I was very lonely, didn't even mention my 21st birthday

16:30 to these people, but I mentioned it to the crocodiles. I was talking to the crocodile, so I mentioned my 21st birthday to the crocodile, and I think he was listening too. I didn't go too close but I was mentioning it to the crocodile, that's how, well, probably, sad I was. Sad but at least I talked to a crocodile.

17:00 **You were a long way from Sydney and where you grew up, was this the first time you were far from your urban upbringing?**

Yes, apart from being in Adelaide when I was eleven, yes. Yes. That was, and then being all round the army from late '41 on, yes, yes.

**When were you in Horn Island?**

17:30 Horn Island? Early '43, '44. it was a long time, and when we got there the poor coves, I'm doing a bit of histrionics now, OK. The poor coves, they'd been there a while. When we got there, they talked like that.

They were like that. They were troppo. Poor coves.

18:00 They'd been there for donkeys, eighteen months, twenty months. They'd really had it, the poor coves. And I thought, God, what goes on here? So we knew, we had a fair inkling of what was in for us when we were there for a while, and we were there for fourteen or fifteen months, too, you see. I was there all told for about twenty months before I got,

18:30 got back home, so that was a while too. But that will give you an idea of how rotten it was, you know, to be in these parts. There wasn't any war but it would have been far better if there had been a war. There was just the Fighter planes, the 84 Squadron, I think, sorties, and '43-'44 there were the battles of

19:00 that part. You'd remember what it was.

**The Bismarck Sea, the Coral Sea?**

The Battle of the Coral Sea, thank you very much. Couldn't even remember what it was. Dear me, I haven't got Alzheimer's. It's getting close isn't it? It wasn't fun and games. It was very debilitating.

19:30 The Americans that were there, and there were a fair few of them, they were there with the air force, they would often go back to Townsville, every three months, for a break. We wouldn't, you see, I'd been twenty months before I would get away from it, you see, and there were others that had been two years away. This is what the government thought

20:00 of the Australians. They could bloody well stay there, you see. Didn't mean a thing. Little wonder why there was so much trouble with, not just with sickness, but with debilitation, depression, and so forth. Little wonder why the people did get depression in those parts. It was tough.

**Can you describe any particular incidents of people going troppo on that island when you were there?**

Oh, well, the whole lot of us, I think, were troppo.

20:30 We mightn't have realised it, but we were off coloured and some of us to various degrees. We were, but the whole lot of us were. We were controlling it but we were, we were stupid, troppo, brainless, it was there.

**How did you cope with, well, I guess the boredom of it?**

Going troppo, I suppose.

21:00 **What were your particular symptoms of going troppo?**

Well, it's hard to realise, you know, that it's happening to one, but when you see it from some coves that are, that go off colour and really go off colour and have to be sent back, it comes to hit you, you know.

21:30 We had one particular chap, who'd been, he didn't have troppo, he was an older bloke, a sergeant-major, he was in Jacky-Jacky which is a unit on the mainland, northern Queensland, and he was sent back quickly because he had been a trouble to the units,

22:00 and they'd put a, I'm trying to think of the name of this insect, it can be twelve inches or thirteen inches long, easily, what's the name of it? Oh, centipede. Centipedes can be easily twelve inches long and that's no baloney, and the troops, the boys decided they'd had enough of him,

22:30 so they stuck a centipede in his bed. Fortunately for him, they saw it and fortunately for him, he was quickly sent back home. That's the sort of thing, if they didn't like you, that's the sort of thing they could quickly do, you know. Apart from so many, many of the people had breakdowns, breakdowns, and had to go to hospital.

23:00 I did go to hospital with a temperature from Horn Island of 104.7. I collapsed soon after, it was dengue fever. A pretty good effort, 104.,7, to cop that, so I think I was a dead setter to get another shot of dengue in New Guinea, another shot in New Guinea and then to get a shot at malaria because

23:30 my immune system had been weakened.

**When you first got Dengue, one of the symptoms of Dengue is a crippling depression isn't it, after it? How did you feel?**

Oh, a headache, a hell of a headache, a rotten headache. I knew I was in for trouble, and so forth and fortunately the hospital was only just straight across the road, so I walked straight into the hospital from the ASC Unit and was eventually, and I was waiting for attention, and I eventually

24:00 must have collapsed for two or three days. I can't remember what happened. That, my mind's a blank on that, so I was treated for the dengue and so forth and that was that.

**Twenty months is a long time up in those places.**

A hell of a long time.

**How were you keeping in touch with Sydney?**

Well. Fortunately for me

24:30 I had spent some time in Cairns and Townsville, and I'd met a girl, that's a bit of a no no. I'd met a girl in Cairns who, befriended her of course, and that was a relief. We were corresponding, and also too I corresponded with my mother. And that was another relief

25:00 and, we would do a lot of coming back to, returning to Cairns, that was the ship from Horn Island or from Thursday Island to Cairns, you see, and that was it and one could go, eventually come back by train, you see. To the big smoke of Sydney,

25:30 but so much time was in Cairns and Redlynch and those parts, and that was that, and I did get some breaks in Cairns, which were good. Fortunately for me, I didn't completely fall for this girl, or I didn't play around with her,

26:00 although that was her idea, and I had so many offers, would you believe. The mother offered me the land and the adjoining land, which was quite considerable, so they were treating me seriously, but I didn't want to commit myself. This is true, Jo Jo.

26:30 I didn't commit myself, not only for myself but for her, because I felt I was too young and immature to play around with a girl and she, she was Greek origin and I feel sure, she was volatile and so was I. I feel sure it would have been "Up you go, mate." It would have been hell's bells and mademoiselle, straight away, so I didn't commit myself, as Jo Jo knows,

27:00 and that was that. But it was quite a deal of trouble. I found out later on. I was trying to protect her but she was trying to catch me. So that was a bit of a no no, wasn't it? So trying to do the right thing and she's trying to catch one. Anyhow this is how things go. Is that enough, enough of that?

27:30 **You're far from home, I think that's bound to happen.**

Yes, bound to happen, but it didn't happen with me. I suppose I'm a determined cove who doesn't want to be taken over. And you see, the army didn't take me over and she didn't take me over either. I wasn't, until I was ready to marry my wife.

**What other…**

28:00 **Did you have any close friends on Horn Island?**

Yes, yes. I was, I had some good friends because I was a friendly cove, I suppose, a quiet cove but I could sing and play, they'd be around me like, they'd do anything for me to play for them. Whenever there was a place in a club, a place in a

28:30 big unit that had a club, not a club, in the units that had a piano, and all the big ones had pianos, we didn't, I would be the king pin you see and I'd just play for them.

**On Horn Island?**

On Horn Island and also anything going on Thursday Island, I'd be brought over to

29:00 Thursday Island to play too.

**Can you describe one of these parties, or how you got involved in this entertaining. Because you weren't officially an entertainer at this stage?**

No, no. Just a general, general muck round, you know. General sing and play, and join in the community and all that sort of thing.

29:30 'We're going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line', and all that sort of jazz, you know. All that sort of tommy rot. 'Kiss me goodnight, sergeant major. Sergeant major be a mother to me'. All that sort of tommy rot and 'There's a track winding back to an old fashioned shack'. All that, all that jazz. Jazz and razzamatazz.

**What was you favourite song that you sang on Horn Island?**

30:00 Oh, I can't remember. I really can't remember.

**Was there any particular ballads, or marching songs that the army taught you at that time that you remember?**

Well, look I think '41, I think, even '41, I think the, oh '41, '42,

30:30 no I didn't join the concert party till '44. No, I'm just trying to remember the numbers that were going. You see a lot of numbers came in in '41, '42, '43, '44 and that could have been the numbers that I can remember. The ones that I can remember from that '44 era were 'Begin the Beguine' and . . .

**We might get on to those a bit later, I think.**

Oh, the ones before that, it might have been

31:00 the Vera Lynne numbers and 'Auf Wiedersehn, Auf Wiedersehn'. I didn't do that one, but I remember it. 'There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover'. That's 'Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square'. I would have done that, yes. 'Da Da certain night the night we met da da da da da da da dum'. That sort of thing. I would have done that.

31:30 **Can you still remember all those songs?**

Yes, I can remember them, yes.

**I might get you to sing a few a bit later, but just to talk about a bit more up there on Thursday Island. Can you describe what it was like on Thursday Island?**

Yes, boring, boring, boring.

32:00 One of the best things was being able, at least once a week, of being able to go to a beach, a fair way away on Horn Island. It wasn't that big, but about half an hour away and have a swim, and I can remember us saying, 'I wonder what the poor people are doing?' That was, we used to imagine we were the rich people, swimming, when others weren't able to swim.

32:30 That was a break down for us, you know, but that was about the only thing. There was just general work. We used to read the local papers, as much as we could. I was always a reader, yes.

**Did you get news from the outside world?**

From, I think, I can't remember whether we got the New Guinea Gold [army newspaper] then, perhaps we did.

33:00 There wasn't that much news that we got really. I think we used to listen to the radio to a certain extent, but I think we were generally indifferent, because it was an indifferent sort of place, and we were indifferent about our time there, indifferent about the army, indifferent about the world, indifferent about everything, just indifferent.

33:30 That indifference really helped to bring on being generally indifferent and bringing along depression, I suppose, and making us morose, and we were morose, yes. The, it was bloody rotten

34:00 and for the army to realise it, they should. It's often harder being in those parts than being in New Guinea. There were things happening in New Guinea, but it was deadly in those parts and so many people, like, had a dead time like the people in Horn Island and Thursday Island.

**Were there any suicides or anything of that nature?**

34:30 We didn't hear about it but I wouldn't be surprised if there were. See, we were in a small group and people that are, people would quickly go to the hospital and if they died they died, and you wouldn't hear the details about it. So I wouldn't say that there weren't suicides, but I wouldn't say that there were.

35:00 If there were, even if there were it would have been hushed up anyhow, see, so we wouldn't have heard about it. That's that. I was the supplier on Horn Island of the meat and I had to go to the 84 Squadron, I think it was, and vouch for the quality of the meat. Well, talking about the quality of the meat, are you interested in this?

**Yes, we are.**

35:30 The quality of the meat was atrocious. One only had to, it was so brittle the bones, if you had a slight touch, it could get infected. It was that, and the meat, it was very poor meat from the north of Queensland and these poor cattle living on this

36:00 grass, if you could call it grass, were probably so, they were possibly more depressed than we were. They were killed for meat, and because the government were getting quite a merry price for this meat, but it was atrocious meat. We had to make the most of it and so forth,

36:30 and the army took what was going, but the air force didn't. They wanted better, so I had to go along with my lieutenant, and so forth, and say how good it was and so forth, and all this baloney, and it was atrocious stuff and should never have been used. So that was some of the meat we had in Horn Island.

**How did you keep the meat?**

We had proper refrigeration, I must admit,

37:00 a proper solid system of refrigeration and we looked after that and it was very well kept, but atrocious meat in the first place which suited the government too. It was cheaper for them to supply that meat to us than the good meat from Townsville/Cairns. So that was another thing.

37:30 **How did you get along with the Americans that were on there?**

They were, there weren't too many of them there and we really didn't see them. I think they were attached to the air force, and they could have been possibly flying too. I forget if there was a group of them there, but they might have been there for the controlling of the air force units and so forth, that could have been their particular part, but there was,

38:00 they were lucky. They were on, and too, we knew what they got. They got far better rations than we got. How did I know? We supplied them with the rations. They were on the best, supplied with ice cream, and all that sort of jazz, that I don't think we ever got, you see but they were on special rations, because they were treated in a far better way

38:30 because they were on American rations. We were on dog rations. You take it and you like it and so forth. And the army knew that they were on special deals, that's why there was trouble on the mainland, because the Americans got far better treatment. Good luck to them, but we should have got far better treatment than what we did too.

39:00 Bbut there was bitterness on the Australian army's part, and they were quite right too. Because it was, we should have been on very similar rations, but we weren't. It wasn't fair. That's another thing. I know the rations, and that just was wrong. Take it, Field Marshal Blamey, take a bow.

39:30 **Did you come under some stick from your men for supplying them. They couldn't have been very happy. Did they blame you?**

No, I'm just a private. They just had to take it. They knew I wasn't responsible. They were wise enough. And I must say that most of the privates there, often I would say, they had far more brains than the lieutenants and captains. And I think that's one of the troubles with the armies. The brains often

40:00 weren't there and the brains wasn't there certainly with Blamey. Blamey, he was a nong and so he was the head of the unit. There were certainly some wonderful generals under his command, but also too there were some lousy types just like Blamey, colonels, generals, captains and so forth under him. A lot of rotten types under control. That's the whole army.

40:30 The army was rotten with rotten people in control.

**How were the people directly in control of you on a day-to-day basis?**

Oh, some of them, the majority of them were nice people. Good people, yes, I was very fortunate in that regard. I'm saying generally speaking, the system of seniority was all wrong.

**How did you get on with your commanding officer?**

Oh, fine.

41:00 He was, the people, different ones that I had, they were fine. They knew I was quite a brainy cove. They realised I was just one of the people that just had to take it, you know, and that was it.

**Did you ever get into any strife with the military system?**

No, no. Because I was wise enough not to get into strife.

**Were you applying for transfers to get off the island at this stage?**

No, I never tried until I

41:30 got the chance to join the concert party, but I was told, too, when I was in Toogoolawah, no, yes, in Toogoolawah, by a chap, Tom Playfield, who was a corporal. They knew I was talented and I was just a private doing…

# Tape 4

00:30 **Can you take us through your, how you got off Horn Island?**

Yes, I can, I remember that. I was due, those that were due for twenty months, hadn't been home for twenty months,

01:00 I hadn't been in Horn Island, to be honest been fifteen or twenty months there. I'd been away from leave, away from home leave for twenty months, so those that had been twenty months or more were entitled to home leave. Amongst all the units on the island, so I was one of the first to be granted home leave, so off I went.

01:30 That was simple as that, just those that had been almost two years, and some of those poor blighters had been more than two years away and they were really, they were really buggered, and that was fighting units, and so forth, 28 months I think and things like that that they had been away. That's terrible. The government take that in.

02:00 **Particularly when there was some pretty serious warfare going on to the north of you.**

Yes, yes. Just been stuck there. They might not have been on the island, but all told they had been away more than two years. Longer than what I had. And I'd been away 20 months which is pretty hard, but others had been away longer, so I still feel for those people. And they were like Infantry Units, and so forth, they were fighting units.

