

Australians at War Film Archive

Gene Owens (Geeno) - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/406>

Tape 1

00:37 **OK Gene, if you'd just like to start off and give us a bit of a summary.**

Yes. I was born in Rockhampton. My father was a US serviceman stationed in Rockhampton during World War II and my birthday is the 2nd of the 2nd, '45. My mother died after I was born. My father on my birth certificate, there's no data on that and my mother was engaged

01:00 to him. I went to school. I was in an orphanage up there until I was three. I had a grandfather which I never met who died when I was about seven. I was brought to a foster family here in Yeppoon. I went to school here from 1950 to 1960. I was on a trawler and a pineapple farm for 12 -18 months and then when I was 17, I joined the army and had six years in the Australian Army. After the

01:30 Australian Army which ended in '68, I married in '69 to a local girl in Rockhampton. I worked in a wine and spirits store in Rockhampton for approximately two years and then I joined Australia Post as a postman for a couple of years and then went in, went on to mail sorter, mail officer. Then I got axed in, 20 years ago, 1984. I was quite ill with PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]

02:00 and since '84, my marriage ended about two years, three months ago after 31 years which was a surprise, and since, I've been living here since then.

OK Gene, if you could

02:30 **talk a little bit about growing up because you had quite an unusual childhood.**

Yes, I was with people in Yeppoon here and they were quite elderly, well to us. They were 55 and she'd had two families, two marriages, two families. Mrs West was the lady, Mrs West and Dave West was the husband. She had grown up children and that out at Tanby which is seven miles out of town and we used to do a lot of

03:00 shooting and fishing and generally running around the bush. As I said, behind Queen Street was the only primary school in Yeppoon when I went to school here. They built a new school over in Tucker Street which was the first high school in Yeppoon which was also a part of the primary school and I was in the second intake of students that went through Grade 9 or sub junior as it was then.

03:30 I did junior which was Grade 10 at the time which was a fairly reasonable education for those days. As I said, during school I used to go out on this pineapple farm and on boats and wander around the bush, fish. It was a really good life for a kid. You've got no idea, it was great.

Your parents, your

Foster

04:00 parents?

Foster parents. What were their reasonings behind taking orphanage children?

There was about four or five of us which were orphans, all told, in the family. They were a fairly caring family. Things were fairly harsh for their days. They were pensioners, there was never a lot of money to speak of but times weren't too bad, and we had very good

04:30 teachers at the Yeppoon High School at the time. There was a chap by the name of Harry Hower. He's still around today. I meet up with him occasionally, and he was very good. He was before his time. He's about 87 now and actually did find a job for me in an apprenticeship in cabinet making at the time and I turned it down and the State Childrens' Affairs [State Children Department] at that time were not terribly impressed that

05:00 I'd turned down an apprenticeship. He got a lot of jobs for people who did the industrial course during that period of time. He had a lot of contacts in Rockhampton and for certain people he used to go

through, and he'd put himself out. He was a great, great man, one of the few people I can really look up to and I still call him Mr Hower to this day. He says, "Gene. It's Gene", and I say, "No. It's Mr Hower", and he's a

05:30 top man.

Why did you turn the apprentice down?

I wanted to join the army. I also got offered a job with Queensland Rail as a clerk and they weren't terribly impressed when I turned that down neither. So I wanted to join the army.

What would be your earliest memory?

Probably when I was about five or six. I went to Yeppoon Primary School and

06:00 I uttered a few words which were deemed at that time not appropriate and I got my mouth washed out with soap by Mrs Fisher. She was a strict disciplinarian for a better word, very strict, but I can remember probably a little, not much before, I was four at that time. I'd started school actually when I was four year old but I turned five within a week or 10 days. That's probably about the earliest.

06:30 **How many people were at this school?**

Trying to think. Probably a couple of hundred, two hundred or three hundred. The population of Yeppoon in those days was 2,500. There's 17,000 here today.

You've seen a lot of changes.

Yeah, in the town and everything and dirt streets are now bitumen. Kerbing and channelling and all that was very lacking in those days.

What are

07:00 **some of the other major, what are some of the things that really spoke of Yeppoon when you were a child?**

I used to spend a lot of time at Tanby. The people that brought me up they had, as I said, they had a grown family and I used to hang around with their children a bit. There was a McBride family in Rockhampton, they had a few daughters and we used to pushbike around. When I went up to Rocky [Rockhampton] we'd pushbike and stop at their place. We'd pushbike around Rocky.

07:30 There was also Johnny Daglish from Tanby. We'd be sitting around 10 or 11 o'clock at night and we'd say "Will we go fishing?" So we'd pack up everything and we'd walk. It would be 9 or 10 kilometres and we'd go fishing. We had one water bottle between the three of us and about 9 or 10 the next morning we had to walk 7 or 8 kilometres back and it was very thirsty and you'd come across a pool of water. We used to get a lot of rain in those days and it didn't matter how dry, what colour the water was, you were that

08:00 thirsty you just drank it. And we built fish traps in creeks and used to go shooting wallabies and kangaroos. Time was just irrelevant. We used to drag for bait in the back of the causeway which is, it might be nine o'clock at night or eight o'clock or any time. We'd get a mad sort of thought, we'll go fishing, or we'll do this and do that and it was all on sort of thing, but

08:30 later on, after I'd left school, I got a scholarship to go and do senior but I found school was pretty challenging, I suppose you could say and I didn't have any ambition to do senior. It would've been a hard two years, really hard two years and anyhow, so I decided that after I'd turned down these jobs, the State

09:00 Childrens' [State Children Department] weren't very impressed, and then there was a trawler. There used to be about 30 odd trawlers here in those days and I went out to the Swain Reefs once for three weeks and did a lot of trips up and down the coast. And some of your nicer scenery is better just up the coast in the army territory, better scenery actually than the Whitsundays. So I've been back in recent times and it's something you never get tired of, the ocean. I have a little

09:30 21 foot long Roberts [boat] and to get out on that and get, not even fish in it, is just mind blowing, it's so great.

Just going back to your family. When did you find out about your parents?

My birth parents?

Your natural parents, yes.

Probably about eight, seven or eight.

10:00 Maybe might've been nine. That's when my grandfather died, when I was seven. I'd never met him. He was living in Mount Isa at the time and left me a small amount of money which would've been some at the time in his will and I had my mother's engagement ring plus a scarf plus a watch of hers. So that's

10:30 my mother's photo up on the bookcase where you probably can't see it now, but it's up there.

So were you ever able to find out about much of her life?

No. Actually just recently, about a year ago, a lady by the name of Phyllis Quinn here in Yeppoon, (actually three years ago because I was married at the time) and she said to my wife outside the post office, "Is that Gene Owens in there?" And she said, "Yes", and she said, "Well I was in hospital

11:00 when he was born." She said, "I was having a child," and she said, "Anyhow his grandfather was there" and she said to me, after she introduced herself, she said, "You were just a very tiny little baby." She said, "You were very very tiny" and then she said, "and your grandfather was very very upset when your mother died." I said, "Yeah, that's pretty understandable, you know." So

11:30 I don't know what the cause of death of my mother was, but it was the day after.

So did you ever find out much about your, the American?

No. As I said in later years, probably 15 years ago, I got my birth, complete birth certificate and there was no, nothing to indicate who my father was.

12:00 **No name?**

No, no name, no. So I never, and that's the only lady that I... I've got apparently quite a few cousins. I have a second cousin in Rockhampton which is a Second World War Vet. He's early 80's. They looked after me for a little while, after, when I was a little baby, just able to sit up. They gave me a couple of photos of myself at that period and I've never really quizzed them.

12:30 I was with them for a while, I don't know how long. They're in their 80's and I don't know whether I'd like to venture down, ask them why did they put me in a home or what the real, or what happened there, I don't know. I keep in contact with them. They're the only relatives that I keep in contact [with]. I believe I've quite a few out around Blackall and Barcaldine. There's

13:00 Owens out there and people said to me, you're related to the Owens out there, but I mean (UNCLEAR) go and everything, haven't worried about it.

At school can you remember being taught much about World War II?

No, not a great deal, though we did have a teacher, Mr MacCallum in about Grade 6 and he

13:30 used to, he was an ex-bomber pilot in World War II and he used to talk at length quite a bit about World War II. The other teachers, very little. How I got sort of probably interested in the military, the people that brought me up, the Wests, she had two, three sons in World War II and one of those was killed in New Guinea and the other two came back to Australia.

14:00 And one of the chaps, his medals are in the house and I used to look at them and think this is alright.

As a little boy, you'd see the medals?

Yeah, and think this looks pretty good. Be in the war and all this sort of thing. I wouldn't mind being a soldier.

What do you think, from a child's mind, what do you think was so attractive about it? Like you saw the medals but what else?

14:30 Well I used to read, I started reading quite early, seven year old, seven or eight year old I started reading and then it was all about the Australians at war, all the histories, and Brits [British] escaping from prisoner of war camps and airforce and it all seemed very romantic at the time and I read a lot of, I probably used to read in those days a couple of books a week. I still read, try and read four or five hours a day as it is

15:00 now. But I don't know, probably certain Australians being there, they've been there, they've done that. Everything they've done, they've done extremely well, the military, and it's something that I really looked up to, the fellows being away to war, and though they never really spoke about it, what they'd done or what they'd seen, but whether that was a part of the mystery of it I don't know. But it was from that age

15:30 when I thought, Gee, I wouldn't mind joining the army or the military.

As a child, when you were doing so much reading, was there any particular campaign or something that you really felt inspired by?

The Dambusters, the Battle of Britain. It was all Australian military I used to read in those days, and

16:00 Kokoda, the Battle for Kokoda Trail and I thought (reading about it in some detail even in those days) I thought the Australians are a remarkable crowd. And then later on when I was with the Americans in Vietnam and the Australians, I realised the Australian soldier is much much better than the Americans will ever be.

Why do you think that is?

Operating procedures, our training, officers.

- 16:30 Also, they treat the fellows much better. As a soldier, they treated us much better on a one to one basis than the the American officers treat their blokes or did during those days. Treated their blokes like second class citizens.

Just going back a little bit to, so you finished school in year 10?

That's right.

And you mentioned that you found it very challenging.

Yes, I got two B's and

- 17:00 three C's which was just enough for a scholarship to go to senior. That's pretty young. I was 14 when I finished school and just that everything I did I had to work pretty hard for. I enjoyed woodwork, sheet metal work, trade drawing, I enjoyed those. English wasn't too bad but, maths was OK, but chemistry

- 17:30 and physics, bloody hopeless. That's putting in mildly, about a Z minus I think.

So you left school and did a lot of your peers leave then as well?

Yes, most of us left. Probably in Grade 8, probably in the sub junior class I was in, probably about 30, 35 people which was the second class of sub juniors in Yeppoon.

- 18:00 Most everyone left those days at Grade 8 which was scholarship. They called it scholarship in those days but then not many ever went on to do senior. So in those days for this area anyhow, for those days it was a high standard of education. But as I said, I had two years

- 18:30 of it and I thought "My God, another two years. Not for me." Again, the State Children's Department weren't over thrilled about that, but they said to me, "It's your decision", and I said, "No, I'm not going back to school."

How was the State's Children Department?

We had a bloke by the name of Paterson in Rockhampton which was the director in Rockhampton and had a lady, I can't think of her name, working for him.

- 19:00 He was a World War II, veteran from Crete (which I didn't realise until much later) but he was a great man, a really top man. He took an interest in his charges, or he certainly did in me. I used to come home on leave from the army and I'd always call in, say hello to him, Joe Paterson, and he was a great man, yes.

So it was fairly harmonious growing up?

Yeah, it was.

- 19:30 It was OK. Going to school there was a, stigma is not the word, but there was a sort of us and them sort of, a little bit. We were the 'state kids' or a little bit of that at school, not to any great extent but it was... We had to go down to the office for our school books and there was always just a few little things.

Do you think, how do

- 20:00 **you think that affected you? Did you develop other kind of?**

No, it didn't affect me all that much. I felt probably a little bit embarrassed at the time but no lasting effect or no real great problem, no.

Do you think it made your other brothers and sisters within that family, do you think it made you closer with them?

Fairly close, yeah. We were, the saying is, we're in the same boat.

- 20:30 **So you left Grade 8, year 8 and you had a number of options?**

That's right. An apprenticeship in a cabinet place and an option to join Queensland Rail as a clerk, but it didn't appeal to me actually. But

- 21:00 I had a great time working on the trawler which we were after prawns, chasing prawns and fishing and was again very laid back and something completely different. And then I went to work on a pineapple farm here in Yeppoon which Atkinsons owned at the time, Reg Gibbons and Reg Atkinson, and I actually was at school with a Barry Atkinson who was also best man at my wedding. Barry went on to eventually

- 21:30 take over the farm and I worked at their farm probably for about 12 months. The wages in those days was 10 pounds a week. That would've been '60, '61 through till April '62. I was on the trawler say '60 to '61 or part of that time.

What was your role on the pineapple farm?

Labourer, just picking pineapples. Those days

22:00 everything was, wasn't much mechanical. It was very hard work and I was very fit. You'd be chipping, spraying poisons, not so much the poisons, but chipping, picking pineapples, things like that. It was hard work in the sun. And I'd always wanted to join the

22:30 forces and when I went up to Rockhampton for my first interview with the army and they said, "OK, we'll send you to Brisbane" and further tests, medical, so forth. And they said, "Do you want to join up or what do you want to do?" I thought well, I'm not going back to Yeppoon to those bloody pineapples. So hence I joined the military.

Just to go back, can you remember, what can you remember about the Korean War?

23:00 I remember the comics from GI Joe or something. I remember the comics on the Korean War. That never ever played any part of my joining the army or probably I was too young. I remember I was sort of interested but not in newspapers, but I never ever followed that campaign.

23:30 **So you decided to join up with the army because it was better than going back pineapple picking?**

Yeah, well I did want to join the army anyhow.

Was that a left over from a childhood thing?

To join?

Mmm.

Yes, I was pretty keen.

Were there any other reasons?

Well, I wanted to get out of Yeppoon for a start and I'd never been any further than Rockhampton until that stage of my life, and that used to be a big thing to catch a train here

24:00 in Yeppoon and go to Rockhampton for the day. That was pretty major. So I did want to get out and see the world sort of thing, or see a little bit more of it anyhow. And when I joined the army, I was just 17 and it was against me a little bit because Malaya was on at the time, but you had to be 19 before you could go overseas and so, yes, I was a little disappointed

24:30 that I didn't get overseas at an earlier time.

What was it like pulling into Brisbane?

Actually, I was pretty impressed with Brisbane. When I went down there to join, they ran us around in an army vehicle, army truck. There were no buses or such in those days. You got in the back of a van or a truck.

25:00 And after I joined and sworn in, I went out to Enoggera Army Barracks and spent a night there and we were treated with kid gloves there and they sent us home for about 10 days to tidy up any matters, and then it was down to Kapooka which was a first recruit training battalion just outside of Wagga. We did six weeks there and then I went on to Sydney and really the first time I'd ever seen traffic lights, or I had

25:30 seen them in Brisbane, but walking in the traffic lights and so forth and all. For a kid from Yeppoon, 2,500 people, it was rather impressive.

Did they do any kind of medicals and all that kind of thing initially?

Yes. When the army recruiters came around to Rockhampton, the then 42nd Battalion was stationed in Archer Street and the recruiting people worked out of there, which I had a medical at that time and some sort of written test from

26:00 memory, and then they got back to me and said, OK, we'll send you to Brisbane for further tests and further medical.

What were the tests that they did in Rocky?

I can't remember. Just written tests, I don't remember much.

What uniform were you issued with?

When I joined the army and went to 1RTB [Recruit Training Battalion] Kapooka, we were issued with khakis,

26:30 like overalls, actually. That was our training uniform and then once a week we used to have a company parade and a battalion parade which we had jungle greens and they had to be starched and looked after, and they were worn only on that parade, and we were also issued with a battle dress which was a different uniform than they have today, and we were issued with that which was winter. Then we also

wore that on battalion

27:00 parades or maybe if we were on guard or something, but generally it's just a khaki beret and khaki zip up jacket and bib type overalls.

So you pulled into Sydney and what news had you heard about Vietnam?

Vietnam had just started in 1962 and the training team went across. I wasn't aware that we

27:30 had troops there in '62, but in '64 (I'd been in the army two years then), in Malaya, (Borneo was well underway), which I wanted to go. It was a two year posting in Malaya at the time which I thought would've been great, but not being 19, I didn't. One of the reasons why I missed out, I wanted to join infantry or artillery, but,

28:00 and all the chaps that joined up, there were so many young blokes in those days, 17, joining the army. Anyone 19, 21 and that, they used to grab those for the combat arms, army, which was artillery, armoured and combat arms because they could be sent, trained and sent overseas and people like myself were in the non-combat arms like service corps, transport, ordnance, non-combat arms of the army.

28:30 **So was that disappointing?**

Yeah, it was. It was disappointing at the time, yes, but later on when I realised, when I did get to Vietnam and realised what the difference was in my lifestyle compared to these poor buggers. I used to I think 'Touch wood Gene, you're not with them'. The mine accidents and so forth, and I'd see them coming back in

29:00 and shake my head and touch wood.

What were your foster parents thinking when you signed up?

As I said, my foster father died when I was 11 and that was probably a major thing in my life because him and I got on extremely well, really well, and that really was a blow.

29:30 But Mrs West, (which we called them Mum and Dad), I had to get her consent and then when I joined at 17, the State Children's Department, I was under them until I was 18 I think, (UNCLEAR) and they said, you're with a disciplined group and they signed me off, for a better word, with the State Children's once I joined the army, but there was no hassle from Mrs West or Mum.

She didn't mention anything? She'd lost

30:00 **one son, was it?**

That's right, yes, in New Guinea. No, it didn't. When she knew I was, well she would've known that I was pretty keen about it.

So what kind of training did you have here in Australia?

I went through 12 weeks at Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka which was very tough physically, reasonably

30:30 tough mentally. Everything was jump, jump, two minutes to do that, two minutes to do this, yelled at all the time. It was really a big wake up sort of thing. Something I hadn't expected, probably being 17 and a lot more naive than the 17 year olds are today. I didn't know what I was getting into really until I got there and that was a real wake up call and an eye opener. But those days,

31:00 a lot would be corporals that actually did the training, were mainly Korean War vets and Malayan and whilst they were very tough, everything had to be done on the dot and I always thought they were fair men. There was no bastardry or anything which I think is in the army and I've spoken to fellows, fellow Vietnam vets that followed me later

31:30 on at recruit training and I believe, and I still think today, there's some bastardry, for a better word. But these chaps did their job and outside of their job, there was no ill feeling. They didn't go out of their way to make trouble for you or anything like that.

What were some of the biggest surprises, do you think?

Just how everything had to be done and every morning your blankets had to be folded up

32:00 and when they said, jump, I mean you jumped immediately, not like five seconds later or you were... You've got one minute, two minutes to do this and it was very, very regimented. Everyone was called corporal or even privates, it was Private Smith or Private Jones, whoever that was, and it was not corporal, 'corp', it was corporal or sergeant or sir. You marched around the area. You didn't walk around the Recruit Training Battalion,

32:30 you marched everywhere. As a group if you were going somewhere, you didn't straggle, you marched as a group.

So what were the particulars of the training, what type of training?

We started off with a SLR, [self loading rifle] Australian built. We started a lot of marching of course, drill marching, left turns, right turns, marching in split platoons, marching as companies,

- 33:00 rifle shooting, which I enjoyed. We started on a 25 yard range, moved up to 100 yards into 300 yard ranges. It was very cold at, I was there in about May till June, no, it would've been about July, August. Twelve weeks at 1RTB training battalion. In that we did a week of duties. A week would
- 33:30 have been on guard duty at the main gate. We had to be dressed in our battle dress and sort of on the ball, and we'd also done a week's regimental duties which was usually working around the kitchens or washing dishes or peeling spuds or sort of KP [Kitchen Police] as the Yanks call it. And then midway through our training we had four days leave which we had a choice of where we wanted to go and most of the young blokes went to Sydney, myself
- 34:00 included and went to Taronga Park Zoo and as I said ,that was a real eye opener.

So you went to Sydney in uniform?

Yes, we had to wear uniform..

What was the public's response to you?

A couple of times, not then but later on, someone said to me "Are you in the Army Cadets?" and I said, "No, I'm in the Australian Regular Army." I thought that was pretty good. Look back and

- 34:30 laugh now.

So the training was just fairly general?

Yeah, training, as I said, was very 'jump, jump' orientated. Do this, do that, now. No one would ever back talk or answer, 'Why?' I mean you just did what you were told. There was no, "Why are we doing this, Sir or Corporal?" You do it and if you don't bloody do it, you're in

- 35:00 trouble sort of thing. Oh, and we had cold showers there. It was the old camp, old Second Recruit Training Battalion, even though it was winter, and there was a sort of fire, coal fired hot water system that very rarely worked and bloody cold showers in Wagga in the middle of winter. Sometimes the water was not warm, but the chill was off it and other times it was just bloody cold.
- 35:30 But it was, we had eight to a hut. They were old Quonset huts [prefabricated huts] from the Second World War and there were seven of us, all 17, 18, and the oldest guy was Brian, can't think of his name offhand, was Brian, anyhow he was 21 and he was the old guy. We used to call him the old guy and he was made a captain to keep us in some sort of order.
- 36:00 And he was honoured with a Distinguished Conduct Medal in Vietnam, Brian London. He was a cab driver in civilian life. He was a chap that I had a bit of time for also. The rest of us were kids, 17, and Brian was sort of a bit of a steadying influence on the hut. Yeah, top bloke.