02:30 **They must have missed you when you left. You were entertaining them quite a lot, were you? Were you regularly doing entertainment on the island?**

No, no, only a little bit, because we didn't have the opportunity to entertain. Although I can't remember, whether I played in the hospital or not, I can't remember.

03:00 They had a piano there. I know I played a little bit in the units and so forth but, no, no, it was pretty deadly.

**Can you describe coming off Horn Island and coming back down south?**

Well, I went, I'd arranged to take half my time, I can't remember what I had,

03:30 twenty months? Whatever it was, I'd arranged to take so much time in Cairns and so much time in Sydney, you see, so I did that.

**Why did you spend some time in Cairns?**

Because I had the girlfriend there, see? So, which I did do,

04:00 and then I went back home first of all, and then I came back. I can't remember how many days it was, can't remember, but whatever I was entitled to, twenty days or forty days, or what, might have been three weeks each, whatever it was anyhow. I worked that half way and that was it, and in a way I'm glad I did, because

04:30 I was some time too in Redlynch, even after I'd, even if I'd had to go back to the army after my time was off, but then had to wait in Redlynch in Cairns to be shipped to Horn Island again, you see. So whilst I'm waiting I'm able to get off fairly often, back

05:00 to see my girlfriend, which I did do. And so that was a break from the army you see, and that was OK, great. So that was, if I hadn't done that, I had so much more freedom, freedom at night, supposedly back at night which I did go, went back early in the morning for

05:30 early morning call up, you see, and all this sort of jazz. I was working roughly…yes, and I got away with it too. I wasn't straight with the army, but who was?

**But you didn't go back to Horn Island, did you?**

No, I didn't go back because a concert party arrived. I had tried to be, I had been there once and,

06:00 for a concert party, to try and get in, I'm not sure what it was, to join, but I wasn't good enough, they didn't accept me, didn't want me, and . .

**Can you describe that for us?**

Well, I just, I sang and played, and so forth, thought I was great, but they just didn't like me,

06:30 so that was that. I just had, it's a bitter pill not to be accepted, but I had to accept it, and anyhow the next time up I had to have more determination, and they wanted me hell's bells, mademoiselles. They wanted me without any doubt.

**Do you remember who they people were who knocked you back the first time?**

07:00 That's a funny thing. It was, it turned out to be a chap who turned out to be - and I can't remember his name – who was second in charge of Stalag Pagewood, when we were doing our concert party, our show for them. We'd only been there about six weeks all told. And the group were quickly accepted

07:30 as OK. We had a well-knit show and the authorities, the powers that be, accepted us straight away. They weren't very happy with our expertise. So we were off. But the cove who was there, second in charge was the cove who'd knocked me back in the concert party. He came around backstage

08:00 and apologised, and said what a wonderful performer I was. So that was a vindication of me and I was just a private you see and so forth, and he was a radio man who knew the ropes. And so sorry, he died rather quickly and otherwise he would have been a great contact. Anyhow, that's how it goes. But the second time around, I was quickly accepted.

08:30 **Ron, we might just pick up the story again at the point where you were auditioning for the concert party in Redlands, Redlynch.**

Redlynch.

**Can you tell us a little bit about Redlynch, to start with?**

Yes. Well, that was, only called it

09:00 Redlynch, it was, well, what was it? It was an early that had been cleared of the bananas, banana plantations, and just made into a big army camp, army base, and they just cut out the bananas… yes, we had no bananas today, no bananas today. They cut that out and it was the

09:30 staging camp to go north or to go up to the Tablelands. Tablelands. So many troops were in the Tablelands there. It was just a staging camp, that was the extent of that, and that was it.

**Did you have a particular nickname for it? There was a particular Stalag you mentioned.**

10:00 Oh, no, Stalag comes back to Pagewood and that's, the performers soon get names, soon get names. Yes, and that was the Cinesound, Cinesound Film Unit there, Cinesound, what do they call them? Anyhow, the various films. Forty Thousand Horsemen were made there.

10:30 All the Australian films were made there at that time. And Forty Thousand Horsemen was made on the hills of Cronulla as a matter of fact. All that big rushing, rushing, Forty Thousand Horsemen and Chips Rafferty and the others, on Cronulla's sand dunes.

**Can you tell us a bit about the audition.**

11:00 **How did you go about getting selected, or applying to go for the audition?**

Well, they were there for a show and I applied during a break, would they audition me? So they were quite ready to audition me. They, people auditioned me and they were very happy with me. I sang and played and they accepted me.

**Who were they?**

11:30 Well, I think it was probably Lieutenant Rothwell, and it would have been Angie Candetta, the staff sergeant in charge, and there would have been other people who would have been around, the other performers around listening and they must have given me the thumbs up because I was accepted.

**What did you play for them?**

12:00 I don't know. It could have been 'Begin the Beguine' or something like that.

**Were there other people applying to join?**

No, no, I was just the only one that came up and asked to be auditioned. I was the only one that had a go.

**Was it, did they call for auditions?**

No, they didn't call. I just rolled up, the stage was there, and I asked for an audition, so…

**How did these entertainment troops work at this stage?**

12:30 How did they work? They worked through Stalag Pagewood and being sent out and working on a routine of going around various army camps. There were so many army camps to go to, and so much work even in Australia to go to. There were so many groups in that part in Townsville, Cairns and on the,

13:00 those parts, I can't remember, in the hinterland, they were all stuck round Queensland. We had all groups, even south of Queensland, all lines of communication just in case they were needed. The army was here, there, and everywhere in Queensland.

**And were they made up of military personnel,**

13:30 **or people from non-military personnel?**

It's all military. And at that time no females were floating around, unfortunately. When we had a concert party there was two female fems, two fems, female impersonators. Fems.

**We'll talk about those a bit later. I was wondering,**

14:00 **did you have to ask permission from your officer to even audition?**

No, I was there, I was there waiting to be in transit, waiting to go back to Horn Island. So I was free, I was there waiting to be under the command of Redlynch troops. They controlled me. They were the organising people sending us up and away… up, up and away.

14:30 **Was this an effort to get off Horn Island, or was this a really, you sort of saw that you would really like to do this?**

It was, on my part, it was a chance, yes, I'd had far enough of Horn Island, far, far enough, and I saw a chance. I'd tried before and I thought well, this is another chance and I'll take it, which I did, and I got

it,

15:00 I only got it, I don't think they would have released me if they'd still been stationed up there, but they were on their way south, so they were quite ready to get rid of me.

**So, who broke to you the news that you'd been accepted after that audition?**

I think it was the Redlynch people. No, I think it was, pardon me,

15:30 the new people, the new concert party crowd told me that I'd been accepted. They'd been given my release.

**What did that mean to be released? Did you get transferred to this particular…?**

Yes, transferred straight away.

**What was their official army title?**

My title, our title for the,

16:00 we were the 3rd Div Concert Party, and the 3rd Div were mainly from Melbourne, Victoria, and I was a Sydneysider. I was an interloper. I joined one of the, what do we call them? One of the people from down south, one of the Mexicans.

16:30 New South Wales always called the Victorians the Mexicans. Just to be facetious.

**So, up in Redlynch, when you were transferred to the 3rd Div concert party, how did life change for you at that time?**

Well, I was inducted into learning the business,

17:00 the entertainment business. And I was given the chance to sing, and I quickly joined them. For instance, in no time or other I was given the job of singing 'Begin the Beguine', on the side, side microphone, to a couple, a male and a fem, doing the 'Beguine' on stage,

17:30 you see, and I was doing, apparently I was told all the people were always watching me, but anyhow I don't care if they were watching me or not, but that was an important thing that I did. Also, I quickly learned to do a spot to a couple of numbers, and I was in Shayner's [?], singing, and I was in Shayner's, doing straight parts and so forth and I was trained into, helped…

18:00 and one needs help to walk on stage and walk off stage, I was given help in that regard and it was very beneficial to me and when it came to me to be a performer later on, it wasn't so hard. So that was very, very beneficial. Much better than learning it off pat, you know,

18:30 back home in Sydney.

**You mentioned fems. What were the fems?**

Female impersonators. Yes, we had two female impersonators. Ones who impersonated females.

**Who were they?**

Oh, one was Freddy Bean. He was, you could tell straight away what he was. And the other one was Don Munro.

19:00 Do you want to know their names? That's Don Munro. He was also a singer. A nice cove. You wouldn't have known he was a queer until he started to drink and then you really knew quite quickly, his eyes seemed to go everywhere. But anyhow, that's another point. Anyone who wants to study queers, let's away. That's a help.

19:30 **And what was their role? The fems' role?**

To play different female parts in plays, you know, and to act the female parts and sometimes they played straight, sometimes they didn't. Freddy played mostly female parts but the other cove could play straight, or what was required.

20:00 **Were there any women in the troop?**

No women in our troop and the only people we would have had there watching shows would have been the nurses who were in various different units. I don't know if too many nurses would have turned up. I can't remember. I think they would have certainly turned up for a Gracie Fields show,

20:30 or something, but not generally speaking. I think they would have stayed away.

**Why did they have female impersonators?**

Because they didn't want females. Females weren't, it was a bit rough. They didn't want females in the army in those parts, in New Guinea or even in the islands in those times. Only those that were the

nurses and people like that.

21:00 Certainly the aides, even I've seen, the aides would have been males too. But certainly only the nurses would have been in the islands in my time.

**Who was in charge of your troop when you first joined?**

Where's that?

**Up in Redlynch?**

Redlynch. Oh, you see, it would have been a chap

21:30 by the name of Rothwell. Yes, he was a nice bloke. Can't think of his name, but he was a nice bloke. Very kindly man.

**This was really the start of your performing life, as a professional, would you say?**

Yes, yes. I suppose so although I'd done, even at 10, 11, 12, I was singing in the

22:00 Cubs and Scouts you know and so forth, but I'd say basically yes, that was the start of my entertainment life, yes.

**What sort of training did you receive and who did you receive training from?**

Initially, I just sang, you see, so it was just natural.

22:30 But that comes in to later on, you see, where I trained.

**Sorry, what happened later on with your training?**

Well, after when I got out of the army.

**Oh, sorry. I was thinking when you were in the army. Who was the director of the shows?**

Director of the shows in?

**The 3rd Div.**

Director of the shows where?

**Say, in Redlynch, where you first joined up.**

23:00 Well, we were quickly away from there, and we were in the concert party then, and we just worked shows and it was Rothwell and Angie Candello [?] and Max Hardy and the group, and we were just a show, we just did shows, you see.

**And from there, where did you go?**

Oh, various parts around Queensland, around that part, which I really forget,

23:30 I forget and then we came back to Brisbane, I think, and did shows around there for a while, and then we went, we did shows around Brisbane, never came further south, and then we went, oh one stage, yes,

24:00 before that, prior to that we did go practically straight back to, after a few shows around the Redlynch area we went straight back to Pagewood, Stalag, and they wanted to re-organise the show preparing to go overseas, you see, and some of the people that weren't OK for overseas, or who weren't wanted,

24:30 or weren't OK, weren't A1 were released, and we had some changes there. And we organised the show and we were off in an amazingly short time, within six weeks, which was a pretty short time to be rehearsed and organised and slap dashed. Given new material, given new gear, new clothes,

25:00 or sometimes or other, we had a lot of clothes by the way, and a lot of rig out, checking the instruments, checking all that, for the equipment. There was a lot of things to fix up, but also the main thing they had to check up was the suitability whether the show was good enough to go overseas. The show was approved

25:30 because it was a damn good show. It was a solid show, and we were all good performers who fitted in. We didn't fight with one another. We had fun and games off stage and so forth, but not, we were a complete unit. And that's important, the show must go on. But often with performers, that ethic

26:00 is not always, with army people not always evident. But it was with us. We were, we were very conscie, conscie, conscious, and I was too, see, so that was good.

**Can you describe for us, sorry, we'll go into some details of that show you took over to New Guinea. But I was just thinking of those early shows you did, performing to a bunch of rowdy troops. How was that for you as a performer?**

26:30 **Was there any difficulty in performing to a bunch of... possibly an aggressive crowd?**

No, I had far more trouble with people after the war, say in the Ling Nam restaurant, or in King Street, whom I think were really queers who were having a go at me,

27:00 because that was part and parcel of the business, you know.

**Can you describe for us, perhaps, those early performances, when you went out in Queensland to perform in front of the troops? Is there a memorable performance that stands out?**

No, it was bread and butter. They, the troops were wonderful. They wanted entertainment. And if we were good, it was so much of a bonus. If we weren't good, it was still a bonus anyhow, but we were a damned good unit,

27:30 you see, so we created a good impression, and it was a slick show and we called it, the show was called Never a Dull Moment. And that was pretty true with it. It was slick.

**This was when you first joined them?**

Yes, when I first joined them, and also when the subsequent show went on. That was Never a Dull Moment, too. That was, that showed motivation and that business carried on.

28:00 It was a slick, slick, professional show.

**Were you given any specific overall instruction to provide a particular style of motivation to the troops?**

No, it was just worked out what we, it was pretty open ended. We had to be approved what we did. It was approved what we'd done, back in Pagewood, you see.

28:30 We quickly got the approval, our show was wonderful, and that's why it was quickly approved by Davidson and the rest of them.

**When you first joined up, when you were performing, were there any particular amusing shows that stand out in your mind? Amusing incidents?**

Well, it was all interesting, you see. All interesting. No particular one. Sometimes there was a far greater appreciation.

29:00 But basically, say coming to one, say there were twelve to thirteen thousand people for the Cape Wom Gracie Fields show, and you could have heard a pin drop there.

**That was in New Guinea?**

That was in New Guinea, yeah.

**I was thinking about the initial shows around Queensland.**

Initial shows. Well, they were very, very, very good, much more appreciative than what I struck back home in Sydney

29:30 as a performer, which I mentioned. Much more appreciative.

**Well, can you describe one of those small shows you did to the troops in Queensland, before you came down to Pagewood? Take us through one of those shows. What went on from start to finish?**

Oh, it's hard to know. It was, like there's this band opening.

**Who was in the band?**

Oh, Band Opening, band opening

30:00 in Queensland. Then Angie Candello, and trumpet player Max Hardy, and three piece trumpet section, two piece, three piece sax section, a drummer, a pianist, Doug Lamprell, yes, it was, and I was the pop singer you see, and doing so many

30:30 pop songs in the group, coming in at different times, singing different things. Which I forget, I may have done 'Poinciana', I just can't remember, 'Begin the Beguine'. 'Lovely Way to Spend an Evening'. Oh, that sort of general song, I was even, in the early part, I was doing a skit on Frank Sinatra. And I'd have people, coming behind me,

31:00 like fems, pinching my bottom, pinching my leg, and so on, like the things they used to do to Sinatra. A scena, that was a scena. Doing that sort of thing, I just had to carry on doing that, and generally appearing in scenas, playing silly parts and so forth,

31:30 playing a drunk or something or other, it was general variety work, general variety work.