So what happened after training?

I was posted to Puckapunyal which is outside of a little town,

- 36:30 Seymour, about 60 miles north of Melbourne for corps training which I was posted to Royal Australian Army Service Corps which is mainly transport, supply. We did two years, sorry, we did two weeks what the corps did, what the corps was about, a bit of history of the corps. The change from 1RTB Kapooka training to there was like going on a Christmas holiday because the corporals
- 37:00 became first names, there was no...Whilst you still marched around in a group, everything was very much, was like apples and chalk for a better word, that was the difference. Once you got out of 1RTB you were back into a, back into the real world you could say almost and then had some driver training there at Puckapunyal. I ran into a chap there from an insurance company and I, his
- 37:30 name escapes me now, and he said to me, "Gene, there's something I've looked at all my life," and he said, "Gene", he said, "never make enemies because they can't help you." And I was 17 when he told me that and it's something I still quote it today. He used to run us down for the weekend to Melbourne. He sold insurance around the army camp and also if you wanted something from Melbourne he would bring it back for you or something.

- 38:00 **What kind of insurance was he selling around the army camp?**

That was life insurance mainly those days. So I took it out, one out with him and I had for about 22 years before I cashed it in. Besides that, it was his job, but he was a good bloke. I mean he'd load his car up and take us down to Melbourne and there was a bus. We could've caught a bus down or something. At Puckapunyal it was very cold.

- 38:30 We used to have ice in the water buckets until ten or eleven o'clock in the morning. That's right, we were in brick barracks and there were lots of rabbits around the barracks. We had green grass around

where we were and everyone would pile out the bottom floor, out the window in the morning with sticks or at night we'd chase rabbits around the paddock with sticks trying to kill them, but we never caught a rabbit. We got a kangaroo once, so we bailed him up and caught him. I was

39:00 17 and a half at this stage or a little bit better. Then I moved to Broadmeadows in Melbourne which was also a migrant camp, which was also a Second World War built camp. There probably weren't many soldiers there from memory, probably about 60 or 70, maybe a few more, and I was there and did a driver training course.

39:30 It was on the outskirts of Melbourne in those days, but I used to go into Melbourne down to Luna Park at St Kilda and they were good days. We drove all around Victoria in GMC [General Motors Corporation (USA)] Studebakers and Second World War artillery tractors which were a sort of, you'd call them today you'd call them a light armoured vehicle. That's what we had for driver training, but it was very interesting. We drove everywhere, all over the state and for young

40:00 blokes it was good. And again the corporal, instructors and sergeant were very approachable. Again, no bastardry, you did what they asked you to do. And just an idea of that, we drove to Melbourne one day in the back of an army truck and we got up to a hill they call Pretty Sally and there was snow and none of us, that I was aware, had seen snow before and sergeant driver stopped the truck and got out and said, "Now

40:30 we'll have a snow fight". And that was those days, well, being young blokes, maybe they had a bit of a fatherly instinct, I don't know, but I was fairly impressed with the Non-Commissioned Officers of the day. I thought that they were fair. If you did what you were told there was no hassles.

We're just at the end of the tape.

Tape 2

00:32 **So you went and you did a couple of driver training courses. What were the specifics, what kind of training was it?**

Actually went out into the country in dirt road driving. Also driving on bitumen roads, country roads and also driving in traffic in Melbourne itself, and I must admit I was bloody hopeless. Particularly being 17 and coming from Yeppoon and

01:00 I had some problems there.

Did you find that the hardest, driving in the city?

Yeah, that was scary to put it quite honest.

So you had some basic kind of training and then you had driver training?

Driver training, yes, and I was in Melbourne, Broadmeadows for approximately August

01:30 till just on before Christmas '62. I hated Melbourne because of the climate. I couldn't come to grips with it, the weather down there and I was (UNCLEAR), I really was unhappy in Melbourne. It got on top of me actually. We had some good times in the barracks sort of thing living four or five to a room. We had a big room at the time, but

02:00 the weather, and then I was posted to Randwick, New South Wales which is an inner city suburb of Sydney and I was there for four years and that was fantastic, probably one of the better times of my life. Not very regimental and it was almost like a day job, it was pretty good.

What kind of duties did you have there?

I started

02:30 off as a barman in the sergeants' mess at Randwick and that was interesting, learn as you go sort of thing. When I'd been there a few months and I was a bit in awe of all the sergeants and warrant officers, but again they came across extremely good people, and they were mainly Second World War vets or Korean War veterans,

03:00 but there were no problems with them at all, and after a while it was on a first name basis. Then after six months or so I got to run the place and do the ordering and I got paid a corporal's pay which I didn't get the rank, but they called it at that time Higher Drawing Allowance and at the end of each month (I must've been doing a fairly good job) because they used to give me handshake with a few dollars, a couple of pounds at the time which was a bit of money then, 'cause you could go out those days in

03:30 Sydney with a pound and you'd have a darn good night out.

What sort of things did they tell you about, the sergeants? What sort of things did they tell you about their experiences?

A little bit about their experiences, but again they didn't talk all that much about their war time experiences. They were all wearing ribbons, medals, ribbons and that and you knew basically where they'd been and that, but those days, not many people ever

- 04:00 spoke on, or they might've had a laugh or said something in a throw away line or something, but no one ever reminisced really. 'We did this' or 'we did that' but they were a good crowd. So I did that for, Gee, about two years I suppose, 20 months, two years.

In the bar?

Yes. It was day on, day off situation. I used to start at

- 04:30 4.30 in the afternoon. I'd go through to approximately, officially ten but usually eleven by the time I cleaned up and got out, locked up. Next morning you'd go in at eight, do very little, might order whatever they were short of. Open the bar twelve till one, clean up again after and then four thirty you're off till four thirty the next day. So I'd go down the beach.
- 05:00 I was only a mile from Coogee Beach and I spent a lot of time at Coogee Beach and I had a mate in the transport unit alongside of us and there used to be three mail runs around Sydney to all the units and on my day off sometimes I'd go with him for the day and we'd drive all around Sydney delivering mail to army depots. And when we'd finish, (we would really go at it) and when we finished maybe one o'clock (we had an army staff car) we'd take our swimming
- 05:30 togs and we'd go to the beach for the afternoon or if there were any visiting American warships in, we'd go down and go over those. So the army never knew about that and if they had've found out about that I imagine there would've been some fur flying but that was a little perk we used to do.

What other kind of things did you get up to?

I used to get in the sergeants' mess. They were a good mob of blokes. A lot of them had young daughters

- 06:00 and myself (I was 18 at the time) I used to get to dance with them and it was all very friendly and as I said, it was usually first names with the sergeants and warrant officers. And on my days off, I'd go down to the beach. Can't think of the name - scallops. Scallops those days were, I'm only guessing now, about six or seven shillings, equivalent to 70 cents a kilo and I'd buy half a kilo for a dinner of scallops.
- 06:30 Sorry, a pound, 70 cents a pound which was half a kilo and I'd get half of half a kilo, and that would be lunch. And we had the hotel, Coogee Bay Hotel, was on the beach front and all the young bikini girls and as a young bloke interested, I spent many, many a happy hour at the Coogee Bay Hotel, many, many hours. But I used to run to the beach, it was only a mile from the camp and being fit and trying to keep fit, run to the beach.
- 07:00 And anyway, after about two years of the barman thing which was every second night on duty, every second weekend on duty, and being a young bloke I thought I wouldn't mind a little bit, and being the middle of Sydney, I thought a bit more free time would be OK. So I got a transfer down to a supply depot, 108 Supply Depot which was probably about 400, 500 metres away and I went into the office as a clerk, clerking experience and
- 07:30 anyhow a job came up full time out in the main, the supply depot which we kept ration packs, fresh food. We supplied Sydney military units with fresh food, ration packs for exercises and the job came up that there was a job for a storeman, storeman/driver there, So Warehouse Equipment Operator was the title I ended up with. Anyhow, so I had probably a bit over a year there and that was really good
- 08:00 again. We had a warrant officer in charge, our sergeants, (the warrant officer was 'Sir'), but the sergeants, corporals, first name basis. So it was more like a job. You turned up at half past seven, quarter to eight and you finished at four o'clock and at lunchtime you played badminton or sat around and talked. It was a very relaxed atmosphere and we got along extremely well. Towards the end of
- 08:30 my time there, I was told I was going to be made up to corporal in six weeks time. I had subjects. I did really well in all my exams in the army. I used to top nearly all the courses. I'd get 98, 99 percent. I really did love it. Anyhow, so I was told I was going to be made up to corporal and I thought this is a bit of alright. Anyhow then the first taskforce, we already had troops there '65,
- 09:00 '66 was the first battalion group that went to Vietnam and I was all bug eyed and all this thing. And then anyhow, one day another fellow, another bloke my age, he was an ex-paratrooper, had lost an eye, anyhow we decided we wanted to go to Vietnam and see what it was all about. Anyhow I filled out a request for a posting to Vietnam
- 09:30 say like on midday today, and I thought, oh well, I'll hear something back in a fortnight or whatever. I went back to work next morning. The boss, the captain in charge at the time, he said, "You've got to be packed and out of here. You're going to Vietnam." And you've got to be at Ingleburn the following day, which is about 35, 40 mile away. Anyhow, so I had to work that day. I still didn't get any time off to pack up
- 10:00 or anything. So I did that all day. Four o'clock, went back to my place. I was building model ships at the

time and I gave a couple of those away and then I threw everything into a tea chest and nailed the lid down. Everything that I had, 'cause I had to be out of there by the next morning. They said catch the mail vehicle out to Ingleburn. So I caught

10:30 the mail vehicle out to Ingleburn and then there was a sergeant there from the 21 Supply Platoon, was the unit that I went to Vietnam with, and I said to the sergeant, "I'd like some pre-embarkation leave" (embarkation leave for going to Vietnam). He said, "You'll be going in that short a period, there won't be time." I hadn't realised at the time and I've been told since that I should've went to Vietnam, I mean I should've

11:00 had pre-embarkation leave, but the rest of the platoon was on, which I didn't know, members of it were on pre-embarkation leave and there were about three of us there and we were boxing up equipment that was going to Vietnam.

What equipment was it?

Tools, rakes, just bits and pieces.

11:30 We were knocking wooden boxes apart and making bigger boxes. I mean it was weird. We did about three or four pallets, five pallets we made up of stuff we were sending and all that went on the HMAS, I went over on the HMAS Sydney. But anyhow my first day at this 21 Supply they said how are you medically for Vietnam? And I said, I've had shots I thought were up to scratch, and they said, "You've got to go down to the

12:00 military hospital and get a few needles". I got down there and they said, "You've got to have seven needles", they said, "Both arms." I said, "No, I only want one bugged arm." So I had seven needles in one arm and being a little bit away further on from that, I had these seven needles and another bloke the same boat as myself got a crash posting there. He had this seven but he got a bit wobbly on his feet.

What were the inoculations for?

There was smallpox,

12:30 I really don't remember, but I was surprised when they said you've got to have seven. A little bit on from that, when I got off the Sydney, they said to me you haven't had such and such and such and such, and I said, "Yes, I bloody well have," and they said, "No, and we're going to give them to you." I said, "Is there any harm, my second lot within three weeks?" And they said "No. Anyhow, so I lined up, got the three shots again on board, before I got off the

13:00 Sydney and when I did get ashore and got set up a little bit, the three needles that they gave me were on the back of the medical form rather than on the front. So I was right and I did get an extra three needles, but no harm came of it.

Can you remember the general public reception at that time?

The public, whilst they were against National Service and conscripts going to

13:30 Vietnam, and looking back in hindsight I think they were right, the public was sort of behind the troops. This is '66, April '66 and we sailed on HMAS Sydney but people were allowed on the wharf at Garden Island to see the troop ship off which was an old Second World War transport, sorry, a Korean War aircraft carrier,

14:00 took on a troop transport role. The flight deck on the Sydney was covered in vehicles and helicopters and stuff. We were the first taskforce going over in '66, going to a new area. Vung Tau as the rear base and Nui Dat was the forward operating base where the

14:30 infantry were operating from. There was also armoured vehicles on the flight deck which was armoured personnel carriers, general, and down in the hold of the ship was all equipment to set up a camp, barbed wire, this sort of stuff, military stores and so forth.

So when you got onto HMAS Sydney, what was that like?

15:00 Again it was an eye opener. As I said from when I volunteered to when I got on board the Sydney was about 10 days. I did have one night's leave in Sydney. That was good. We got a really good send off, a lot of streamers and people and women also the women on the wharf were a little upset and so forth which I suppose is understandable. Yeah,

15:30 it was fairly well organised actually. There was probably about 500 or 600 Australian troops. Mainly we were forward parties for the battalion and I don't know how many of the battalion blokes were aboard but most of the troops who went over in the first taskforce did fly over. We went across with the equipment, forklifts, that sort of stuff

16:00 and as I said, vehicles. On board it was real, was like a small, it was like a cruise. The roughest part was going out through Sydney Harbour heads. The artillery school on North Head gave us three cheers as we sailed through the Heads, and I said it was that calm you could've rowed a row boat across from Sydney to Vietnam. We went via the

- 16:30 Celebes and we used to darken ship at night. We had our destroyer escort from Sydney, was the old [HMAS] Tobruk which was a World War II class destroyer. We followed the coast pretty well, in sight of the Australian coast until way up north of here, way up Cairns, maybe even a little further north from there. You'd see the coastline most days. Ships
- 17:00 were sending 'Good luck, crew of the HMAS Sydney and all the best.' A lot of those they used to read them out at night over the speaker system. It's a funny feeling when you're on Sydney Harbour and you're sailing out. You are looking around and thinking, "Am I going to see this again sort of thing?" It's in the back of your mind. "Have a good look," I'm pretty sure. I had a funny experience just before I
- 17:30 left. I knew I was going to Vietnam. Anyhow a couple of nights, two or three nights during that 10 day period I was asleep one night and I dreamed I was walking through Vietnam and I stopped and there was a gravestone with my name on it, and I stopped and I thought, "Gee, this isn't real great", and I thought for a while, I thought "Hmm". Anyhow I found out later on, I was talking to a lady that was into tarot and a bit of this and she said, "Gene, that was a good sign", she said, "that you were coming back." And I can tell you what, at the
- 18:00 time I said I had a few doubts. But anyhow, but when you're going out, you look around and think, "Great", but the trip on board the Sydney was again, was very relaxed. We spent most of the days on the old gun stations. We had a large can of beer every night issued. During the day we had a couple of small work parties where we brought up all the soft drink from
- 18:30 down in the ship into the freezers. The food on board was, I was glad I was never in the bloody navy. I believe it's much better these days, but it was lousy tucker and down below decks in the tropics was, you have no idea, would've been 44, 45 degrees [Celsius] all the time. They had in a room about half the size of this, there would've been 12 or 13 hammocks. Anyhow, so I got out of that. You had to go down onto another deck for showers and that sort of thing.
- 19:00 We had our combat, our field force gear with us and I went out on the abandon ship stations which was the deck, below the flight deck and quite a few of us were out there and we just slept on the steel deck and it was quite a good trip after that, nice breeze coming through, but in the, I think they call them mess decks in the navy, was cramped and if you got out to go to the toilet there was all these hammocks
- 19:30 everywhere. It was a bloody, you had to bend right over underneath the hammocks and then find your own way back to the hammock and I thought, 'Bugger this, I'm going out onto the deck.' It was so calm as I said. The band, the ship had a ship's band. They jumped for forecandle and maybe 100, 150 troops would get up there and they'd play music of the day and then a couple of afternoons on the trip over. We had Anzac Day at sea on the 25th of April.
- 20:00 They made a beautiful wreath, the shipwrights, and threw it over the side. We had a ceremony on the back deck. We had a 'crossing the line' ceremony which was really great fun and we all got issued with a, I've still got it, a certificate of you're now a mariner, ancient mariner, crossed the equator. The warship, we ended up with another warship, not long, two warships after we left Sydney. They refuelled from us
- 20:30 which was interesting, both ships cruising along probably 14 or 15 knots and within 30, 40 metres. Then one afternoon one of the destroyers opened up with its main armament and was throwing depth charges and that around the place and that was pretty exciting to watch, and one afternoon the gunners, we had 40 millimetre Beaufort guns on the troop transport, and one of those opened up. They put a floating target
- 21:00 out and I thought, "These blokes, I hope they run the ship better than they can shoot" 'cause they were bloody hopeless and their gun kept jamming. I thought this would be great if it was the real thing. Anyhow we all laughed and it was very relaxed going across. Of an afternoon, three or four times, we would sit on the back of the carrier, on the back flight deck and the navy crew would fill balloons with a bit of water, blow them up, they'd throw them over the side. Then
- 21:30 we had our SLR's and we'd practise rifle shooting, yes, so that was interesting also.

How long was the trip?

About 13 days. We were supposed to get off the day we arrived but logistics were a problem and we had another night on board. When the Sydney, in those days it stayed in the harbour

- 22:00 overnight, but they had divers were going around inspecting the hull and they were also throwing over scare charges which was explosives about every, pardon me, they would randomly throw these explosives over and they were to deter any enemy divers that might've been attaching something to the ship's hull. Pardon me. When they went off, it was like if you hit the
- 22:30 hull with a giant hammer, 'Boomp' and a big dull thud as these explosives went off. Anyhow it sort of made you wake up and realise that there was a war going on and as we arrived, a big barge went out full of wrecked bits and pieces of aircraft from, there was a nearby airfield, a transport airfield and they'd been shot up and mortared apparently within a couple of
- 23:00 nights and they were taking all the wreckage out to sea to dump it. So, you think, oh yeah, things, are

happening.

What, before landing in Vietnam, what did you know about it?

Before we left they got us, the group that went on the Sydney, they got us together in an army barracks and they told us what was going on, a few dos and don'ts like lifting your people, lifting your feet in front of the Vietnamese, don't pat them on the head. Then they said,

- 23:30 this is how we like to see them, and they had four or five heads, decapitated heads, on the ground and shots from Vietnam. This is how we like to see these buggers, and we were told it was pretty full on over there.

What was that like?

Oh no, just sort of, well, it was a bit confronting when you first saw it but you thought oh well, that's fair enough, it's a war.

- 24:00 It was Vietnamese troops that decapitated these VC or whatever they were and about four heads on the ground and we saw a little bit about the place, but yeah, it was oh...Just to set the record straight in some respects, everyone that went to Vietnam, as a regular, I had to sign a form saying that I would go to Vietnam. I've been told that everyone did sign,

- 24:30 including National Servicemen. And probably what people don't realise is peer pressure on someone that had trained with a battalion or trained with a group and if he were to have said in the last 10 or 15 minutes or last day I should say, or few days, 'I'm not going', and the sort of Australian spirit again. We had one chap just didn't want to be there, a national serviceman from Tasmania, and he

- 25:00 did not want to be there.

Why didn't he want to be there?

He just hated the army, hated the army, the whole... you know. In fact I've, we've spoken a couple of times since and he didn't like the army just as a whole, being called up and that, and if they ever gave him a form to fill out or anything he'd write across it, 'Hate the army. Hate the army.'

So he was conscript?

Yeah.

- 25:30 But the trip over was really good, was almost like a fortnight's sea voyage. It was that calm and it was like sitting here, that's how calm. I mean there wouldn't have been, the highest wave, well, wasn't even, as I said, you could've rowed a row boat. That's how good it was.

So what were your first impressions arriving?

Well, we arrived. We got off the ship and went ashore and we were told, kept hearing all these buggers are running around in black pyjamas.

- 26:00 We were given a loaded magazine of 20 rounds each and a rifle and went ashore and here's all these people running around in black pyjamas and we thought, "Holy hell, how are you going to tell which", old story, "How are you going to tell who's who?" Anyhow they took us to Vung Tau which was nothing but great sandhills fronting the South China Sea and they just said, 'OK fellows. Go for it,' and we got let off. We went out in an American army truck which was a cattle truck

- 26:30 for a better word. It was just a great big semi-trailer with sides and I dunno how many blokes would've been in that, probably 100, 120. We went out there and jumped off and someone said, "You blokes go to that hill up there, that's where youse are going to go." And it was like a big sand dune and they'd dozed a cutting through it and all out tents, we only had our little hoochies and it was the rainy season and there was enough room in each of those to put a stretcher in which were touching and you crawled into the

- 27:00 tent into your little hoochie onto your stretcher and that was home for about three weeks or a month I suppose. Our toilet was an Arnott's biscuit tin further down the sand dune. That was toilet number one. Anyhow, had to walk up this sand dune and then the cutting in the sand dune, the job was, we had that cutting for about five months. Was any spare time, you just filled

- 27:30 sand bags to keep the sand dunes from coming in on you 'cause they just came down. So, we had one bloke that used to do the hygiene duties and he continually filled sand bags to keep the sand at bay. After we'd been there a while, there was a big barbed wire fence set up all around the place, and we built a bunker. Things were very, should say at Vung Tau, we didn't know at the time, but it turned out things were

- 28:00 pretty quiet there. We used to mortar the airfield occasionally but we worked extremely hard. Our days used to start at about half past five, quarter to six and we'd go through until nine o'clock that night and then we'd do a guard duty, picket I should say. We'd finish at nine, have a few beers until eleven and then sort of hit the sack and

- 28:30 then you do a two hour guard duty. We had three months of that, and building the camp. We were

building defences around the camp, but as a supply platoon we were also supplying the taskforce with all its food. There's two convoys a day were going up to the taskforce. We used to go into the American food dumps, load the vehicles with food, we'd come back to our place, unload it, break it up into unit rations which would be loaded into

- 29:00 trucks. They would go up, occasionally we went up a bit as armed escort, as guards, shotgun duty. Anyhow we'd go up and that would be a break, three or four hours of just sitting there, just up at the convoy, and the trucks would come back. We'd go into town again, load up again for rations, load the trucks again. That night, we'd work into that night loading the trucks
- 29:30 and they would go up again next morning. They were going up in the afternoon, they'd be engineering stores, barbed wire and stuff to set up the camp up at Nui Dat. So there was two convoys a day up there for quite some time. We had one fridge run by a petrol motor. It would've been probably about four foot square and about six
- 30:00 foot, two metres high. Anyhow, this would be very early days, even before the infantry or before they even got there in any numbers. We'd go and get the fresh food and ring up the units in the area which were around us and say, "Come and get your tucker. How you keep it or what you do with it we don't care." Because the fridge was always full of booze, full of beer because cold beer was, and all these units would come down with their
- 30:30 beer and stick it in this fridge and the fridge was, its role was to keep the beer cold. So when we got the food we'd just say, "Hey guys, the food's here", and it was their problem what they done with it or what happened. I don't know, but it worked really, it worked well the whole time I was there. I had quite a lot to do with the refrigeration side of things and people put it in and people came and took it out and there was never any fight, never any argument of "I put 15 or 10 cartons in, only got 6 back."
- 31:00 It was a system that worked. People would roll up and they'd put it in and then someone else might roll up in the afternoon and take half a dozen or whatever they were taking. So that was the main use of the fridge, the first fridge in Vietnam for the Australians.