**What's a scena?**

Scena, a scena is like coming on, doing a scena is like doing 'Begin the Beguine' and I'm on the side, and two people, a male and a fem,

32:00 are doing the 'Beguine'. They call that a scena, that's a scene, a scena.

**And when you went down to Pagewood, were you told that you were about to go overseas, and take the act overseas?**

Oh, we knew that we were being trained, being prepared to go overseas, and if they were happy with us,

32:30 and they were happy with us very quickly, because some poor groups, and excellent performers, I can remember the Dixie Kids, they were there for donkey's, I think they were just stuck there, I can't remember. Whether they were kept there, they felt sorry for them or whether they didn't want to go overseas, or whether they kept mucking up, or whether they were difficult people to get on with overseas, they seemed to be there for ages,

33:00 and I think they could have been there for months, you know. And they were wonderful performers, but just having their lives, but they possibly just couldn't care a damn, but that was, people that had it, possibly didn't want to go overseas, didn't want to go out again, you know. But our group was solid and so forth, and because we were manageable and they liked us,

33:30 and our show was solid, a great show, we were off. And out you go in six weeks, and that was amazing, because groups had been there for months and were still there, you know when we left.

**How many people were in your show?**

Oh, about, would have been 30 to 35 and that included like people like yourselves, backroom people,

34:00 camera people, and we had, also had a cook, had a cook that did the chores for us, you know that was fun and parcel of the bit.

**Can you describe when you were in Pagewood preparing to go in that six weeks, how you put your show together and how you planned it and what the components of it were. Can you describe that for us?**

34:30 Well, it was all just about worked out. We had a show and apart from new ones joining the show, they just fitted in, and it was up and away. It was no big deal, you see. The show was strong, the detail was strong, and we were going to new people, going to new entertainment, we were going to perform to what turned out to be

35:00 the 6th Divvy [Division] people, poor 6th Divvy people that had been all round the Middle East, and being sent back up to New Guinea again, which, sent back to New Guinea. Should never have been. Never have been. Government take a note. And new replacements that were ill-trained, too.

35:30 Twenty one year olds, that were just around my age that are hardly trained, just sent up there, just like that. It was an amazing bit how we were lucky. The Japanese had had it at those times, but they'd had. So, I went out, talking about New Guinea now?

36:00 **I just want to stay a little bit on the whole organisation behind this. We'll get to the New Guinea thing, but it's quite fascinating to me to know how this thing was structured, within the military at this time.**

The group.

**Yes, how you actually got it cleared, for instance, and things like that.**

Well, it was quite easy, because we all had expertise, quickly had expertise,

36:30 otherwise we wouldn't have been performers, and I quickly fitted in as a performer, and I was considered, I know, quite quickly, one of the top performers amongst the pop singers, which was amazing, seeing that I hadn't been a pop singer before.

37:00 And I just did it, you see, I was a natural, like the others, they were experienced, and some of them were pros, the majority had been pros beforehand, really pros, had worked in Theatre Royal, worked The Tivoli, a number of them, and the chap that taught me the stage work, he was a Tivoli man,

37:30 and the Theatre Royal, worked at shows in Melbourne and shows in Brisbane, Theatre Royal in Brisbane, and Bunny Wesley was another specialist who'd worked. He was a singer too, and they'd worked, they were full time pros. Full time pros.

**Were you given extra pay?**

38:00 No, no. I lost money by becoming, I was a third degree, TG3 butcher. I lost money by becoming a performer which was a far more onerous job, you see, but I just had to accept it.

**What was your specific title within the army as a performer?**

I was just a private, nothing, just a bugger all private, bugger all private.

38:30 **You didn't have any specific . . .**

No, no title whatsoever, just a nothing. The highest rank in the army, a private. I would have been, I know, it would have come to me, I would have been made a corporal, but unfortunately for me, the group was saturated with corporals and sergeants, and there wasn't room for me so,

39:00 bugger me, I didn't become a corporal. I had the standing to become a corporal, I was told that, but I couldn't be because there wasn't room for me, unless they got rid of some coves, and I didn't want that. So I just had to accept, bugger me, I came in too late, so that was that. And the ones who were in early were the corporals and the sergeants, so that was the bit.

39:30 **So can you describe that six week rehearsal period as you built the show up before you went overseas?**

Oh, we just, we just did a few shows, that's all, not very much. Just a few shows. They were mainly working on getting all the equipment ready and sorting out the lighting, the, whether we needed more of this,

40:00 more of that, more fittings, more clothes, that was the main things that they were doing.

**Did you have amplification?**

Oh, yes, yes. Oh, yes, we had all the best of equipment at that time available, yes. It wasn't wonderful, but it was the best that was available. On the side of the stage,

40:30 yes, and going straight out to the troops. But apparently, it was able to take a group of thirteen or fourteen thousand people on, I think it was that, twelve, thirteen, fourteen thousand people and say for shows like that. Often there was only a couple of thousand people for the shows. Often, other times there may have been a thousand, whatever was needed. We did the entertaining to whatever goes.

# Tape 5

00:30 **Tell me, Ron, you were not an entertainer before you joined this unit, this 3 Division. You were quite talented, but you hadn't been in that world before. It is quite a world of its own. How did you mix into it to begin with?**

Yes, it is a truly different world. How did I mix in? I had a friend

01:00 as a performer, who took me in hand, Frank Lamprell, he was a dancer and he was, he could do Russian work, he could do all sorts of dancing, he was a specialist dancer. And also a very good stage man,

01:30 a very good compere, a very good one at handling script, speaking words. He took me in hand, fortunately, to guide me, and that, he just did it quite naturally. He knew I was shy, and fortunately, he was straight too, which was a great advantage, for another and he took me in hand because he knew I was shy,

02:00 and he knew too that he would have to do a bit of checking up to make sure I was OK. And he and others wanted me to keep away from such and such, and such and such, and I could see what they were, but I had other people watching me, so that was a great help to me and sort of realising there were people that were really concerned about me which I thought was, 'Well, that's great'.

02:30 **Can you tell us in a bit more detail the kind of things he would do for you in those early days?**

Oh, just to teach me how to walk on stage and all that, all that sort of jazz, and to really judge and to really listen to me and so he and others were so proud with the reception that I got. You see there was a certain amount of competition with people and I would, apparently,

03:00 get far more clapping than so many others, the compere, a comedian, and others, and that would often annoy some people, they would say, "Hear that, hear that?" I tried not to hear it, but they were really boosting me up, realising I was a pretty damn good performer. They were so pleased for me.

**How did you deal with encountering that kind of catty aspect**

03:30 **of the performing world?**

Oh, just by ignoring it. We once had, oh, over in one part of New Guinea, or New Britain, I can't remember, but we had this particular crowd of, they were, oh, what were they? these big macho, not artillery,

04:00 they were infantry coves, and our particular group had, the ones in charge, whoever they were, we won't mention their name, had the night off. They must have been going to a big function and so that came down to sergeant or something or other, sergeants who were supposedly in charge, and one of the

sergeants was one of the fems,

04:30 and they were able to have a merry old time with so many of the boys of the infantry group, big blokes like themselves, and they put the lights on and they were in the tents trying on all this gear, apparently. They were a fair way away from us fortunately, having a whale of a time, but that's the sort of thing

05:00 that the females would do. And these particular, well, they must have been queers, queers would do, trying on all these infantry coves too, these big blokes, far bigger than you people, for instance, trying on this gear and having such a great time till 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, before we could get to sleep.

05:30 That's the sort of thing that some of the people do, but those people left us alone, so we didn't, but don't think that these big macho blokes in the infantry are all straight. They are not.

**It must have been an incredible eye opener for you. I mean, looking back now, you've had contact with a lot of those people in your subsequent career, but at the time how did you react to seeing, well, homosexual people around you?**

06:00 Well, I felt sorry for them, tolerate them, as long as they let me alone. And as long as they let me alone, that's fine. But one of them, one chap annoyed me very much by, we were in a truck, a big bus, and going around in the bus, going around, going around various units,

06:30 and it could have been in the open air or going through a city of something or other, and I could see, quickly, this particular cove, "Hello, dearie, how are you today?" Talking to a girl, and then, a little bit further on, he'd wax all that,

07:00 "So and so bitch, who does she think she is? What does she think?" Such a bitchy attitude to girls, I couldn't understand it. You see, that's the nasty attitude of the queers, and that was good for me to see. To see how nasty some of them could be, but that was quite an eye opener to me. But they didn't hesitate to show their nasty side to us

07:30 because they realised we knew they were nasty.

**How did they live their lives? Obviously they couldn't be completely up front with their sexuality in the army at that stage.**

No, they couldn't be, but they were just tolerated.

**By everyone?**

08:00 Oh, no, I think they just had to watch their step.

**Did you ever have any trouble early on with these characters?**

No, because I think I had minders making sure I was OK. And when they knew I was OK, that was it. I had trouble later on in the business, but I can handle that,

08:30 righty-o, that goes. But, in fairness to them, when the queers knew that I wasn't one, no troubles. I was treated as a straight. And so I treated them in a decent way. If they'd been nasty to me, sergeants or no sergeants, I would have told them off, you see.

**What about within this group**

09:00 **of thirty you mentioned before, there were about thirty in the entire crew.**

Yes, all told.

**They had different roles and different interests. Were there factions within that?**

Oh, yes.

**Can you explain a bit about that?**

Oh, factions, there was, the band people were very much of a band people, very much themselves. They weren't too keen on the performers.

09:30 There was two sections, talking about the thirty, there was one section that did the, putting the, assembling the stage, and assembling the stage, this is current with this, isn't it? Assembling the stage, involved opening the bus, which was a pretty big bus and it had big, I suppose it could have been six foot or eight foot sides.

10:00 And by the time that goes out it makes quite a decent side, eight foot there and eight foot there, that's another sixteen feet that you've got on the side, plus the front, the flap, and that flap, and there was another flap to put on that, and that made quite a fair size flap and that, and then what had to be assembled was the iron structure to put the canvas on. The canvas was quite

10:30 a, well the iron was quite big, they had to get all up, well, those doing that part, had to get up and assemble it and screw it all on and so forth, make sure it was all OK, and then put the canvas on top, and that, and there was the flap, and there was a big flap going on to the back, to the stage, to have a

dressing room. A dressing room went

11:00 on with stakes and so forth at the back. See, that was down on the floor, that was part of the bit. But one crowd, one group, assembled that part, that part of the stage and put all the stage up and also took it down when it was finished. But they'd be assembling that, poor blokes, in the heat of the day, and we were in New Guinea,

11:30 and those that have been in New Guinea or north, know what it's like, and that was hell, and these poor coves assembling it were often taken, were thought to be our troop helping. The people coming to see the show didn't think that we poor blighters were the ones who had been assembling and putting that show up, were the ones who had been doing all that heavy work. So that was a hell of a lot of work to do.

12:00 And I was one of the weaker ones, I suppose. I was in the crowd doing the back stage work putting the fittings up, which were quite considerable. There were a lot of changes of gear, a lot of parts, a lot of different shows and scenas, and a lot of parts to do, there were so many different parts that we were playing.

12:30 We did so many serious sketches. It was quite a massive undertaking. But the two particular groups did all that, and that was before they did the work. The main people doing the assembly, they were the tougher boys I suppose, they were all the,

13:00 they were all the band boys. They were the tough ones. They could take all this tough work, and they were setting up and getting up on top of these structures and putting them all together, and pulling them down and so forth. And we were the more performer types

13:30 and we were doing that work. But it was quite a bit.

**People who had been doing this in civilian life in the thirties, must have been fairly worldly-wise. You must have had a whole new world open to you as far as their experiences were concerned?**

Oh, yes, it was a tough field for a, I was twenty-one when I joined the group, twenty-one, twenty-two to join, yes. It wasn't all

14:00 beer and skittles. What did I do? I made money in that part. We were allowed so many bottles of beer a fortnight or something or other. I was a non-drinker. So I worked out a deal and I got money for the, which Max Hardy was glad to pay

14:30 so he had more drink. So good luck, jolly good luck to him, but I got the drink and passed it on and got money, so that was a good deal for me. That's what a goody-goody I was, you see. Just how it goes.

**They were quite into drink, the musicians, as a rule?**

Oh, yes. They would have been drinking

15:00 as much as they could get, but unfortunately they couldn't get that much. But no, they were cultured, mainly a cultured cove who were pretty solid, pretty solid, but a slightly wilder group than the more artistic crowd of the performers the variety artists, I would say. But Max Hardy was, I think

15:30 he was a graduate from one of the universities, so he was a, he became the leader of the group, the band in New Guinea, but his father was, I think, the Principal of the Geelong Grammar School, so it would give you an idea of his standing, so they had this sort of people in the entertainment field. Very talented people, you know. Very talented.

16:00 **You were a performer, but you also played the piano.**

I didn't play it in the concert parties, but they had two excellent pianists, so I didn't get a chance, but it didn't matter, but I still had the ability to play for myself when I wanted.

**Did that mean you were firmly within the performers camp, if you like?**

Yes, although I was accepted by the band people because I would sing with them. Yes, you see, I was either way so I would play with them, too, you see,

16:30 and I didn't put on any airs and graces, and I was a new one, and I didn't act, "I'm a performer, you're not a performer." That wasn't in me, even if I had been a pro I wouldn't have that attitude, and you see performers do at times you see.

**How did you react to that, that snobbery?**

Oh, laughed. Take it.

17:00 That's silly, people wanting to carry on, let them carry on. But the people that I dealt with weren't like that, you see, so it was OK, you see, for me.

**Performers, I think you said before yourself, they are notoriously difficult people.**

Oh, yes.