Had to get your priorities right?

Had to get our priorities right.

Where did the fresh produce come from?

It wasn't so much fresh, it was mainly tinned stuff at that stage. It

- 31:30 came from, we had an American supply base there. It was enormous, attached to the airfield. It was the whole perimeter of that airfield and the supply dump as we call it. But they handled petrol also, had a massive petrol dump, ammunition dump. Probably would've been 30 odd, 40 odd mile around that perimeter of that camp. But the Americans, ice cream,
- 32:00 we had a fair bit of ice cream. We used to have these fridges back to back and there would've been 70 or 80 metres of refrigeration and full of ice cream and we'd go in with spoons in our pocket and open up the doors till we found the ice cream of choice and we'd sit around a gallon tin and just eat ice cream. So it was a bit of perk also. And when we got ration packs and stuff from the Americans, there would be an American there counting as
- 32:30 we loaded them on to the truck and we'd say, "Four, five and six" and up to ten, and that was, "Hold on, that was only seven" and then this Yank, they'd say to us, "Well, you Aussies got too bloody much here" and they'd take two or three cartons back, but we had more than that, so we.... But their supply system in Vietnam, when it got to Vietnam, was virtually written off. All ours was very strictly accounted for. We had ration clerks keeping track of things
- 33:00 and all this sort of thing. It was pretty full on, the accounting system. The platoon I was with, we had a captain, a lieutenant, a company sergeant major, a staff sergeant, four or five sergeants, about six corporals and I think there was about six or eight troops for a better word, six or eight privates. We were pretty heavy on the ground with rank. A supply platoon, it was a specialist sort of
- 33:30 platoon, but it was, they were a good mob of blokes. I hadn't met most of them or 98 percent of them because I was sort of flung into the unit at the last moment. When I went on the Sydney, well they flew across and they were there when I got there. There was a perk with the forklifts and that, the engineer, I won't go into that. With the forklift we'd go down to the engineer stores at night and we'd lift a bundle of flooring so all our
- 34:00 tents, we had the first floored tents, tents with wooden floors. We'd go down there but there were some, there was a bit of trading I should say also at the engineers, so they tuned a blind eye to what we were doing and we looked after the engineers to a certain extent too, but we didn't get any bread for ages and ages. When the bread came up from Saigon it was about a week old and covered in mould so we would dump it on the forklift. Take it down to this big pit
- 34:30 and dump it but the Vietnamese kids would get into it and rip it apart and pull out all the bread that was of any use, and they'd take it. They'd just go through this barbed wire fence like it didn't exist because the dump was inside the barbed wire fence, and I used to think, boy, if they could get through it, I mean,

as if it wasn't there, so you think these other buggers could do the same thing, which they never did. May have tried but they never got through anyhow. I don't think they

35:00 tried, to be honest. But Vung Tau was a town about 4, 3 kilometres away I suppose and it was where a lot, where we went on leave.

What was your contact with the first Vietnamese like?

It was on leave actually in the bar. There were lots of bars, bars which would be around about 7 or 8 metres

35:30 long by about 3 metres wide and they all had [names] like Copacabana, named after American beaches and this sort of thing and all full of good time girls and bar girls and everyone. There was oh, lots and lots of beggars and they were all there to see what they could get out of the troops, American and Australian troops. They had a beer, called Balmy Bar or

36:00 333 [Vietnamese beer], and it was made out of embalming fluid and the Australian medical authorities said it was unfit for human consumption but some of the blokes used to take scotch into town, and buy coke from them. That was OK but you'd go and drink their beer.....But on leave we would spend a fair bit of time in the American air base. They had air conditioned

36:30 canteens or PX's for a better word [American canteen unit] and they lived really well. The Americans lived well and we lived in tents. They had tents but they'd start off with tents with cement floors and we had just sand for quite some time. But as I said with this timber deal we had....We built ourselves a shower. So the water ration there, I was on the water truck at one time and

37:00 with ice and later on we got established a little bit to pick up about three ton of ice. The water ration at the beginning was one jerry can, one 20 litre can per person per day. So 35 blokes in your unit, you've got 35 jerry cans and that was for washing, drinking and washing your clothes. So water was for quite some time, was a major problem. Not a major problem, you got used to it, but

37:30 it was alright for us actually, but for the infantry guys, they used to carry up to six water bottles and for those poor buggers it was a major, major problem.

Did a lot of the guys compare what they had with the Americans frequently?

Yeah we used to swap and trade or just bloody take it. They didn't worry about it too much. As I said, I spoke earlier on about their officers treating their blokes pretty bloody

38:00 crook, which they did. We had a bloke by the name of Peach and they had a second lieutenant running the store, this particular store area, and Bob asked him something and he said, "You don't talk to us like that. I'll put you on your bloody arse." He said, "Our officers don't speak to us like that and I'm not taking this from you," and he rang up our captain and our captain went in and smoothed things over a bit. But we had a good, we had Captain Tuckett, he was a damn good officer.

38:30 We had two good officers, we had Lieutenant Roper and Captain Tuckett and they were both extremely good officers. They backed us. Captain Tuckett went on to become a brigadier in the Australian Army and in the end he went to England on a job and outside of the army, and he killed himself, shot himself. I didn't find that out, that was quite a long time later, but he'd done himself in, in England.

39:00 What were your thoughts about the Americans?

Individually great people, great to mix with, great to have a few beers with but as a group, bloody hopeless and as soldiers are panic merchants. You know there would be grenades thrown in the bars, you'd hear a bar go up and they reckon it was the Viet Cong but a lot of the times it was the Vietnamese themselves throwing grenades into the bars because the Australians, mainly the Americans would be in there with their girls and

39:30 a lot of the girls wouldn't have anything to do with the poor old Vietnamese soldiers. They were broke. And we had to go on leave in Vietnam as a matter of interest in civilian clothes, no weapons. I believe some of the fellows did have pistols, carried, that was a private thing but as soon as they bombed the bar, the Americans would come into town in flak jackets and all the gear. One in every corner and chasing you out of town on their

40:00 vehicles. Put you on their vehicles, run you back to camp. We'd just go from bar to bar, one step ahead of them. Usually we'd be the last ones out of town. But there were some shootings in town. Americans were killed and they'd panic. There'd be a dead Yank there and they'd just go off their head. He was dead and they'd just, pushing Vietnamese and trying to get a vehicle to get him on but there was no, I could see,

40:30 no sense it. I mean they could have calmed down. They just used to go, no matter what, just go ape shit. We'd be just standing around looking, watching these bloody Yanks 'cause they were just, I wouldn't say excited, I dunno. The Koreans, on our back beach we had a Korean rest centre, and it wasn't a rest

41:00 centre when I was there, but the Australians built one later, the Badcoe Club [Peter Badcoe Club was a soldiers' club in Vietnam] But the Americans used to get very excitable for a better word. And as I said,

that's why we went to Phuoc Tuy Province, the Australians, because we operated on our own virtually for the year I was there. And we didn't operate with the Americans because of....They're lax, their security, they're lax. They're just bloody hopeless soldiers,

41:30 as simple as that. Good blokes, well meaning, give you anything, help you, but you wouldn't want to go....We would go on our convoys. We'd have armoured vehicles, APCs [Armoured Personnel Carriers], usually had a helicopter flying above the vehicles and we'd go through. You'd dressed in shirt, shorts, and I used to carry a heavy barrelled SLR and if anything ever happened I was going to give them a good time too.

42:00 Anyhow the American

Tape 3

00:32 **Could I just go back a little bit, could you tell us a little bit more about the prawn trawling that you did as a young bloke?**

Yeah, it was really interesting. We operated out of Ross Creek at the time, which is tidal, and we'd travel up and down the coast trawling in close to the beaches around the double heads here. We'd get fish, some nice fish at times, some prawns. It played havoc. Even those days everyone

01:00 realised, all the small fish and everything that went over the side which were dead, but we got some big shovel nose shark, some sharks, lots of snakes in the nets. Got some Morton Bay Bugs. Those days you couldn't sell them. We used to give them away. When people bought prawns you'd literally say, "Here, take three or four of these," and you'd give them three or four Morton Bay Bugs.

Why was that?

No one, there was no market or no one knew what they were. That was just, it was unreal when you look back now. Twenty-two dollars,

01:30 twenty-four dollars a kilo now and we were, just to get rid of them, if they bought prawns. But it was for a young bloke. The skipper of the boat was a chap, he had grown, would've been early '50's he would've been. And there was just the two of us on the boat and a 36 foot prawn trawler and it was interesting to say the least, what come out of the bottom of the ocean. Never got a real great heap of prawns

02:00 and there was not like a set income like. As a deckie or crew for a better word, you got about 10 percent of what the catch was worth. So money, it blew for a week or something you got nothing. And if you got a good week's weather you might've got some money but it was never, you'd never make a living out of it, let's put it that way.

Did your time on the prawn trawlers ever influence you into maybe thinking about a career in the navy?

02:30 No. I've always said I could always walk further than I could swim and that's my rationale still today.

But you could swim?

Not very much, no, poor swimmer. Still not much good.

And what sort of problems did the prawn trawling industry face back then? Was there the same sort of things that they do now?

Over fish. There were about 40 odd boats working out of Yeppoon here at that time. There's about five today, five or

03:00 six today. There were too many boats for the prawns that were around at that time. That's what the problem was. Some boats did well, some boats didn't. It was sort of luck of the draw or if once you got into prawns the word, someone would ring up, someone would get on the phone, "We're a bit short of oil. Bring some oil up," or they'd quarter their catch if they were getting 50 or 60 pound of prawns every hour, they'd say, "We're getting 10 pounds every hour".