**Who was the most difficult people you worked with in those days?**

In the concert parties in New Guinea, it was a chap Tommy Noonan. Tommy Noonan,

17:30 well he's Irish obviously. I was Ron Thurgood at that time, he wouldn't have realised it, even though I was Thurgood, I was as Irish as Paddy's Pigs as what he was with an English name, but he didn't know and I didn't bother telling him but we were both very, very talented and I think they used to rib him,

18:00 because he was an excellent compere. He could sing, excellent singer, he could do spot work, he was an experienced variety performer. He had been a performer in the Tivoli before the war, so he had done so much work, and I had come along, I was a new chum, and I was considered a far better performer. I went far better, I'm told,

18:30 than what he did in the shows, you see. And he hated that, he hated my guts. He would hear this clapping and cheering for me. I just, well, whatever it was I had it. I was just appreciated. Even just doing bits and pieces. For the Gracie Fields show, I did, for instance,

19:00 I did a couple of numbers and we had under me, behind me, I had two staff sergeants, Bunny Wesley and another cove, Albert Chappell, staff sergeant, blah, blah, blah, you know, corporal and someone else, I forget, possibly another corporal, and they did the harmonies behind me

19:30 while I'm singing, and that was the Gracie Fields show, and they were my bosses, they were the ones responsible for me getting in front to do that particular Gracie Fields show. And so many of the other performers, weren't even, that were there, therefore there were two shows, two people, the Waratahs and our show were there, for that show, and there was only so many allowed,

20:00 or only so many that fitted in for that particular show because we only did the first half, and Gracie Fields did the second half, and Gracie, a lovely lady, had people with her to do a spot too. So all those other people are doing the first half, and yet I was able to do four or five songs in that particular show.

20:30 They just allowed me to take over. Just how it goes. I was honoured. But I'd only just joined the group, you see.

**We'll talk about the Gracie Fields show in a minute, but you mentioned the Waratahs?**

They were there for that Cape Wom show too, and that included a very great performer, Buster Noble.

**What do you mean by the Waratahs. Who are the Waratahs?**

They were another show. They were another

21:00 army concert party and that's what they were called, the Waratahs. Obviously a New South Wales show and Buster Noble was the comedian in it.

**So these companies were employed by the army but they were formed more or less independently?**

No, not employed. We were conscripted. We were in the conscripted, no, no.

**So poor choice of words!**

Yes, no. We were part of the bloody army.

**But the army didn't control you, obviously. You were independent.**

21:30 Oh, yes they did. We were part of the army.

**So they didn't control your makeup?**

No, they didn't control us. We were part of the 1st Aust Entertainment Unit, we were part of the entertainment unit based in Pagewood, but we were controlled, Lieutenant-Colonel Jimmy Davison controlled us from there. No. We were already conscripted, we were in it whether we liked it or not.

22:00 **Was there a lot of competition between you and the other concert parties?**

Well, I suppose there was to make a good show. Yes. I suppose there was a certain amount of business. But those that were good, were good, and those that weren't, back luck mate.

**Just to give us a rough idea, how many concert parties were in New Guinea at any given time?**

I think there could have been four, five, or six.

22:30 You see, we were there towards the end of the war, but I still think there could have been a number there. There could have been more that that in the early part, but, or in the other part, there could have been a dozen concert parties overseas all told at any one time, a dozen, and there could have been another dozen concert parties going around all the states.

23:00 You see, these were some big units in WA, there could have been army units all over, all over Australia, army units all over the Northern Territory, so there could have been, at any time there could have been twenty four army units.

23:30 **And this does not include those that entertained the American troops. They had their own, didn't they?**

Oh, yes. Well, the army, well, the Bob Hopes and all that. But the Bob Hopes only went to some of the main areas. They didn't. Our units went right into the thick of it.

**You mentioned Noonan before.**

Tommy Noonan.

**He was your nemesis in a way. He was your direct competitor. How did he react to you getting all the plaudits that you were getting?**

Well, he hated my guts!

**What did he do specifically to you?**

24:00 Well, he was a sergeant, too, by the way. He was ready to kill me if he could, you see. And so it goes. But give you an idea. Buster Noble was in the concert party before. Just give you an idea of the set up. Buster Noble did the comedy, did a comedy spot in the Gracie Fields show. I did, I think I did all told five numbers,

24:30 including 'Begin the Beguine' and those couple, and two or three scenas. I did about five numbers anyhow, and not two numbers in the group and three numbers all told in scenas, and so forth, but five numbers. So I was honoured. But Buster Noble did his spot, today's spot, and Tommy Noonan, who was also a concert party sergeant

25:00 wasn't given a spot. He wasn't included. So that would have killed him you see. Because a great honour to appear, I appeared with Gracie Fields. He, poor old Tommy, didn't appear with Gracie Fields, so he must have been livid. And I understand. I felt sorry for him. But his staff sergeant wouldn't put him on. Didn't want him. There wasn't room for him. He was damn good enough,

25:30 but he wasn't given a show, you see. So what would Tommy Noonan think of me? He would have been livid. It was all my fault, you see. I didn't have anything to do with it.

**You never directly confronted him in any way about all this?**

Oh, well, he was just sour, you see and he just had to take it, you see. But I think he drank, and drank, and drank, and so it went on, you know,

26:00 but he was so sour on me it just wasn't funny, but people were just keeping any eye on me to keep him out of my way, you know.

**Just before we get to New Guinea. How did you get to New Guinea? Your show was passed as good enough. What happened then?**

26:30 I've got to remember. I can't remember whether we went from Townsville or Cairns. But we would have gone up as far as we could and then shipped off to, where did we go? New Guinea. Where was it? To Aitape.

**Did you arrive in Aitape, or did you go through Moresby first?**

Oh, no. We were in the latter part of the war.

27:00 This is '45. And the war, and the war, this is we were some of the last people to go up there, to be honest. See our trouble was, well, my trouble was really, the whole island bit, that was in the midst of the war and then it became, the Aitape.

27:30 That was in the north of New Guinea, and Wewak and Aitape were some of the last bases that had to be taken over, and also New Britain, Rabaul, from the Japanese, and it was a particularly rough,

28:00 still a particularly rough part, as I possibly mentioned before, but Aitape was a far better part than Wewak. I think we landed within about a week of the main troops, initial troops landing, within a week, or a few days to a week, of the initial troops which seems to be amazing. Yes, within three days, I think it was,

28:30 of the initial troops landing there, so they wanted to make it as easy as possible for the troops, because the 6th Divvy troops, and the replacements, the poor young recruits, and it was 6th Divvy, mainly experienced coves, and so very few other troops, 6th Divvy and replacements. 6th Divvy and twenty one year olds.

29:00 **How did you get in to Aitape?**

Aitape? By barge and go in and get off the, go down the, those particular sort of, what do you call them? Part of a walkway, part of a rope walkway, and

29:30 you've just got to walk down the walkway to get into a barge. And so they couldn't get close to the beach, and that was it. We landed and then we just had to go and do our stuff.

**What was going on in the fighting at this stage?**

Well, it was, so much was on in the hinterland and there were so many troops that had to be there to

30:00 gradually put the Japanese back, back further into the swamps, and they did go into the swamps, because there was only the beach front or the swamps, and seeing we wanted the beach front, they went into the swamps. And kept on going into the swamps, and going further into the hinterland, into the country.

30:30 It was pretty tough on the Nips.

**So when you arrived only a week or so after the troops had landed, how far back had the Japanese been pushed?**

How? Well, you might say not very far, you see. They might have been, even when we arrived in,

31:00 when we were in those parts, we, I can remember going to Karawop, that was from Aitape, and the troops in the main part, Aitape, they seemed to be a fair way into land, and the main part of the Japanese was in the Wewak area.

31:30 They seemed to be clear to me. But in the Karawop area, which was north of Aitape, the troops, we had heard that there were some Japanese on the perimeter, and they were sort of, apparently they had been watching the show, so we heard, anyhow, later on.

32:00 It's all very well watching the show, isn't it, anyhow, and so we heard there'd been certain movements around, and we had intended to stay at Karawop for the night and pack up and move the next morning. And we'd been advised that it might be in our best interests to pack up and move that night in case there was any further untoward movement. So we did hurriedly and off we went, and packed up our gear in the darkness,

32:30 and that was it, and we got through, we were concerned whether we would get through, but we did get through, but a couple of days later from Jimmy Gold, we found that three of the poor blokes that we had been possibly entertaining had been killed in the skirmish at Karawop. That will give you an idea that it wasn't all beer and skittles. And that was from Aitape. But other parts,

33:00 other parts from Wewak, I can remember from Won, going into a part, going into the aerodrome there, Wewak and they hadn't cleared, fully cleared, the aerodrome and there, and still the Japanese bones were on the perimeter, and the stink was, it wasn't just, it was human bones and so forth.

33:30 It hadn't been cleared. Not that they should have cleared it, but it just gives one an idea of what, it just gives you an idea that we were up there pretty early in the piece.

**How did this affect you?**

Well, we just had to take it and feel, well, I felt sorry for our troops and I felt sorry for the Japanese, too. I feel sorry for anyone that's been killed, murdered, no matter what they've done. Felt sorry for them.

**Did it bring it home to you, what this thing was all about?**

34:00 Oh, but unfortunately I already knew what it was having had an uncle who was gassed in the First World War and seeing the trouble that he'd had. I can't remember if I mentioned that before.

**Oh, yes, you did.**

# Tape 6

00:30 **Thank you for bringing out the piano. It's a pleasure to have someone to play for us. When you were in New Guinea, what sort of songs did you open in that particular performance with? Do you remember any particular ones from there?**

Well, I definitely did a number of times 'Begin the Beguine'. And whether I can do it now, we'll soon see.

01:00 **Was there a particular performance that this song was part of?**

It was part of a scena, doing it with, on the side, and I had a couple of dancers doing the Beguine, in the centre of stage.

**What is the Beguine? Can you explain that?**

It’s six/eight time. It’s sort of South American, I suppose.

01:30 **Will you play a bit of that for us?**

Well, we’ll see if we can do it, eh?

**Have a go!**

It was one that, I used to only sing this. Whether I can sing and play it now, well, we can see. (Starts singing ‘Begin the Beguine’)

\n[Verse follows]\n When they begin the Beguine\n It brings back a sound of music so tender,\n It brings back a night of tropical splendour,\n

02:00 It brings back a memory evergreen.\n

To live it again is past all endeavour\n Except when the tune a da da da da da,\n Even the palms seems to be swaying, when they begin the Beguine,\n To live it again is past all endeavour\n

02:30 except when the tune touches my heart.\n

And there we are swearing to love forever,\n And promising, never, never to part.\n What moment divine what rapture serene,\n Till clouds come along to disperse the joys we have tasted,\n

03:00 and now when I hear people curse the chance that was wasted,\n I know but too well what they mean.\n Oh, yes, let them begin the Beguine, make them play,\n Till the stars that were there before return above you,\n Till you whisper to me once more, darling, I love you,\n

03:30 And we suddenly know, what heaven we’re in when they begin the Beguine,\n

When they begin the Beguine.\n

**What else was a particularly popular song back in those days?**

Well, there was this one.

04:00 Vera Lynne. (Starts singing Blue Birds over the White Cliffs of Dover)

\n[Verse follows]\n There’ll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover, tomorrow, just you wait and see.\n There’ll be love and laughter and peace ever after, tomorrow, when the world is free.\n The shepherds will tend their sheep,\n

04:30 the valleys will bloom again,\n

And Jimmy will go to sleep in his own little room again.\n There’ll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover, tomorrow, just you wait and see.\n

05:00 **What would the audience be doing when you were playing one of these songs on stage in New Guinea?**

I hope they were listening.

**Would they be sitting down or standing up?**

They would be with, often with their raincoats on and carrying on even though it’s raining and just watching the show.

**Would they holler and cheer, or clap?**

They did towards the end, yes, they did.

05:30 **What was a number that was particularly lively, something that they really, really enjoyed. Not one that you necessarily played, you don’t need to play it, but what kind of music would really get the troops going?**

Oh, they liked a lot of the stuff that all the pop singers were singing, you see, and it was Frank Sinatra and all those songs, they were popular at the time.

06:00 But also Vera Lynn was very, very popular. But, also, too, serious things like, well, I can remember doing Swing Low Sweet Chariot and things like that, you know. Would you like to hear that?

**Would the crowd sing along?**

No, that was, that was a straight solo. OK

**Would you play a bit of that for us?**

(Starts singing Swing Low Sweet Chariot)

\n[Verse follows]\n Swing low, sweet chariot,\n Coming for to carry me home,\n

06:30 Oh, swing low, sweet chariot,\n

Coming for to carry me home.\n I looked over Jordan and what did I see,\n Coming for to carry me home?\n A band of angels, coming after me,\n Coming for to carry me home.\n

07:00 If you get there before I do,\n

Coming for to carry me home,\n Tell all my friends, I'm coming in too,\n Coming for to carry me home.\n Swing low, sweet chariot,\n Coming for to carry me home,\n Oh, swing low sweet chariot,\n

07:30 coming for to carry me home.\n

**Would you have any banter, or would you say things at the time?**

No, it was just a straight show where you just, one does these particular spots, and on and off you go.

**How would you change on and off stage, would there be a curtain?**

08:00 Oh, yes. A big area for doing that, you know. It was the lot behind the stage. A big curtain would be put on and away we'd go.

**When Gracie Fields came to town, was there a bigger stage than usual, or did she perform on the stage we already talked about.**

She performed on the one that we had.

**And did she have her own musicians?**

She used our particular band,

08:30 yes, I believe so. She was a lovely person.

**She was a bit of a comedian as well, wasn't she?**

Well, she did eighteen numbers, eighteen numbers straight in the open air, and in New Guinea. That's wonderful. She was 43 I can remember at the time, and she was singing in her prime. And she was lovely to the performers. All the performers were allowed

09:00 to be on stage, in the background, and she didn't mind that at all. She was pleased that we were a part of the bit, you know. She was a lovely, beautiful lady. And she did so much, 'Little Puddin' Basin that belonged to Auntie Fool' and Ave Maria from that, from those two, she did all sorts of numbers.

**Do you want to play us anything else, from the period or otherwise?**

Can I do something from,

09:30 something closer to the stuff that I do now?

**Yes, sure, explain to us what sort of crowds you would have played to after the war. When would you have played this?**

Well, this is a number that I would sing to my wife. It's one of my favourite numbers, and it's her favourite number, that why I'd like to do it.

**Sure.**

(Starts singing Autumn Leaves)

\n[Verse follows]\n

10:00 The autumn leaves drift by my window,\n The autumn leaves of red and gold.\n I see your lips, the summer kisses,\n Those sunburnt hands I used to hold,\n

10:30 Since you went away the days grow long,\n

And soon I'll hear old winter's song,\n But I'll miss you most of all, my little Jo Jo,\n When autumn leaves start to fall.\n

11:00 Yes, I'll miss you most of all, my little darling,\n

When autumn leaves start to fall.\n

**Is that your song?**

That a special song. Before we finish this I'd like to do this.

11:30 It's one that I really admire this particular performer. It was (asking off camera) Peter Allan. This is a number I'd like to do, I worked with gentleman.

12:00 Such a shame that he died far too young. He's got some beautiful numbers and I'd like to do this one in

memory of him. (Starts singing I Still Call Australia Home)

\n[Verse follows]\n

12:30 But no matter how far or how wide I roam, I still call Australia home\n

.

13:00 I'm always travelling, I love being free,\n

And so I keep leaving the sun and the sea,\n But my heart lies aching over the foam,\n I still call Australia home.\n All your sons and daughters, spinning 'round the world,\n Away from your family and friends,\n

13:30 As the world gets colder and older,\n

It's good to know where the journey ends.\n Some day we'll all be together once more,\n When all of the ships come back to the shore,\n I'll realise something that I've always known,\n

14:00 I still call Australia home.\n

Someday we'll all be together once more\n When all of the ships come back to the shore,\n I'll realise something that I've always known,\n I still call Australia,\n

14:30 still call Australia, still call Australia home.\n

**Is there any other tune from any part of your career that you would like to add to add to this now while we're on? Explain to us first where it comes from and what it is.**

Well, I play all sorts of stuff, all sorts of music. I'll do . . .

15:00 **One more tune for us, please.**

Okey doke, we'll make this one Mam'selle (Starts singing Mam'selle)

\n[Verse follows]\n A small café, mam'selle, a rendezvous, mam'selle,\n The violins were warm and sweet and so were you, mam'selle.\n

15:30 And as the night passed by, your kiss became a sigh,\n

Your lovely eyes seemed to sparkle just like wine does,\n No heart ever yearned the way that mine does For you,\n

16:00 and yet I know too well, someday you'll say goodbye,\n

And violins will sigh, and so will I, mam'selle.\n

16:30 (starts singing in French)

17:00 \n[Verse follows]\nTake me to your heart again, my dear, let's make a start again,\n

Forgiving and forgetting, take me to your heart and then,\n And leave behind from then, a life of lone regretting.\n

17:30 Dearest let's turn back the years,\n

Let smiles come after tears,\n Like sunshine after rain.\n I'm yearning for you by night and by day,\n Praying I'll soon hear you say,\n 'I love you.'\n Then we'll never part again,\n If you will take me to you heart again.\n

18:00 **Thank you very much. Do you know Lili Marlene?**

Yes, sure. (Starts singing Lili Marlene)

18:30 \n[Verse follows]\n Underneath the lamplight, by the village square,\n

Stands a certain lady of dubious repute,\n Da da da da da da da da dum,\n

19:00 This is the best I can do of Lili Marlene,\n

My own Lili Marlene.\n

Always say something, anyway.

**Do you know South of the Border down Mexico Way? Could you play that for us?**

Sure. (Starts singing South of the Border down Mexico Way)

\n[Verse follows]\n South of the border, down Mexico way,\n That's where I fell in love when stars above

came out to play,\n

19:30 And now as I wander, my thoughts ever stray,\n

South of the border, down Mexico way,\n And she sighed as she whispered, ‘Mañana,’\n Never dreaming that we were parting,\n And I lied as I whispered, ‘Mañana,’\n For our tomorrow never came.\n South of the border, I rode back one day,\n

20:00 There by a veil of light, by candle light, she came out to play,\n

The mission bells told me that I mustn’t stay,\n South of the border, down Mexico way.\n Ay yay yay yay, ay yay yay yay, ay ay ay ay, yay

20:30 **Did you ever play that one in New Guinea?**

No, I can’t remember.

**The first concert that you did over in New Guinea.**

Blowed if I can remember.

**What was the most memorable concert that you did over there for the troops?**

Oh, it would have definitely been in Cape Wom, close to Wewak,

21:00 where Miss Gracie Fields did the second half of the show. That comprised, the first half comprised quite a few Australians, including from two concert parties, and I had the honour of I suppose, singing all told in scenas and so forth five songs in that.

21:30 It was a wonderful opportunity, and I was allowed to sing those, thanks to my staff sergeant giving me the honour, and I’d only just joined the concert party. But they though I had a voice that was worth doing solo work.

**How many people were in the audience?**

I think there was about thirteen thousand. I just forget. I didn’t count them. Something like that.

22:00 **Was that the biggest audience you’d ever played before?**

I think it would have been, yes. That was at Cape Wom, yes, Cape Wom. I’ve remembered the right name. Part of Wewak.

**How did you get there?**

Well, I got there because we were just stationed there around that area of Wewak, we happened to be in the Wewak area at that time.

**Where were you stationed?**

22:30 In that Wewak area, Cape Wom.

**Can you tell us a bit about, did you know what was happening militarily in that area at that time?**

We knew that we were winning the war and so forth and it was becoming, getting mighty close to the finish of the war in the Pacific.

**So what was the mood of the troops at that time?**

23:00 Well, I think they were getting excited and knowing that the war in Europe was over, and just wondering how long there was going to be the kerfuffle with Japan, how long they were going to carry on.

**As a performer, did you get to meet the troops off the stage?**

Well, I often had people coming up to me and talking

23:30 to me, and checking on me and happy to find that I wasn’t a queer, that was one of the things that they wondered about. You see, one of the troubles in the entertainment business, when there’s one or two fems, impersonators, in the business, so many of the odd bods think that everyone else is the same. Well, that’s not the case. We just had to put up with

24:00 them as much as they would have had to put up with the queers they had in their own entertainment, their own particular units, although they probably wouldn’t realise who they were, but they were there.

**How many regular soldiers who were homosexuals approached you?**

I wasn’t approached, but I can tell you it’s

24:30 quite amazing if one knows some of the signs, how many there are of them in particular groups.

Youngsters need to know. I think they do know more now.

**In the regular army, at that time, was there, how many did you notice?**

Well, there's one point

25:00 where we sent so many cavorting and carrying on from an infantry unit, I must say there'd be, could be twenty percent, could be, which is quite a percentage. Maybe even more now.

**How were your shows received?**

Because we were a

25:30 very tight show, I've mentioned that before. Because we were a solid show we were really appreciated, and the people went away happy that they'd seen a decent show.

**How many shows were you doing in a week?**

Well, we could do three or four. Sometimes we could do more if the stage was set up,

26:00 if we didn't have to set up our own stage. Up to three shows a week, I'd say, but that was very hard. Putting all the gear down and all that sort of jazz, and packing it all up again, and off again, and the travelling.

**How were you travelling around?**

We were travelling in trucks. Yes, yes. Oh, travelling around in,

26:30 sometimes it was a bus, yes, yes, a bus, we were travelling around in a bus. Just had to think of that.

**Did you ever perform in hospitals?**

Yes, yes. We did that. We did special shows. That one Kangaroo Point, that was, we did a number of shows there to some Indians,

27:00 and so forth, and they'd been, straight out Indians, not Red Indians, Indians. They'd been hurt, hurt by the Japanese, really, and so many of them were in such a bad shape. I'm glad that the Japanese didn't get much of a chance to have a go at us. But they were mutilated.

27:30 That was Indians.

**Can you describe that show for us?**

Well, we just sang around, sang around some of the beds. But they'd been disadvantaged. Legs off and all that sort of jazz. Maybe it was gangrene, or something or other, it could have been that, I suppose, but I wonder.

28:00 Perhaps it was, it may not have been the Japanese, but there were a lot of people from Asia and so forth, that finished up being knocked about badly, and they were down at Kangaroo Point, near Brisbane. It's no longer a hospital, I think it's part of the developments there.

28:30 **When you were in New Guinea, how close were you to fighting?**

Well, we're non-combatants, but just the same we had our own guns. But once we had, out of, going from Wewak, we had a group, a group went, a troubadour group went to Maprik,

29:00 we went around that part entertaining the troops, right on the perimeter, and I mean right on the front line. And I possibly did a silly thing. I walked up to talk a chap - I was told not to, I didn't take any notice - I walked up to a chap, I think he was about my age,

29:30 he was punchy. And I felt so sorry for him. They were scared he might go berserk, and he did, they the troops there were waiting for reinforcements to come in. We were the, the army doesn't send reinforcements, it sends a concert party to entertain them. Which wasn't pleasing to these poor troops.

30:00 It wasn't fair to them and it wasn't fair to us, but that's the sort of thing that the army does. Anyhow, I spoke to him and I thought I calmed him down, and then I came back, and I believe a lot of people breathed a sigh of relief that I hadn't been shot. But that's the sort of thing that one either does on the spur of the moment, or doesn't.

**Where did that take place?**

Oh, that took place on the Highlands of New guinea. We were between,

30:30 from the coast we went over the Japanese swamps to a small plane landing at, I can't remember where it was, but it was there in the Highlands.

**And what was particularly wrong with this man?**

He was a twenty one year old,

31:00 who was really, I think he was depressed, he was punchy, he was likely to attack anyone, including the officers, at any time, and so they were scared for my own safety.

**What did you talk to him about?**

Well, I talked to him about everything, saying that the war would soon be over and

31:30 just to take it as calmly as he could. By talking to him, I think it at least calmed him a bit.

**Did he at least know you as a performer?**

Oh, yes. He didn't want to, he knew what we were there, we came with instruments and so forth, but they were looking for, not for entertainment, they were looking for replacements. So I say bully for them. Good luck to them.

**What did you perform for them?**

32:00 Oh, I'm blowed if I know. It was very hard, I've got some photos there. I thought I was smiling. The photo was taken by a Department of Information person, but it was more or less a frown, I suppose. I thought I was smiling, that will give you an idea. Things were tough.

**Why were things tough?**

32:30 Well, we had quite a trek to get there, even from the plane. And it was a tough time, because they didn't know where the Japanese were. Whether they were likely to come in or not, that day or night, or what goes, you know. It wasn't hell's bells or mademoiselles.

**What could you see or hear of the war there?**

33:00 What could I see of hear? Oh, it was all quiet. It might have been all quiet on the Western Front, but it wasn't the Western Front. It was all quiet in the jungle of New Guinea. It was tough country and people had had enough, including the Japanese had had enough.

**How many people in a troubadour troop?**

Well, we had about seven or eight I suppose. Just a special troop that could go by Shank's pony [on foot].

33:30 From the plane you see, and go out to another place, another sort of section, another section of that area.

**What was the name of your particular show, the big show?**

Never a Dull Moment, and it was pretty true, too.

34:00 It was a wonderful show. I was quite proud to be a member of it.

**How many troops do you think you performed it before in New Guinea?**

I wouldn't know. Thousands and thousands and thousands. Possibly, say thirteen thousand in one place and two thousand here and two thousand here. It soon mounts up. And also, too, in Australia. So many people all told we worked to,

34:30 it must have been in the six figures. And so with other performers too, other units.

**Is there any particular fans you had in the audience?**

Of all people, I had so many that would come up to me after a show and thank me for the show which was very good.

35:00 Very good indeed. It was very gratifying. Surprising that they thought that the people setting up the show and pulling it down again were other people, instead of realising that we did the whole blinking lot.

**Can you tell us about your most disastrous show?**

No, I can't remember, I don't think that we had any disasters. Supposing that the microphones went off, we just carry on as though,

35:30 without a microphone. And if it rained, we'd just carry on, and the troops stayed there. We'd just carry on, you see, that was a case of doing your best. No, we weren't beaten.

**Within an army, you're organising lots of people, and it's really not possible that time goes by without some amusing incident occurring. Can you recall any particularly . . .?**

36:00 Well, it was all interesting things. So many interesting things. I think I mentioned before I had trouble with Tommy Noonan. Was that, that was interesting with the, with that Gracie Fields show, but poor

man I felt sorry for him not being allowed to be a performer, but you see there was only room for so many,

36:30 so that was it. But that was a memorable moment, and a great moment for me. One of the greatest things in my life to see that lady work, and to give me an idea that I could be a performer.

**What advice did she give to you?**

Well, she didn't give much, didn't have much time to talk. She had her Italian husband with her. He was a poor little pathetic man, well, she must have been happy with him,

37:00 so that was good. But he seemed so lost, but he was needed there as a companion. Well, some of the happiest moments were when we could get away and get home, and get out of the place, and get away from the army. Even though we had malaria and dengue fever,

37:30 and I had to go through a lot of that, the best part was getting in, doing the work and getting out and the war ending. That was the best part by far.

**You also went up to Rabaul, you've mentioned.**

Oh, yes, Rabaul and Jacquinot Bay, and the Japanese had just been brought out of the caves and all that,

38:00 so many caves around Rabaul, and they'd just been ferreted out of the caves, but Jacquinot Bay was quite a nice place. That was the copra plantations, but some of our troops had had the concussions. There was a lot of eruptions there with, and so many

38:30 of the poor coves didn't have their tin hats on when they were floating around, and they got concussion. The coconuts coming down on their head. It didn't do their head a lot of good, you know.

**Can you explain a little more about what happened there?**

Well, they were in the, all the camps were amongst the copra, the plants, the coconut plants, and the, there'd be the shaking of the ground,

39:00 the eruptions, and righty-o, the big shakes, there could have been half a dozen shakes, decent size earthquakes every day there, and yet Rabaul didn't seem to get that sort of shakes, but Jacquinot Bay did. There'd be the, some of the coves forgetting

39:30 their instructions, without the helmets on, righty-o, down they'd come and down they'd go, often with concussion, because a coconut can really, coming down from fifty odd feet, really can make a dent in your head. Anyhow that's what it was.

**How many shows did you perform in Jacquinot Bay?**

Oh, I think we were there for about six months, so we must have done a lot.

40:00 We kept on doing shows and shows, possible to the same people, but we kept on, possibly to keep them sane. Forgetting ourselves, trying to keep ourselves sane.

**What variety did you bring into your show?**

Well, we changed it as much as possible, but I think there were only so many who could watch the show at one time, so, there was a lot of troops there still in those areas, so by the time they were whisked around, and played A, and played B,

40:30 and played C, D, E, F and G they'd come around again. That sort of thing. It was all a hotchpotch. It was all very hard and a long, long time ago.

**Was it a bit like that at the time, though, to keep track of events?**

Yes, well, I think by that time, see, I'd been in, when the war ended,

41:00 I'd been in about four years and I still had about another year to go, and we'd all had more than enough of the war, more than enough of it, and more than enough of having to take the orders from often, I'd say, delinquent officers. I'm coming up about that again, aren't I, delinquent officers who were no hopers. Some of them were all right, but, our crowd were OK,

41:30 but I'm speaking for the troops. Some of them had some mighty poor characters in there, in their control.