03:30 Everyone would be watching and as soon as one boat took off, everyone, been gone awhile, let's chase this bugga, he knows what's going. These messages would come across and usually everyone knew pretty well what was going on.

When you mentioned going into Rocky first to look into the army and that, was there a travelling recruitment thing?

Yes, Rockhampton, not to Yeppoon though. I said Yeppoon was about 2,500 people those days and Rocky was, I can't

04:00 recall the population, but they were in Rockhampton and they did the regional. You found your own way to them, like Mount Morgan, areas around there. If you wanted to join, you would've went to them rather now they come through all the small towns.

So as a 17 year old how did you get to, what was it, 17 when you were going into Rocky?

Yeah.

How did you get into Rocky?

The steam train in those days, from the railway station here and

04:30 used to take the workers up actually. Most people went on the steam train to go to work and left here at seven in the morning and arrived in Rocky at about ten to nine. They left Rocky about half past five got back here at ten past seven at night.

Besides fishing, what was the main industry in Yeppoon?

Pineapples, always pineapples. That's the only reason why the rail is kept open today, because of the pineapple industry. So otherwise the rail between here...About

05:00 30,000 tons a year of pineapples leave this area for Northgate Cannery, Brisbane.

And it's still a passenger service is it, between Yeppoon and Rocky?

No, no. That passenger service, they downgraded that 15, 20 years ago. They had a rail motor on and the rail motor only lasted 2 or 3 years. It was too slow, an hour and a half, maybe a little better, versus road transport.

And you also talked about

05:30 **when you went to Brisbane, when they first took you out to Enoggera, they handled you with kid gloves and all that sort of thing?**

Yeah.

Was there any stage like when you got down to Kapooka when you knew what was, before basic training, was there any trepidation as to what was going to happen?

No, I didn't have a clue what was going to happen when I got to Kapooka, but you were, from the moment you got off the train into the trucks, bellowed at, screamed

06:00 at and it was one hell of a shake up. We got there about two o'clock in the morning at Wagga and then into the barracks and we got issued bedding and I can't think of much else, but from then on it was jump, jump, jump, and after about six weeks though, you got into a routine. In four days or five days, things were quite a bit

06:30 easier and then you got local leave after, say for the last month at Kapooka, we'd get four or five hours in the town of Wagga Wagga.

And what about the new language that you come across when you go to basic training?

Yes. It wasn't all that colourful really. It was a little bit, but what I've heard since, people have been through, even women that's been through in platoons and that,

07:00 and some of the bloody language they use there is unreal, from what I've been told. But it was a little bit colourful but we were a mob of blokes.

And what sort of travel, you must've got into some mischief when you had your leave and you went into Sydney?

We met a couple of girls. I took a girl, there were three of us actually went to Sydney and we met a girl at Taronga Park and actually

07:30 we just hung out with her a fair bit. Nothing untoward or nothing more than that really but it was nice to have female company and someone that knew Sydney and she took us around a few sights, touristy spots at the time.

Did you get to the Cross?

Yeah, there was the last tram was still running at that time and we went up there for a look and that was about it.

And what about even in the early stages when you're doing your basic training at Kapooka, did you see

08:00 **the camaraderie building even then?**

Yeah, you could see it then. Everyone was sort of for each other to a degree 'cause they all knew chaps and after that six weeks, if people were having trouble, we had our dummy ammunition and that, we had tests to pass. At night you'd be in your barracks loading magazines all done to a time limit, pulling

08:30 guns down, putting them together within the time limit and people were there to help and suggest. This

is your hut mates. Yeah, that was the start of it all I'd say.

Had you, prior to sort of hopping on the range with the SLR's, had you done any shooting before?

Yeah, I had a rifle when I was about nine or ten. Had a 22 (0.22 calibre rifle) and a mate had a 303 (.303 calibre rifle) and we'd go out and blast away and did a lot of shooting as a kid.

09:00 **And as a 17 year old what were the popular things to do, you know, popular music and movies and cars and things like that?**

Elvis Presley was a big thing. There was the Top 40. If we went into town, we'd go somewhere where there was a juke box and those days it was the equivalent of five cents for a tune. I spent actually pounds on juke boxes in those days.

09:30 And again we had some money and everyone bought quite a reasonable camera, a Kodak camera or a nice little National leather case radio. They seemed to be all the go.

And when you first arrived in Vietnam and you spent a night, did you spend a night on the HMAS Sydney before you

Yeah, one night before we were taken off.

One of the blokes that

10:00 **we've spoken to that was a crewman on the Sydney, he said that they were pretty keen to get out of there. They weren't real keen on staying there.**

No. Well later on, I've got a book on the history of the Sydney and what they did. They timed it that they got there in the morning and loaded during the day and got out that night, or they still went out and came back next day and then unloaded, then went. But that first, second trip or so, they did anchor for a couple of nights, but.

10:30 **Could you sense the feeling of the navy blokes?**

No, not really. No, it was all, seemed, pretty normal. Three or four days into Vietnam the gun crews, on our way, we met up with the HMAS Melbourne, the aircraft carrier at the time, and the first thing we knew (it

11:00 was reasonably close) was they were using A4 Skyhawks and they were flying below the deck level on the Sydney. We were looking down at them and they're not too far away, and so they escorted us probably right in. Not into the harbour at Vung Tau, but they escorted us to Vietnam and overhead you could hear it, not see it all that much. We had, it might've been Australian, but PC3,

11:30 not Orion, Neptune, had Neptune anti-submarine hunters [Lockheed Neptune P2V Anti-Submarine aircraft]. Just a matter, when we were on board the Sydney and we were drinking all these soft drinks, you could buy three or four cans at a time, and we're throwing them over the side those days. Anyhow, the two destroyers we had with us, they were showing up on their sonar and so the word come through, fellows, don't throw your bloody cans over the side anymore, you're bugging up their listening gear on the destroyers. They weren't too much worried about the environment then,

12:00 just worried about the....

And you mentioned the beer issue that you got, what

One large can of VB at night [Victoria Bitter beer] Some of the crew that didn't drink....if you really wanted it, you could probably end up with a second can. When they gave it to you, they opened it of course. But it was nice and cold and the beer went over across real, 26 ounces those days.

And that was a steel can?

Yeah, steel can.

Was it a ring-pull or was it

No, no. You had that old.....

12:30 **Did you see anything on that night that you spent in dock. Did you see any action of any sorts?**

No, no, nothing. I was still sleeping on (UNCLEAR). No, I didn't see anything, no, no.

How could you explain, was there a feeling of tension growing as you got closer and closer to Vietnam?

Yeah, there was. Not tension, there was

13:00 expectation (UNCLEAR). There was, wouldn't say worry even, but there was certainly...tension would be a good word.

What about, did the army make you fill out a will or anything like that?

Yeah, we had to fill out a will. So that, all the same again, that makes you think 'bloody hell.'.

What sort of worldly possessions did you own back then?

Bugger all.

13:30 There was \$10,000 on us if we were bumped off.

And with the fresh rations that you talk about, what sort of things would've been amongst that?

There was eggs. The American supply system was funny. Their steak, ground beef they call it, really is, it's just cheap meat compressed and cut up like steaks but it was bloody awful.

14:00 Then there was, there were a few salads I imagine we got from the Vietnamese. See, we lived fairly well compared to what the infantry lived. When the infantry were in base which wasn't very much they lived reasonably well also, fresh food and that. We had tinned milk, we had cartons of milk, flavoured milk through the American supply system. You had ham, you'd live for a week on ham that come into

14:30 the place and they'd fry it and whatever they could do with it, and then chicken would be on. You'd have a week of bloody chicken, until eggs. You'd have three or four eggs for breakfast or take a handful of boiled eggs away with you or something, and then they'd run out then you'd be on powdered egg. The system was OK. It was OK but it could've been managed a little better.

So all the fresh rations the Australian forces

15:00 **were getting were all through the Americans?**

Ninety per cent of them were. We had a tent, not a tent, a great big marquee for a better word in which we had Australian fresh, not fresh, Australian tinned peaches, pears, condiments, Vegemite, all what you'd find in an Australian supermarket, and before the Australians left Vietnam, what they were trying

15:30 to do the last ten or twelve days there, they were trying to get them back onto Australian rations. Also the freezer, the fridge, when we got a second fridge we got an American butter issue, but we had no bread. Sometimes I'd have up to a ton of one pound blocks, up to a ton of butter in the fridge. We had some more fridges around the place we used to send it, give it to and

16:00 that sort of thing.

Was the lack of refrigeration, was that an oversight do you think?

Yeah, very much so.

And how long did it take for that to be remedied?

Before we got our second fridge, the major fridge, (it was probably about ten or twelve foot square, or cubed actually) I'm only guessing now, probably two months I suppose.

So when you went out on, you went out on shotgun,

16:30 On convoys, yeah.

on shotgun convoys, what sort of gear did you go out on?

We had the military police led the convoy in a Land Rover with a mounted M60 machine gun and there'd be a couple of trucks, a couple of APC's with infantry aboard, then the long line of trucks. And the thing was if you ever get into trouble, you pull off the side of the road so the APC's can run up and down with the infantry. But had a few scares like they thought there might've been mines and we had

17:00 to dismount a few times. As I said we'd carry, we'd be very laxadasical. The Americans would pass us going the other way and they'd have steel helmets, flak jackets, machine gun mounted on every truck and they were the buggers they used to ambush, and we'd be up on the road and as I said shirt, shorts and you'd have your weapon sitting on top of the vehicle. You'd have your weapon alongside you or sometimes

17:30 you might have it in your lap and you'd pass these Yanks, 'How you going guys?' and they'd be, you know, and we'd think 'silly bastards'. They had a go one time but the helicopter must've picked up the ambush and gave them a hell of a hit with artillery and they all got out of the place. They left us alone pretty well but I have seen other shots of blokes after I was there on convoys, I don't know how or where but they're wearing bloody flak jackets and

18:00 steel helmets too. I just can't believe it, but yeah, I know a bloke that was over there about '69, '70 and got a picture of himself in a flak jacket and a helmet, Christ, and that would've been fairly tame in those days.

Does it really strike you having been there in the initial deployment that the stories you hear from other blokes seem quite different to yours?

Not from the infantry. They worked extremely hard the whole time. When I was there, there

18:30 was only two battalions and the poor buggers, they worked them to death. The average infantryman spent between 310 and 315 days in the bush of each year and the gear, they were 80 pound, 90 pound was quite common, the gear they all carried and they'd be out there for sometimes up to six weeks. But with us, we worked extreme for three months. We worked extremely hard and then after that we used to have half a

19:00 day off on a Sunday or something like that. Go down the back beach for a barbecue with grog and steak and it was pretty, it was OK. And we got odd nights in town which was OK too, but at the infantry no one ever worked as.... And it is a fact that even the blokes in the Second World War did not do the time that those fellows did in a year in the front lines. Might've done a week, ten days, a fortnight, they'd be back, but even when

19:30 they got back to main base at Nui Dat, there were still patrols patrolling out the front of them. There was still picket duty at night. They just, the crowd I was with, I was up with a section up there for about two months, two or three months and there was about, we did every night, we did three hours on duty. That was good up there because at night all worked stopped. Everything was blacked out.