**Can you just run through, I know we've gone over it, but how Never a Dull Moment started?**

## Tape 7

**Sorry, might just clarify. What was it called? The 1st Australian . . .**

00:30 1st Australian, 1st Aust Division, 1st Entertainment Units.

**Sorry.**

1st Aust Div Entertainment Units. That became the whole group.

01:00 **And Never a Dull Moment?**

Was part of the 3rd Div Concert Party. We were the 3rd, 3rd Aust Div.

**And Never a Dull Moment . . .**

Was part of the 3rd Div Concert Party.

**Was that the only show you performed?**

Oh, yes, yes. I was never, they didn't want to get rid of me and I didn't want to get rid of them, so.

**So throughout your army career in entertainment it was just Never a Dull Moment?**

Never a Dull Moment, that was it. Yes, and it was pretty good too.

**What was the theme song at the start?**

01:30 Oh, well they didn't have any theme song. They would have had a band opening, you see. Possibly, look I can't remember whether it was No Business Like Show Business, I can't remember what it was.

**Can you describe the lighting arrangements for us?**

The lighting was

02:00 spot on for that period, which was the early '40s. It was, see they were able to have lights, because they had a ceiling, able to have lights from top and on the side and so forth, and have the various different lights wherever they wanted them. Just like what you've got here.

02:30 They could put the ropes and leads and so forth, they could put the lighting all round, no troubles. And have as much as they wanted because they needed lights for the band. Because the band needed their own stage lights and their own little lights in front of their music, too. To handle that. So it was all self-contained and very, quite, surprisingly pro, professional.

03:00 **How worried were you that the lighting might also attract the unwanted attention of the enemy?**

Well, that was unwanted, but I think the enemy may have come in so many times to so many shows and just wanted to watch something else. And quite happy to watch and not be noticed, not be caught, and then go off, you see. That was the enemy, because

03:30 they were starving for entertainment, too, you see. And they'd had enough of the war, too.

**How did you come to the suspicion that the enemy might be also observing?**

Because they were often caught, you see.

**Can you describe a particular time when that happened?**

I didn't see it happen, but you see, I was, being on stage and so forth, but I just heard things that, in various different groups,

04:00 that they caught this bloke up sort of up on a tree and so forth. Whether they killed him or not, I don't know. These things are often mentioned around, you know, it just happens.

**How did you find the hecklers in the audience?**

Didn't have hecklers, they were just ready for entertainment.

04:30 No heckling, not, they were just damned glad to have somebody trying to entertain them, in the main, except for the coves that were waiting for replacements, you know, in the highlands, you see. We weren't popular there.

**How many people turned up to the concert then?**

Up there? Only the few that weren't on patrol, and so forth.

05:00 You see, and there was a native New Guinea detachment there, too, that was interested in what was going on. We've got photos there.

**What was the reaction of the people from Papua New Guinea?**

I don’t think they were too aware of what was going on. Because I don’t think they were so really hot with, au fait with our entertainment,

05:30 because I don’t think they’d seen that much of it.

**Can you, did the troops call out requests, and were you able to fulfil those requests?**

No, because it was a tight show, you see, it wasn’t one of those come and join us and we’ll entertain you. It wasn’t that at all. The show was just arranged. There could have been a bit of heckling for the comedians,

06:00 which they’re looking for, you see. But all quiet on the Western Front for performers, straight performers, like myself, you see. No trouble whatsoever.

**Can you recall any of the jokes that the comedians. . .**

No, no. I hear jokes and forget them. They’re not my cup of tea.

**Yeah, I’m the same. I can’t remember a joke. What about entertaining the nurses,**

06:30 **did they also enjoy your shows?**

I think the nurses stayed away, because they didn’t want to be sitting ducks, you see.

**What do you mean?**

They didn’t want to be trapped. Or perhaps they had their own boyfriends, you see and so that was that, and there were so many wild buggers there, and give them half a chance

07:00 in a dark place and so forth, and they’d go hara kiri, you see, OK and the nurses were some of the, unfortunately, they had access to straight out alcohol, 100% alcohol, and so they were, so many of the troops were trying to get very friendly with them because then they could get on to whatever brew they had.

07:30 **Can you tell us about any parties you had after the show?**

Yes, well, sometimes from the bigger brigades, there were big shows and so forth and that was very nice, but it all dims in the memory now.

**How were you finding life as a performer in the army?**

OK. It was OK

08:00 and I was using it as experience and that was invaluable and it was doing something that was appreciated, far more than my butchering, and being able to entertain people that really wanted entertainment was great.

**They didn’t have too much choice, though, I guess?**

08:30 No, they had to take it. Yes, and there was only one, one black and white film might be shown once a week, or once a fortnight in some of the places that had the wherewithal to have it, so there wasn’t that much entertainment there.

**When you were up and travelling around, what accommodation did you have?**

We had our tents, that’s it.

09:00 That’s it. Had to put up the tents and that was it. We were often in a place that we’d go out from to other parts, you see, so the tents stayed in one place for a fair bit of time.

**Did you ever get tired of playing the same songs over and over again?**

No, no, no. Just sort, because it was a set bit one just had to like that,

09:30 you see, and it was different shows, like a number 2 show, and so forth and swung things around a bit, I forget what they were, but it did really change things you know, and we had different changes in people, performers, you know, that brought a new sort of spark to

10:00 Never a Dull Moment, too, so that came into it too.

**Where we they coming from?**

Oh, they would have just been replaced, they would have been coming from just another unit, or from headquarters, you see. If somebody got, got leave, you know, and somebody was replaced, they were replaced.

**How did you, yourself, relax, when you were up in New Guinea?**

10:30 With difficulty. Well, about the only thing was to, if there was a place worth swimming in, we’d go for a

swim, and that was the best thing. And there weren't any, there was only crocodiles in the swamps, there weren't crocodiles in the sea, so that was safe. But, it, we did have shows, singing shows at times,

11:00 you know, and had singalongs and so forth, and we used to sing in the bus and that sort of thing, trying to pass the time away.

**Was there a time when you were putting on a happy face, when you didn't feel happy at all?**

Well, we were trying to always be happy, no matter what, and that's hard to do, trying to be happy,

11:30 whether we succeeded. I know I said about that, I'm supposed to be smiling at that troubadour bit, and I'm blowed if I am, I'm frowning, and as unhappy as I could be, but I thought I was smiling. Things were tough.

**How was that affecting you, physically.**

Well, I suppose I was depressed.

12:00 I think we all were depressed. The heads and the whole lot of us, we'd had more than enough and so had all the troops. More than enough.

**Can you talk a little bit more about that?**

Oh, it's hard to think back,

12:30 but I, I feel sorry for the ones that had breakdowns, and so many did, but they were often hurried away and put in to hospital, and either sent back home or they recovered. Telling you about that now, what did I have? I did, coming back home,

13:00 I used to work in a lot of the clubs and one of the places, after the war, was Arncliffe RSL [Returned and Services League] and they had, in their wisdom, God bless them, they were good people, had shows for the, for some of the chaps that were in Broughton Hall. Do you know Broughton Hall? Broughton Hall's Asylum. They were sick people

13:30 and so many of them would have been malarial cases that went off their rocker, and so forth, and we used to, they used to come out and we would entertain them in the club, and I used to feel so sorry for them and I thought, there but for God's good grace, there go I. Because, it was, they'd been through similar things to what I'd been through

14:00 and the troubles and trauma of having, being tied up in the army and not being able to see loved ones, and being unhappy in the service, and being ill-treated which was quite often the case, was often too much for so many of them,

14:30 but we used, and we were so glad to perform and try to make those coves lives happier for them. I can remember when I went to Marrickville Depot to get my discharge, there were two cages there, it just makes you think, and there were two poor coves in these cages

15:00 and they looked like big animals, and they were in there because, well, they'd overstepped the mark, goodness knows what they'd done. It mightn't have been that much at all, but it was enough for the army to put them in cages, and put them up on site for everyone to see. It was probably just a warning for some of the coves, that were ready to cause the trouble, waiting to get out of the army, you know,

15:30 and so forth. Probably some idiot officer doing that to them. Treating men like animals. Just not right. Not right at all. And that happened in '46 when I went over to get my discharge. I was so glad to get away from that place.

**What was depressing you in New Guinea?**

16:00 Oh, the general nothingness. New Guinea was so much better than Horn Island, because there was something going there. Something doing there. We had things to do, we were travelling, we were entertaining people, and it was never so nearly, well, it was hazardous, it had its troubles, but it wasn't anything like the trauma of

16:30 They talk like that (exaggerated drawl). These people that had been there for so many months and so forth and some that had been waiting for leave for so long. They talk like that (exaggerated drawl). They were absolutely troppo, the whole lot of them, and I felt so sorry for them, and I think after six months we would have been the same thing, you know. That, it was a relief

17:00 to get to New Guinea to escape the boredom of Horn Island.

**Yes it can't have been too much fun, performing night after night, the same thing?**

Well, it wasn't night after night. We did have a break, you see. We couldn't work every night, we just had to, we might have been off a couple of nights, or something or other. It was no, it was doing something. We were really doing something. Had to concentrate on it. It was great. Really great.

17:30 **Yet you must have been looking forward to going home at the same time?**

Yes, but we knew we just had to make the most of it, you see.

**How aware were you of the situation in the war?**

We knew, that, then, toward the end we knew that the Victory in Europe had come along, and three months later, August 15th, 1945,

18:00 the Victory in Japan, the bombs had gone on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, yes that's right, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had gone and the Japanese decided to call it quits, which they should have, and I say jolly good, Mr Truman, President Truman, for holding, finishing the war more quickly than what would have been possible if

18:30 they hadn't used those weapons. Those weapons served a purpose there, and we heard that the Japanese had civilians ready to, with sticks, to stick out the eyes of the incoming parachuters, particularly the Americans as they came down, and blind them, you see, and things like that,

19:00 we heard those things were on. They could have been and I don't think, I think that's what they were scared of.

**Did you put on a special show? How did you celebrate VE Day? Victory in Europe Day?**

Just by doing our work. Just carrying on.

**Was there any special show put on?**

No, no. Just another day, you see.

19:30 It may have been over there, but it still wasn't over for us. So, no, no. We didn't have any beer or anything like that to drink, or anything.

**What about at the Victory over Japan? What was the celebration of that?**

I don't know. I think it was just the same. Just sort of accepted it. But we were still tied up. We weren't, it was a

20:00 great relief and so forth, thank goodness. We knew that possibly there mightn't have been any killings of us or the Japanese.

**Where were you when the surrender was . . .**

I think I was in hospital with malaria, so that I didn't have much chance to celebrate that time, did I?

**Not at all, no. Where do, did your troop carry a piano around with you?**

20:30 Yes, yes, they did cart a piano around, yes, and it had to be tuned to a certain extent to try and keep it going, you know. Yes, they did cart a piano around.

**So you had, so how were you technically supported? What sort of support crew did you have?**

Well, we had the whole group, no support group, we did the whole bit. Like the piano, move the piano, do this, do that. It fell to the whole group.

21:00 You see, that's why we could only do so many shows. Because we had the whole thing to, the whole business to do, whole business. Not just the glory of performing, we had the dubious glory of doing the pre-work and the after-work.

**How was the piano tuned?**

It was tuned by Doug Sanders, to keep it in some sort, he had a piano tuner,

21:30 a tuner to do it and just kept it as good as he could.

**Did you ever have to, was there any occasions where somebody had to be let go from the show because they had lost it?**

No, I think there were a lot of, some replacements, because some were getting old and some had had it, you know, but really, no it wasn't,

22:00 I can't see anyone pegging out or anything like that, no.

**In between the shows that you were doing, how did you feel?**

Well, after having it was a good show, and realising well, we'd done that, we'd done our bit and that's it, we looked forward to having a break until the next show, you see. That's how performers react.

22:30 **Were you still getting letters from the girl in Cairns?**

No, they stopped, because I decided, I finished, decided to call it a day with her, because I realised she wasn't the one, and I wasn't going to marry her.

23:00 She didn't have me by the noose, because she didn't have anything on me whatsoever. If she did I would have had to have married her, but she didn't, you see, so that didn't eventuate, even, and I must say her… she came from a very big, fairly rich family.

23:30 As a matter of fact, we went up there and there was an arcade there, I won't mention the name of it, but it was the arcade of the family and there were three theatres in it, and plus all the of shops and so forth, and besides having other shops in Cairns, they had other properties, so the people, or the whole group, I'm not saying these people I knew were wealthy, but the relatives

24:00 were very wealthy, but the opportunities were there if things had been even fair and above board, but they weren't fair and above board as far as she was concerned, so that was it.

**How lonely were you up in New Guinea?**

Well, for most of the time I had the, I had the letters from home, you see, which was a help you see and so forth, you know, so.

24:30 **Well, eventually, you stopped writing to . . .**

Yes, yes, it fell through.

**So, you were by yourself up in New Guinea. Did you feel lonely?**

No, I felt relieved that I hadn't been caught. You see, in that instance, so I thought at least I haven't made a fool of myself, and haven't ruined my life, which could have been, because she was a pretty determined girl,

25:00 around my age, and so forth, but she didn't, the Irish bit came into it too, so I'm determined and I was saved. Save me! What do you think of that?

**When did you first come down with malaria, up there?**

25:30 Malaria in Wewak. The war ends and I get malaria. Jolly good show, eh? Jolly good show, old boy!

**It was after the war you got malaria?**

Well, no, I got it as the war ended. You see the war ended, but war still went on for us because we were still up there, up in the islands, that was August, I was still up there for another year, you see, before I could get back,

26:00 you see, so it hadn't ended for us. The war had ended, but it hadn't ended as far, we were still in the army, still tied up to the buggers.

**Did you still continue to perform at the same rate?**

Not so much. It sort of gradually petered down, but we still worked, yes. We were still expected to do some work, yes.

**What other things were you expected to do?**

26:30 Oh, well that was our work, so that was mainly it, you see, or go to other areas. From Jacquinot Bay to go to Rabaul and perform there and so forth. And by the way, Rabaul is, for someone that had bad sinus,

27:00 as well as the bad nose, the bad sinus all told, That was a terrible place because there is so many, so much sulphur in the air there, from the earth, from the whatever you like to call them

**From the volcanos.**

From the volcanos, there are a number of

27:30 volcanos there, and the air was putrid with sulphuric acid, putrid. And that didn't do my bad head a lot of good either. So I was glad to get away from that place, there was a lot of, there, in Rabaul, there was the native population, and they'd been mistreated, too, poor people.

28:00 We entertained them sometimes too.

**Can you tell us about one of those, when you entertained them?**

Well, they just came along too, an army show, it's all open air, and they'd just walk in and that was it. They'd just do it, you see.

**Did you get to meet many of them?**

Yes, I did meet some of them but I soon stopped

28:30 going out in the dark, because this one big cove thought I might be available, so I excused myself and got away from his big clutches. He was a massive cove, I'm glad he didn't try to hold me, because I would have been a goner, you see. I got away from that cove. That was one that I got away from.

**Where were you when that happened?**

Oh, that was in Rabaul.

**Did you have any, develop any close friendships within the troop?**

29:00 Yes, yes. I had some very good friendships with practically all the group there, but unfortunately they were Melbourne people, and so it was, but one lost contact with them. They were from Melbourne, you see, and I, well, I was in more than enough trouble with sickness and study, and so forth in the early part

29:30 that it was in the fifties before I started to get hold of myself.

**When you were in New Guinea, did Noble still continue to give you a hard time throughout the time up there?**

Oh, Noonan.

**Noonan, sorry.**

Oh, he really didn't give me a time, he was just sorry for himself and so forth, but he was just one of the many people,

30:00 who are unhappy with themselves, you know. Many, many people like that, can't make the most of their opportunities.

**What do you mean?**

Well, so many people that think they should be the greatest and they're not the greatest, and just accepting what they can do and not expecting to be the great performer,

30:30 that they hope to be. If they're not good enough, too bad mate. It's a tough business. If you weren't good enough, you wouldn't be doing, somebody else would be doing your work, for instance, and there'd be so many people who would be envious with you because you've got that job. See, that's people, particularly when people are one off, like a soloist.

31:00 See, a lot of people think that they can get up and perform, and then, when they have a go at it, they just collapse. They can't do it. You can either do the stand up bit, stand on your own, not fall, or you can't. Like the Beatles, amongst others, were very lucky, that four of them, they've got four of them to do the work and only got one sound to have to come out.

31:30 **Can you tell us about when you were finally told that you were going back to Australia?**

Oh, we just took it, and yes. When we were going back, when the war ended they tried to get us to go, get as many people as they could to go to Japan, for the Occupation Force. I could have become a sergeant or anything,

32:00 but I had no intention of being a further day in the army if I could get out of it. No intention whatsoever. It wasn't for me. I wanted to get the hell out of it, and so I said no, but it still took ages, it took about a year to get out of New Guinea, you see. So It might have been better if,

32:30 I would have been over in Japan, you see, and doing something else, but we were just waiting and hanging on to get going so it wasn't a big home. Very boring, and very uninteresting. Until one got home, you see, one couldn't celebrate.

**Where did you spend that year after the war ended, in New Guinea?**

Mainly in Rabaul, yes. Yes, mainly in Rabaul, yes. We may have gone back down to

33:00 Jacquinot Bay again, but I think we were stuck there in Rabaul until we were ready to go.

**How did you get back to Australia.**

Oh, by ship.

**Can you tell us any stories about coming back to Australia on the ship?**

Well, the ships are, great for the captains, for the officers, but for the ordinary troops, you're put down in the hold, and the hold is often filled with fumes of petrol.

33:30 And that was terrible for people that have got malaria and dengue fever and all that sort of jazz, and any other thing, so it was, that was a nightmare. So that was inhuman treatment. So, that was probably the best that the government could do, but it wasn't good enough.

**In Rabaul, were you in hospital with malaria?**

I was in hospital in New Guinea,

34:00 and in hospital in Rabaul, I think, with dengue fever, too, Look I forget, it's hard to remember. But I was

in hospital a few times over there.

**Yet, you were still expected to perform while you were ill?**

Oh, no. You just to get better you see, and righty-o, they cut out what you were supposed to do and it comes in when you're OK.

34:30 **Can you recall any memorable incidents, or the boat trip home?**

No, well you see . . .

**Sights and smells?**

Well, that was it. No, because it was, the memorable incidents were getting up on deck and getting away from that horrible smells in the bottom of that bloody boat. But it was, the, some of the memorable incidents, were at times,

35:00 well seeing the, coming through the Barrier Reef, that was very good. Particularly going up. It must have been from Townsville, going up. The Barrier Reef. Seeing so much of it from Townsville. That was magical and so forth, but as far as the boat goes,

35:30 that was just a, forget it. Nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

**How long were you in the army for, when you finally got back to Australia?**

Four and three quarter years I think to be close enough. Almost five years.

**But when you finally got back home, were you discharged straight away? What happened?**

Eventually they have, they check you and so forth,

36:00 and then release you, yes.

**How did you feel when you finally got home? Do you remember when the boat came back into Sydney?**

Oh, not it was by train. I came in through Central.

**You landed in Townsville or Cairns? Or Brisbane?**

Look, I can't remember, but we came, I think it could have been either Townsville or Cairns. One or the other.

**What about when the train came in then? Can you describe that scene?**

36:30 Yes, yes, well, it was a red letter day. But I can remember going home to Royal Street, Maroubra, and our cat, I had a black cat I called Tiddles, and the cat had, with a haversack, I had the haversack on my back, and the cat came down about four houses and jumped up on my haversack.

37:00 And he hadn't seen me for donkey's, for yonks. I thought that was lovely.

**How did you feel to be back in Royal Street?**

Well, I was glad to be back, but I knew, hello, hello, hello, here it goes again, and also too, I knew that I had to get over malaria, which wasn't funny, not funny at all, and I had so much trouble, so much trouble,

37:30 and I had, I had treatment. Here's a bit of baloney. I had a treatment of Paliogen, three lots of Paliogen, that was supposed to be a ninety-nine per cent cure of malaria, and I had over about three years I had three lots of Paliogen tablets, and at the end of it, a few months later, I still had malaria.

38:00 So that's how good Paliogen was, so that they were really trying to help me get rid of it, but it did not, did not get rid of it.

**Did your mother and you stepfather remain together throughout the war?**

Yes, they did. They did, unfortunately, They did. But my stepfather was away mainly in the wartime,

38:30 in the Civil Service, I think it was. He was a carpenter and he could get work then, and he was mainly in Brisbane, around that area, working in hospitals, and building hospitals and that sort of thing, you know, and that was, that was a break for my mother.

**When you did get back then, you'd come out of the entertainment unit, you were no longer an entertainer, how was it to be a civilian and no longer a show business person?**

39:00 Well, it was a bit of a rift being away from old friends, even though they were from Melbourne, I knew that, that was it. But that's what goes, but I realised righty-o, just had to get on with it. But the trouble was, I tried to work but the malaria cam back, so I couldn't work so I went down to the Con and got a scholarship in singing and piano

39:30 and all that jazz, and it's classical training and taught, and I had four years training. I'm qualified singing and piano teacher. I didn't want to be a teacher, though. I wanted to be a performer, or nothing.

**You're making out they were giving out these scholarships. It was hard to do that, was it not?**

Oh, no, it wasn't so hard, to be honest. Those that were any good could get scholarships.

40:00 Some, even a friend of mine, who is still performing and has written some good music, war refused a scholarship, you see, so it didn't, everyone didn't get a scholarship. I could get it pretty easily, you see, because not being, having had the experience of a performer, and the experience of being not only a singer but also a pianist,

40:30 was a great plus as far as the classical side's concerned. So the classical side were quite happy for this cove, to take him on and I was taken on by some very good people like Raymond Beatty for singing and Penny Quick-Ramsey, for piano. So I had very good teaching and I was very fortunate.

41:00 I found after four years study that I needed about another six years at least another repertoire training. I wanted to be an operatic baritone and base baritone. I had the double range, base baritone and baritone, which was a pretty good trick for a singer, really, truly it is. It had that big range at the time. I had that, and I needed six years to study,

41:30 and I would have been about thirty five by that time, and I thought, well I haven't got a sugar daddy or sugar mummy so I'd forget it. So that was it, so I looked around and I got clerical work for a year or to, until such time as I got in the variety field, because that was, said Ronald, that was where the most money was available at that time.

# Tape 8

00:30 **After you went over to the Con, was it a difficult job to get work in Sydney as a musician and a performer?**

Yes, it was very difficult. I planned to get going, to get going in the business somewhere or other, but I realised that I needed some other experience

01:00 to get going, and I had to see agents and all that sort of jazz, to see where I could go. I decided to get into the variety field.

**Just before we start. What sort of music was popular in Sydney at the time? What were people listening to and where were they listening to them?**

Well, they were listening in the clubs, particularly the RSL Clubs

01:30 and in other big clubs. The work, there was only so much work around, but there were so many, fortunately the clubs gradually expanded in the '50s. And St. George Leagues Club started. But some of the big clubs were, before St. George Leagues Club, were Kogarah RSL.

02:00 Kogarah RSL had, before the Tivoli closed, had Tivoli girls coming after the show, after the Tivoli show, to do their late night show there at Kogarah. And we had quite big shows there, big variety shows, and I worked in some of those, worked there, did that work.

02:30 **What about jazz and dance music. Was that popular as well?**

Well, the variety field was a far bigger field than the jazz. There may have been big dance halls, big dance halls going, with some big orchestras going, but that was mainly straight balls, straight balls at the Town Hall and other places like that. Later on the other people may have got going,

03:00 in the Rock and Roll may have got going and other things, but in the early part it was, after the war was the balls.

**What was a big venue for a ball in Sydney?**

The Town Hall.

**The Sydney Town Hall?**

Sydney Town Hall, and another big venue believe, was Marrickville Town Hall. And another place I believe was Bankstown. There were so many of those. Big balls were the winter time thing, and

03:30 they employed quite a big size band and often a soprano, you know, to sing and so forth. And the work that was going around then was also the, I didn't get into this, I was still sick, but the work that was going around was in the State Theatre, the Prince Edward Theatre, which is no longer there. Like they had floor shows and there were other places like that that had floor shows.

04:00 Could have been six week floor shows, together with the particular theatre show, cinema show that was

on there too, but there was this floor show that was on before the cinema. But overall it was very, very interesting. It was alive. It wasn't, jazz, jazz didn't mean, I can't, I don't' think there was much. Jazz is around now,

04:30 it's current now, but it didn't, it wasn't OK then, wasn't going then. Well, The Basement and those places just weren't around. And other places, too, you see. Now what did I do? I, with my work, I worked, I went down, I got work initially,

05:00 I think, through going to, winning the Amateur Hour, a weekly amateur Hour, and getting so much work from an agent, Tommy Mack, who took me on. Also got work, from work that I'd done. You see, one job, fortunately for me, it was good, led to another, and another.

05:30 And it went on, and on and on. Just like that, and for quite some time. And that's where my work came from. And then we went to England in '56, '56 yes, before television

06:00 here, early '56. We thought we'd beat television here. We didn't. It started in '56, in Melbourne on, for the Olympic Games, '56. That was September, I think, yes.

**So why did you go to England?**

Well, I wanted experience and wanted to broaden my horizons and so forth,

06:30 and I was able to work in a men's club there for a good six months, which was amazing, amazing, when so many other English pianists weren't even working. This is a tough cookie, this entertainment bit. They weren't absolutely,

07:00 they were around the Windmill Theatre, just hanging around, the pianists, waiting for agents to pick them up. Just as though they were prostitutes. I thought, if I've got to do that, that's the end of it, you see. But this is what pianists were doing, and working for lousy money, and I got fairly decent money working in this place. Although this was only working about 60-odd hours a week, yes, 60-odd hours, afternoon and night, thank you very much, six nights a week..

07:30 **Well what sort of hours was this men's club opened?**

Open all sorts of hours, you know. All sorts of hours.

**What sort of club was it?**

Well, it was a tickertape machine place, a tickertape machine is one where the races, a racing place, where the races are shown from all over Britain and Ireland, and all they've got to do is like come down and see, well, I didn't do very well on that one.

08:00 Apparently the, you could bet on the next floor. I never went up there. I kept away from that, thank you very much. I wanted to keep my money.

**What did you do there? Was it straight piano?**

Straight piano, and singing, too. And I was able to hold a job down, because Winnie Atwell had been there, you'd know Winnie Atwell, she'd been there about a year previously,

08:30 and got the sack after a week, got the sack after a week, I'll repeat it, they just didn't like her, and I was there for a week and I got the sack too, but they called me back. The English people, amazing thing, liked me. Amazing. I think possibly because I was more than a pianist. I was a singer too, and so I think I added variety,

09:00 and so that was that one, you know.

**All the time you were in England, had you noticed the new phenomena of television at all at this stage?**

Yes,

**What state was it at in England at that time?**

Oh, it was coming along nicely. I did a couple of things over there fortunately. I was due to go

09:30 to a show in Cyprus, which I think I mentioned, and I think we'll let it go at that, and I didn't go, that could have led to so many more opportunities, but it just wasn't on. I got a couple of shows at, television shows,

10:00 you had to have people to help you, and Kitty Blewett and Joy Nichols helped me. Not the males, the males weren't interested, only interested in themselves. They helped me to get some more work on BBC television and radio, and that was a great help, and so I knew, knew what they did, and we both knew more about television by studying it over there, than what the people were here

10:30 when we came back knew.

**What sort of thing would you do for the BBC in those early days of television?**

Well, it was just singing at the piano, doing a couple of items on This is Your Show, or one of those. This is one of the night shows, you know, and things like that, and the television, and the radio too was a quieter show.

11:00 The work was there. I did that, but really the work was, I was due to go into the Quaglino's, which is a top night club there, but the Suez crisis came, blah, blah, blah, the Suez crisis. What was that? That was the Suez closure, and they had the people, weren't motoring in,

11:30 that's the money people. Wouldn't motor in say from twenty miles of thirty miles out from their big homes. They were not coming in. Petrol was a pound a gallon on the black market, that was, and average was only one pound, the average wage was only eight pound a week, so that was eight gallons of petrol and that was the average wage. This is sterling.

12:00 So the agent decided that a girl would have been safer to put into the bit, thinking they could bring in the males, and so forth. Those stupid people. They should have stuck with me and didn't. But anyhow that's their choice, But it was very hard to get work there. But I was given material over there of Eric Spier that a

12:30 famous coloured performer couldn't use. I can't think of this name. He was Princess Margaret's favourite pianist, and even he wasn't working over there when we came away, and he died in Hong Kong not working, you know, poor old cove, but just can't think of his name. Doesn't matter.

**Did you enjoy living in England?**

13:00 No, no. I didn't enjoy it. It was tough, You see I knew my voice was going down with the fog. With the fog, and I knew my voice would never get better whilst I was over there, so I thought if I was going to recover, going to do any work, I had better get back to Australia. I'd had enough of England.