Where was that?

At Nui Dat.

Nui Dat.

20:00 And there was movement, there was a little clearing up there because later on after we left, they put an infantry battalion in front of us. We were right on the wire at that stage, a couple of sections of service corps, and there'd be monkeys in the trees at night and bloody noises and at night you could go like 'that' in front of your face and you couldn't see your hand and then when the moon come up, I could tell what colour socks you had on bloody a hundred yards away. Until

20:30 that moon come up, ooh, it was, yeah.

Can you explain to us the different feeling that you might've had between daylight and night time in regard to that?

Yeah. Day time was your normal duty. You just walked around the place, unloading rations and there was no great hassle up at Nui Dat, it was for us. There was a section of about nine or ten of us, we had a lieutenant up there in charge, a staff sergeant, a couple of corporals and about five

21:00 or six troops I suppose, of us, and it was just very casual sort of. No one ever saluted up there. We didn't salute back at the, (we did back at Vung Tau) but at the main camp, because there were snipers in the trees or something like that, they'd know who was who.. They did a stupid bloody thing just after we got up to Nui Dat. We built this bunker in amongst the trees and in our area and we had still a field of fire and a bit of open ground and one of the officers in their

21:30 wisdom, not our bloke, said, cut down the trees around. So we cut down the trees, then we put a stone path past it, then we white-washed the bloody stone path. Anyhow some got a bright idea, this is not such a good idea, a stone path past your bunker. So we dragged the rocks away and then we had to put a camouflage net over the bloody bunker. If they had've left it.... And then we weren't there that long and down at the taskforce headquarters they were pushing Victa mowers around mowing the bloody

22:00 grass. Everyone would just shake their head.

What about, you mentioned Vung Tau when you first got there was nothing but sand dunes.

That's the camp at Vung Tau, yeah, massive sand dunes.

What did you think when you turned up and thought 'this is it'?

Bloody hell, and hot, very, very hot, monsoonal. And most of the guys who were across had done three weeks at Canungra, fortnight, three weeks at Canungra, all the blokes and I come from Sydney in April, nice temperature in the supply depot and

22:30 not extra fit, but fairly fit, 21 and pretty fit and it was a bloody, a real, real eye opener to get into these tropic. And at night we didn't know it was a safe place at that time. You didn't know whether they'd have a go at you to test you out, to see what you were or how, whether you were on the ball or not, so generally everyone was pretty well on the ball for some time. At night

23:00 when you were on picket, you're on your own there and later on when we moved, some interesting things, when we moved from that area they bulldozed down a sand dune opposite and they put the tentage over there and then there was two of youse walking around at night with your rifle and just keeping, just generally on picket, just see if everything was alright. But some blokes had come down from the first battalion group, the very first battalion,

23:30 they were up at Bien Hoa [Bien Hoa Province]. There was four tents of them, probably about a dozen of them and they had all their gear, their photos, piccies, the stuff they brought from the PX and we had a

bloody fire in one of the tents and their four tents went up and they all just got out with their life, nothing. That was their ammunition went up. I was on picket that night and we were going past and the first tent went up and they tried to drop another, drop two, but the fire just went like that and then the ammunition started going off.

24:00 So we hit the deck and stayed on the deck for a while until it was all over and the sad part about these poor buggers, all their photos, everything they had was gone.

Can you, what other security did you have at Vung Tau at that stage?

We had a bunker. Everyone carried weapons all the time, you carried a magazine of live ammunition. If you went into town on the trucks

24:30 with food you took, everywhere you went, you slept, everything, it was a chargeable offence not to have your rifle on you. So you went to the toilet, rifle was a part of you, shower.

Was there a particular moment where you just sort of thought this is the real deal?

Yeah. I was up at Nui Dat the night before the Long Tan Battle and I was in the bunker with a mate and I saw the explosion. I was at Nui Dat itself which they called SAS Hill [Special Air Service Regiment] but we were there

25:00 at the very beginning and I saw these explosions down the artillery lines and these buggers are going to town tonight 'cause they did fire harassment and interdiction fire at night, and all of a sudden the bloody fire started coming up towards us and I thought, 'Holy hell'. I said to my mate, "What are these pricks up to?" And he said, "No, that's not these, that's not us, that's them", and I was alright. I was alright then. I really thought we were being done by our own crowd. Anyhow, they marched, brought the

25:30 mortars right up in front of us and they lifted their fire and came behind us, lifted again, went through the infantry on another line, then lifted it again, then went to the other side of where we were. That went on for about three hours I suppose and they, and I honestly thought they were going to have a go that night. Our CSM come down and he said, keep your head down. I said, "No", I said, and I got the machine gun fully ready to go and

26:00 I said, "These buggers are going to have a go at us under this fire". That was my first reaction. I said, "We've got to keep a bloody look out for these blokes". Anyhow, went for about, went from about two till just on sunrise or not sunrise, breaking day. That was when they, D Company, went out or another company went out, found the sights, and then D Company went out and that's when they walked into these buggers marching

26:30 on the camp.

Did you have stand to and all that sort of thing?

The afternoon after that, about four or five (UNCLEAR) with the posties got injured. They stopped to get dressed and they had shrapnel wounds and there's probably about, there was one killed, 22 injured that night, but there was, one died actually, he died later, but there was about five or six with shrapnel wounds up where we were,

27:00 and we were having a party with Col Joye and Little Pattie and the next day, and the guns, everything just opened up and after about 10 minutes, 15 minutes we knew something big was up 'cause there was just gunfire and they fired over 3,500 rounds in three hours and we realised (that was the end of the party, concert party) and we went back to our units and was on tippy-toe sort of thing and we didn't

27:30 really know what was going on until a couple of hours and then we heard one of our companies was in deep trouble.

Before the position was mortared by the Vietnamese, the attitude in the camp must've been pretty excitable with the concert party?

It was, yeah, but also I've gotta say this, the attitude up at Nui Dat until that time was slack. No one would dig personal bunker holes or, it was, oh shit, we'll do this tomorrow, or we're not being pushed

28:00 so we won't do this, and after that night we got mortared, it was shovels and picks and sandbags. If you didn't have them you didn't get them. It was everyone dig, dig, dig, dig and it was all full on for a while after that.

And was that the thought that the concert party had been called off as a result of that?

Oh yeah, because of what was going on. Because you read different accounts but they were

28:30 marching on the camp, about 2,500 of the buggers and had they come through they were going through the artillery lines and we were up from them a bit, but if they had have got in the camp there would've been, it wouldn't have been very good because no one was very prepared.

How did going up to Nui Dat come about? Like you're at Vung Tau?

Yeah. We had a section up there. Whilst we did the food back at

- 29:00 Vung Tau we went up to shotgun at various times. We had a section up there with a big cold room and all the perishables went into that and we did some issuing from up there. Again the same thing happened up there, really the cold room was just full of beer and APC's would turn up, a grader would turn up or a front-end loader would turn up with 10 or 12 cartons in his bucket. They
- 29:30 said to us guys, (UNCLEAR) you can have one can per carton, but we had our own beer anyhow. So we said, no, that's right, and well, they would've counted it going in but there was never like, there's a carton missing. It was really, I still am impressed today the honesty and the camaraderie and the goodwill that was put in and they'd come along and take it out and no one kept,

30:00 or we certainly didn't keep count.

And was it all American beer or were you getting Aussie stuff?

We had Australian and American. We had it pretty well open slather on the beer in the first taskforce but they replaced two cans per person per night, and looking back (UNCLEAR) we got up to, basically, it was pretty....We were first up there and there was no real guidelines

- 30:30 set, but when things got civilised, for a better term, got more into the military, don't do this and do that and do this and jump, jump. Yeah, they got rather regimented.

And the work that was being done in Vung Tau to make it the base that it became,

Yeah.

was that done by Australians?

Yeah, by our, the ordnance group there on the front beach, the Americans filled in probably about half a mile by,

- 31:00 half a mile, probably 300 or 400 metres across and two metres deep with sand and that was the Americans on that. They worked 24 hours a day and finished that in about a week or ten days, 24 hours, trucks and then the ordnance depot set up rain water tanks and not so much rain, just general supplies and that. But yeah, we did beside building
- 31:30 defences, the bunkers. We had to build work areas so the trucks could back up and load off of the trucks. We also handled the fuel for the taskforce which was, they brought across eight or ten guys after about six months to do that for us, but we handled 44's [44 gallon fuel drums]. As a matter of interest, when we left up the hill to move over to some proper tents and floors over on the other hill, they
- 32:00 could doze that one down, about 2,500 gallons of diesel and the Yanks just said, let it go, so we opened the cock on it and just whoosh, all it went, dragged the thing down to where it was supposed to go and it come out another big bloody, another big tank, pumped it up again, no problem at all. Used to wet the road, dust, sand roads. They'd get a diesel truck out and just pour thousands of
- 32:30 gallons of diesel over the road so trucks wouldn't bog. There would be an acre or two acres of concrete three pallets high in the monsoon. When they wanted a pallet they just knocked the top pallet off and take the second pallet. You have no idea the waste, unreal. Anyway, as I said, in this three months we were at Nui, Vung Tau, first three months, there was a lot of,
- 33:00 I wouldn't say, I thought there were a lot of people were very easily upset. You know, you bumped someone's rifle, fell in the sand, he'd want to fight you sort of thing. Tempers were, people were pulling guns on one another. I did later on in the piece. That was towards the end of my stay there. This bloke, we didn't get along very well at all, and the people, a fair few fights, people, temper, just they were worn out, literally buggered, the heat.
- 33:30 Generally everything got along real well but some little things, someone'd fly off the handle. And what I mean by pointing guns at each other, they'd whip off the empty and you'd have your two magazines bound together and slap on the full and cock the bloody thing and stick it in their gut or something or point at them and somebody would tippy-toe up and just take it off them and just send everyone on their way sort of thing.

- 34:00 **Was there any term given to that condition people were in?**

No, not really. It never got reported to the officers or anything. Whether they were aware of what was happening I don't know, but it happened a few times, yeah. People were just really fed up. I mean tired, buggered, and we had our day off, three months went by roughly and we had a day off. Oh God, everything was just literally bedlam, just

- 34:30 bedlam. They ended up banning spirits in the camp for months afterwards. A Land Rover was stolen, bloody, God, it was just mayhem, run into town, bloody, all the local girls did a roaring trade and it was bedlam. One of the officers and he was a good bloke too, he went into town in his Land Rover and held up the local police station and got all the good

- 35:00 time girls out and the cops, Australian MP's [Military Police] were chasing him around. Anyhow he went back to the officers' mess. They put the bloody officers' mess on this big sand dune, one they didn't

knock down and they weren't game to open it because they were operating at that stage in tents in Vietnam, Australians were, and this bloody officers' mess up there. Now the day we all got our day off they opened it, and this captain, he went in there and had all the officers, (the bloke that had all the

- 35:30 girls out and the coppers were chasing, MP's) had all the officers lined up along the bar with an Owen machine carbine on them.. The coppers come in behind him and thumped him to the ground and he was sent back to Australia the next day and out of the army, but that's true, that's a true story. But that was what the day was like, that would've been par for the course, the sort of day it was.