13:30 It was a depressing place at that time. I think the English people were so sorry for themselves, and they were just looking, the English people in the main were just looking for somebody else, waiting for the government, to buy them a house. That was in the mid '50s. That's what they were doing. They weren't planning to get, here, we were planning to buy a house ourselves. We already had a house when we, before we left,

14:00 before we left England, we had a house in Pagewood. Which we didn't sell. We had something to come back to. And that's what a lot of poor performers can't say, they didn't have a house to come back to. Even Bobby Limb and Dawn Lake, they came, they were over there. They got a job in the Tivoli, which enabled them, thanks to their agent,

14:30 to come back and do a show, it was a Jack Davy show, they got into that, and we were able to come back on our own steam, and our own money, and pay top rates on an English ship and do that. That was the difference. One had the money and the other one didn't. And Jo's saying enough, but that's the truth.

**Can you tell us a bit about the jobs you got when you got back to Australia, the television work that you did**

Well, that was . . .

15:00 **For an advertising, or variety.**

Yes, well. I started practically straight into the work in the variety field, but I had an audition with a chap, Vic English, who became a very good friend, who gave me the opportunity to working in his show, Fortune at One, which was a Fortune Advertising show, on Frank Packer's Channel 9 show. Channel. Not Kerry's,

15:30 Frank Packer. And Frank Packer needed something to keep that timeslot, one o'clock to say two thirty of something going, so he was only too ready to book that time every Thursday and he had that hour and a half, two hours, whichever, to money, money in the bag, so that was Frank Packer took that.

16:00 And I did one show, and I was on a contract straight away, and the bloke that had been on a contract, his contract, won't mention his name, his contract was, he was paid off. So he was lucky, he got paid six weeks' money, but, so that's what they thought of me. And I worked with Jackie Kott,

16:30 she was the compere and Mrs Samuels, the ex, the wife of the ex-Governor, Governor Samuels, Government House. A very nice man. And a very, very nice, she was a very nice person too. She was the compere and a very good compere too. Introducing the acts, introducing the people. It was a talk show,

17:00 mainly, and also with me coming in playing here and there, and also having an artist to accompany and, you know.

**Can you describe to me what a television studio was like in those days?**

Well, I think it's, possibly, I haven't been in one recently, but it wouldn't be much different to what it is now.

**You mentioned something before about the colours they used. What was that all about?**

The colours, it was black and white television, of course, and that was ’57, yes, ’57, and you had to wear blue.

17:30 Blue was the best colour, so I wore a blue tuxedo and a blue shirt you see. And a blue Bermuda jacket. Better get it right. I was the initiator of the Bermuda jacket.

**Where did you get a Bermuda jacket?**

In London.

**It was popular in London?**

18:00 I don’t know if it was, or not. I don’t, I think it was just the idea of having something flash to come back home to, to come back home and use.

**Can you describe to me what it’s like in the television studio? Is everybody wearing blue?**

Well, as far as possible, yes. Yes, they had to. Yes, they had to. They couldn’t wear, I don’t know, white might have been all right. But it was basically a blue shirt all the time

18:30 and that was until they’d worked there, worked their lighting and all of that.

**It must have been quite a funny looking set.**

Yes, well, we just accepted it.

**I’m sorry, that’s probably my preconceptions. But you never see the colours behind the black and white television. That’s why I think it’s a very interesting point.**

Yes.

19:00 **What live gigs did you get around that time or afterwards?**

Oh, just the general business around town, the clubs. And also I did do single spots, or I did do country tours, and so forth, and in between the country tours, I’d do city work. You see I was an act, I was an accompanist, I had an accordion act, singing, I could come out and entertain,

19:30 I could come out front, you see the piano might restrict some, but I could get that accordion and come out and be right on top of the audience, you see. (Sings an Italian snippet). Voice has come back now, it’s amazing, isn’t it?

**Do you still play the accordion?**

Yes, I still, I played it somewhat, enough to get by, but a lot better than some.

**You would have been in a very good position**

20:00 **to gauge the morale of a nation, in a way. You’re entertaining them. You’re seeing people going out to be entertained.**

Yes.

**What do you think that was like in the ‘50s?**

Well, I had to be a diplomat in reaching people and I could reach, see, I played in Government House, I played for the Governor-General in his bowling club in Double Bay.

20:30 That was the Australian Governor-General. I forget his name.

**Isaacs?**

No, no.

**He was the first one.**

No, I can’t think of his name. But I played for a Governor-General there. I played for the governors. I played for the various judges, and important shows. I played for oh,

21:00 some of the very big work I used to do, promotion work for firms, and nowadays it would be all arranged by big companies to do that, but then it was just small time, and I’d do, it could be a show for Ford, it could be a show for Holden’s, it could be a show for anyone. They’ve got more up market now,

21:30 but it would be arranged for some promotion people that I would do shows for. And they were big shows, and they’d be held in some of the big clubs in the city, and so forth. And things like that. But I did all sorts of varying work.

**How was your health holding up?**

Well, with difficulty. And I’d work,

22:00 if I was having trouble, I'd get, feeling off colour, I'd get through all the work that I had, and then have a break, and then get sick. And then get better again and get some more work. And I'd do that.

**What sort of sickness would you be getting?**

Oh, the malaria. I'd have a partial, just couldn't work with malaria.

**How long did that last?**

Well, it lasted. How long did malaria last, love?

22:30 **We can stop the camera and you can ask your wife. Did you think that your malaria was a problem, it was obviously from the war, and it lasted a long time. How long, roughly, do you think it lasted?**

Well, twenty years or so, twenty years or more yes, before I got semi on top of it, yes.

**Were you getting any type of payment from the government to do with your war service?**

23:00 Not till 1983, I think it was. So it went for a hell of a long time before they finally admitted that I'd had troubles, you know. Before it was finally accepted.

**Do you think it affected your career?**

Oh, yes. Definitely a hindrance. Definitely a hindrance, yes.

**You mentioned a breakdown you had before. Do you think that was caused partly by your health?**

23:30 Oh, yes, yes. The breakdown was I think mainly the health and the strain of the business. That breakdown that I had, partial breakdown, that I had at City Tatts in the '80s was, it was, yes, caused by the tension, expected to do top class work and I wasn't really well.

24:00 So together, a certain amount of malaria came to the fore there, sickness came to the fore there, and I wasn't well.

**How did those symptoms, what symptoms did you have during that time?**

Sore body, you know. And those that have had it, you know, and I was still getting sore back and headaches and

24:30 all that sort of general, general trauma and drama and so on.

**Sweating?**

Oh, yes. Sweating. It just wasn't funny. Anyhow that's that.

**After the breakdown, did you work for many years after that?**

Yes, but I continued on a quieter, quieter style. I found that I didn't want to work six nights a week and so forth.

25:00 You see, I was getting close to 60 odd, and time was marching on.

**Did you stay in touch with people you met during the war?**

No, they were mainly from Melbourne and so I lost touch with them.

**Melbourne's not that far away.**

But I was working pretty, I was working continually, you see, and really didn't have that much time to,

25:30 one is in the entertainment, one has just got to keep on going while the work is there. It might, you take time off and it's gone. Somebody else takes the work. It's not a job where one can say, oh, I'll take six months off and then come back, because that's not the, that doesn't work like that.

**Has it always been worthwhile? You make it sound quite difficult but obviously you must be…**

Well, it's a bugger of a business, but it's a great business.

26:00 **Why is it a great business?**

It's a great thrill to be able to perform and entertain people, and it's about the only thing I could do, so you know, just do it, that was it. But I found that some of the people just impossible to deal with and so,

26:30 I gradually sort of cut it back a bit, you know. I could have done far more work I've been into City Tatts and been offered work by one of the managers, who said, "You can come in here and work any time you like, Ron." And so that was from one of my friends, you see.

**We've just seen, you can certainly play the piano very well.**

I wasn't really, I was off colour there, today.

27:00 **Has that musical and entertainment spirit gone down through generations to your family?**

Well, it think, I've got, people, my mother was musical and my other side, I've got a famous relative,

27:30 who's got an Italian name, Grimaldi, and he was a famous clown in the 1930s. He had the dubious honour of being Hitler's favourite comic. There you are. Hitler's famous comic. He worked three times at Berchtesgaden. And so it's something that he wouldn't be sprouting out forth in England, but he did work three times for Hitler. And amongst, he worked 19 years in

28:00 pantomime in Daly's theatre, this is from an aunt of mine, a session of about six to eight weeks, so he was one in demand in England, and so forth. And I have, apart from that I have, this son, that son over there is very talented, if only he'd carried on.

**What sort of talents does your son have?**

He's, well, he can do an

28:30 impersonation of Spencer the garbage man. And he can sing. He's not a, he's quite musical, but he's a real actor, and he's a wonderful, quite a, very good ad libber and he's wonderful with reading parts, learning parts, and that's when he was doing, practically, even as a two-year old, for little children shows anyhow. A bit older than two.

29:00 We took him in '56 to the Royal Academy. Jo arranged an appointment six months beforehand. Why? Because we thought, we knew he had talent if he was prepared to work at it. But the blighter wasn't. But anyhow that's another story.

**We won't go into that. You life, from the perspective you have now,**

29:30 **how do you feel about the war?**

The war was necessary. Necessary because Japan had to be stopped. Japan really had to be stopped. And Germany had to be stopped too. You see the, Japan should have been stopped sooner than what it was. Japan was going all through China

30:00 and the rest of the world were ready to see Japan annihilate China. Well, that wasn't fair. They should have come in and had a go at Japan in those earlier days, and then things might have been a bit easier for the rest of the world too. And the authorities should have stopped Hitler before he got that far, and they shouldn't have had such a weak individual as Chamberlain

30:30 in charge. He was just the usual pomptie-diddy-pomp-pomp Englishman, and didn't have any guts. There's the Englishman that's got guts, like Churchill, and there's the one that doesn't have guts, like Chamberlain.

**What about on a personal level. What effect do you think the war had on your life?**

31:00 Yes, you can say, one can feel sorry for themselves. But I don't feel sorry for myself. It just happened, so get over with it.

**But you should have quite the opposite effect. It started your career. How do you feel about what the war did for you?**

Yes, well, that, it wasn't fair because I was handicapped by being in the Services when I couldn't when I would have studied more in my 19, 20, 21s and really studied seriously, and maybe I could have become a great,

31:30 or a decent singer, or a great pianist. I've had people say, it was such a tragedy, this is classical people, such a tragedy that I hadn't kept to the classical music. But really I was getting too late, I'm becoming 27 and 28 and trying to study. One had to be studying in 18, 19

32:00 and before that, you see, to make a go in the real straight classical music field.

**Was that an ambition that you had before the war, though?**

I think if I had had a fair go, yes. I think I would've, I wanted to go to The Con, and I think I had the opportunity, but my mother wouldn't let me go, thank you very much.

32:30 She didn't think it was, didn't think I could make a go of it. Didn't think I could make any money in it. She couldn't understand it, so it wasn't any good as far as she was concerned. And I had a stupid stepfather, a Pommie.

**We've talked about that. How do you feel about the role that you played in winning that war. Are you proud of that small role?**

Well, I did what I could and I was a… I know I brought enjoyment

33:00 to quite a few people, so I'm satisfied with that. And I know what I did, and I was singing right at the

top of my voice, but I was able to sing well then because the air was so clear and the sinus trouble wasn't prevalent. But it was prevalent when I came back here and together with the malaria,

33:30 you see. It was a double whammy?

**How important do you think the entertainers were, in that war?**

Well, I think terribly important because I think we helped to restore some equilibrium amongst so many people. So many poor coves who felt absolutely lost, and I think we would have been a certain amount of help to them.

**How do you feel about war in general, these days?**

Oh, anti-war, anti-war, anti-war.

34:00 **There's been a lot of wars since the Second World War ended. Do you think it was worth it?**

Well, I even think this last one was worth it, because, that man Saddam Hussein, he's just murdering his own particular people, and if he'd been allowed to carry on he would have murdered far more than what he's done now. They're still finding bodies of children

34:30 that have been murdered by him The different ethnic crowds or Iraqis that have been murdered by him. He was a terrible man, it should never been allowed, and he should have been assassinated, should have been got rid of years ago. No, he was a bad man. It was necessary in that sense.

35:00 I don't know whether the government, all the baloney that the Americans was right or not, but maybe, whether or not, there was need to stop that violent murderer, and a need to stop Osama Bin Laden. They're bad types that need to be stopped, and there's need to stop

35:30 the Timorese or the Muslims that killed all the Australians and their own people in that Bali bombing, too. There's need to stop them. They're saying, "Allah is great. Allah is great." Fancy calling themselves people, when they just murder, not forgetting Australians, murdering their own people. And don't care about it.

**Your generation stopped Hitler and stopped the Japanese militarists taking over,**

36:00 **and you actually won for us quite a big period of peace. How do you think we've used that peace?**

Not very well.

**What are your views on that?**

I think there has to be a greater effort on everyone's part for people to work, all races to work in harmony, for all churches, all religions to work in harmony, which they're not doing,

36:30 and possibly religion, although I'm Church of England, and supposedly religious, religion is often one of the banes of the trouble. And that's with the Muslims and with the Christian Church. The Christian Church was having the Muslims in the war of the Crusades, and that's been on television recently and so forth,

37:00 and righty-o, we've got to try and live together with everyone. And stop the bickering, and religion is one of the worst things. And this comes back to my own crowd, Northern Ireland. I'm on both sides of the fence. I'm a Prod, Protestant, but I'm also a Catholic too, on the other side, too. And my father's lines are from Northern Ireland.

37:30 I feel very sorry for the Irish Catholics.

**Can you see a future without those kinds of troubles and wars?**

I think only with the coming of God, God amongst all people. Only with the coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

**This archive is going to be put away for the future. It may be there in a hundred years' time,**

38:00 **or a hundred and fifty years' time. If you had a chance to speak to people in that period, is there anything you would like to say. Is there any final you would have as a message on the end of this archive?**

A hundred years' time.

**Whenever. Is there any message you have that you would like to put down before we finish?**

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to consider the well-being of the world.

38:30 The well-being of not just yourselves, not just you own family, but the human family and the human family is not only your own family or your own people, whether it's, and forgetting religions, forgetting all religions, the human family of people.

39:00 The Asians, helping the Asians, helping the Africans, helping all people. And trying to build a better society for not only our own people, but for everyone, everyone, everyone. That’s my message to you.

**Thank you very much. It’s been a pleasure talking to you.**

Is that all right?

**That’s a great message. One of the better ones.**