Did you think that maybe

- 36:00 **a day like that where everyone just went crazy because of the build up,**

Yeah, yeah.

that was just to let off steam?

Oh yeah, oh yeah, everyone was, everyone talked about it, everyone talked about what a day it was and what they could remember and everyone was choofed off about it, fantastic day. It was just, it was needed, it really was needed.

It just made me think before when you were talking about all the diesel that was just being

- 36:30 **wasted,**

Yeah, oh yeah.

blokes always speak about the smell of Vietnam?

Yeah, the country and yeah, the smell, yeah, you can smell the place, yeah. You get through the villages, there's nuok mam sauce which was fish heads put on wire netting and what dripped through was their sauce, and you go through the villages, the smell. If you went through the villages between Vung Tau and Nui Dat and the kids were out waving or lollies or whatever you gave them.

- 37:00 If you went through and no bugger came out of those villages you knew the buggers were there, they were in the village. The VC [Viet Cong] were in the village, but if everyone was out waving and it was OK, but if you went through and nothing was going on... And, we also had an orphanage towards Baria way and we gave them a lot of food and we took kids from there, the drivers, when there were spare vehicles and that. We took them back to Back Beach and

- 37:30 lollies, ice creams for the kids and gave them a day out. The same at Christmas, we went out to the orphanage. I personally didn't do it, but they went out to the orphanage and played Santa Claus for the kids but we did a lot of good things. We built wells in the village, the engineers did and they had certain days that they called road runner operations where the APC's were every mile or so along the half mile between the villages, and the trucks went out and picked up Village A and took them down to Village B, and Village B back to Village A so they

- 38:00 could trade and see rellies [relatives] and that hadn't happened. We got along fairly well I think. Part of the deal was the Americans and their bloody food system, I'd seen it myself. The Vietnamese picked up a bit of rotten tomato or something like that or something that you wouldn't eat, and this Yank walked over one day and knocked it out of their hand and put his foot on it in front of them, and I thought, "You're not going about this the right way". And we'd get the food back at our place

- 38:30 that wasn't so great. We had Vietnamese at Vung Tau, not at Nui Dat, and you'd see them. They'd get this old fruit or whatever, not so much fruit, it might be tomato or bloody, a banana or, and you'd turn your back and they'd put it under a tent flap and then when they got to go home, they'd go to their tent flap and grab it and get on the truck with it and the drivers would run them home well

- 39:00 before dark so he could get back before dark too. Anyhow yes, so we built up, anyhow they could've done the work, but this American attitude was just, now guys, you're going about this the wrong way.

I'll just get you to stop there, the tape's about to end. Actually I meant

Tape 4

- 00:33 **Can you tell us about WHAM?**

Yeah, Wing, Hearts and Mind was an extremely good program. They had an officer, a small group, probably four or five people which went around the place. The engineers were involved when they had free time. Like the village of Baria and smaller villages, they were building market places for the locals to put their produce in,

- 01:00 to display their produce. They were also doing wells. Where one town might have one well, they'd put in two or three bores for a better word, so the people could have two or three access points for water. Another part of WHAM which is still under the same thing, the Australians would go to a lot of trouble.

They'd go out nights around the village and in the morning the Vietnamese would go in and tell everyone to, don't take off,

01:30 just take it easy. And then daybreak'd come, there'd be tapes set up all around the place. The WHAM people, the interpreters would go in with (the Australians would be on the perimeter guarding, see anyone didn't get out) and then they would go through, interview the people, check their documentation and then usually, not always, the Australian Military Band would be there playing music and the dentists would go in and do a teeth check.

02:00 There'd be soap handed out, maybe some powder and the doctors would be there, (the Australian doctors), and this would come under part of WHAM, but it was... I don't know if the Americans had anything like that going, but we certainly, a lot of effort went into it, and even today you're probably aware of, there's a reconstruction team in Phuoc Tuy Province, so it never

02:30 has really stopped. But the Viet Cong if they could they would destroy anything that the Australians built, but it was good, it was, from the word go, that started.

You mentioned before you went to Vietnam you were told a bit about it. Were you told what the war was about?

Yeah, I had a fair idea. What I didn't really know to what extent it was, it was certainly a war and that, but

03:00 the '94, the '54 Geneva Accords, when there were supposed to be elections and they were never held, and they were never held because probably the reason was that the communists had had enough and that Uncle Ho (Ho Chi Minh) was such a charismatic figure that they probably would've won the bloody elections. And then when they were split, the country [Vietnam] at the 17th parallel, all the Catholics went south of course, got out of the north and

03:30 internal politics played a big part of it because the Christians or, but again the Buddhists I think, I don't know but I've got no....Probably would say that had it been elections held under that '54 or '52, '54 Accord [the Geneva Accords were held in 1954] after the French got the big A, I'm pretty sure that it probably would've been bloody reunited under communists.

So when you went there as a young bloke did you know of

04:00 **the French?**

I knew they'd come to grief. I was well and truly aware they came to grief there, but I wasn't so much aware of the supposedly held elections. I went there knowing the south was fighting the north and that they weren't going to be dominated by the communists. Basically that's about as much as I knew at that time.

And people when they look back, they talk about

04:30 **the communism, the paranoia. How did you feel at that stage about the threat of communism as a young bloke?**

Yeah, I just thought of a book called The Necessary War [Gene is referring to 'Vietnam - The Necessary War' by Michael Lind] which referring to Vietnam, 'cause I honestly felt that it did help. It certainly made it very tough for the Russians and what they supplied economically and that, but what was your question again? Oh, the communists, yeah.

05:00 I would've like to have seen them, even today at the Long Tan Cross for instance, you can't wear your medals or a green army shirt or anything like that, but I was glad in '75 when the war finished. It was all over, all finished, just because no country knew what was happening and how they were living, but I thought the communists would have, I didn't think they'd stop

05:30 with Vietnam. All the same, even though they won the war, they got a bloody hell of a hiding over the years and lost a lot of people and as you know, they went into Cambodia later on and got rid of the Khmer Rouge, but yeah, at the time when I went across I thought Thailand would've been a place they would've had a go at and they certainly got Cambodia.

06:00 **So if one of your mates had've come up to you in 1966 and said, "What are you doing? What are you going to Vietnam for?" what would you have said?**

Well, I had four years in the army at that stage and I was fit, fairly well trained. I knew I wasn't going to go in the infantry. That wouldn't have bothered me though, because a few times I volunteered to go out with the infantry, just overnight ambushes and that, but my boss would say to me, "Gene," he said, "how do I explain if anything

06:30 happens to you?" I think he was looking at himself too. He would've got a kick in the back... in the rear. Anyhow, but no, my mates reckoned I was crazy because I wanted to go out with them on the ambushes and that, and they would've taken me. I'd arranged it that I had no problem going out with them, but if I would've kept my mouth, oh, I wouldn't have got away with it because we were on guard duty every night anyhow, so, but I put it to my boss and he said, "No, how do I

07:00 explain if anything happens to you?"

Is it fair to say all the blokes that were in the regular army in the '60s were keen to go on operations?

Yeah, yeah, but not at the tempo that they had them at. It was just unreal. I was about eight and a half, nine stone, those blokes were carrying packs nearly as heavy as themselves. When the situation allowed, they did fly meals

07:30 out and occasionally clean uniforms. That might've been once every 10 days or it might've been... Water was flowing. How the Americans operated, they had helicopters coming in all the time with food, water, then the Viet Cong knew exactly where they were. With the Australians, the Australians went out, they were carrying nearly three or four or five days of ration packs and as much water as they could carry, fill up from streams. Unless there was casualties, helicopters would come

08:00 in every third or fourth day to resupply food, ration packs and that. So they [Viet Cong] didn't have really no idea, exactly. They knew we were in the province but they didn't really know where we were until we showed up. Whereas the Americans with the helicopters coming in, their noises, their movement, their bloody, how they carried on, they knew where they were all the time and they were the ones that got ambushed all the time, hence the losses.

Even with what you were talking about with Nui Dat before, did you see how

08:30 **different the forward bases were for the Australians as opposed to the Americans?**

We never got onto any American forward bases. I got to the ammunition dump and the supply dump and they were set in massive complexes, but the ammunition dump was like on a perimeter, and the field dump, they had bloody guards there with these bloody great big attack dogs and I'd go in their on my forklift and I'd say, "Hey, hold on to that!" and the thing would

09:00 be "Grrr". Say, "Watch that bloody dog. Hang on to it!" because by the time I got to my rifle it would've had me. But again the Americans one night, 10 blokes in an army truck coming in to relieve the bunker, they shot them up and killed everyone. And they lined us up next day and said, (we always went in the front gate rather than in through their perimeter in the back gate) and they said, "You blokes don't go in the bloody front gate for any reason, and this way you worked through the airfield and down

09:30 towards and through the back gate. 10 of them, just done them. There was an army truck (UNCLEAR), crazy things. That's a reason why their casualties were such... We had our own operating theatre where we operated ourselves on our own because there'd been a big contact, lots of injuries. Rather than spend eight or ten hours on someone's arm or

10:00 leg, they [the Americans] would chop it off and that was the easiest quickest way about it. And the Australian doctors would work for hours and hours and hours. Limbs were lost and that, but I mean, if they were taken off they were beyond all salvage and we had great doctors. They were great doctors over there.

Can you tell us a bit about the ration packs?

Yeah. We had American ration packs, we had Australian rations packs. American ration packs

10:30 were three tins in a little cardboard box, one per meal. I used to have one here but I've got another one coming, an Australian one. Anyhow the Americans were big on ham and lima beans. There was chicken, they had a little tin of tinned fruit. Yeah, a little tin of tinned fruit. A pound of cake which was another little tin

11:00 with a sort of cake in it. Our ration packs were overall a better pack. The Aussies were sort of, we had a mixture of both. The Australian packs had three tins, one for each meal. We had a piece of chocolate, small packet of cigarettes, toilet paper, a packet of lollies something like glucose, a packet of something like Lifesavers, all different mixture, Fruity Loops or something they were called from memory.

11:30 You had a tube of condensed milk, a couple of hard biscuits you could put that on. A little tin of jam and a little tin of cheese and the cheese was bloody yummy, bloody real top cheese. It was some of the best I've even tasted till today, and we controlled all that. As I said, we had to deal with the engineers for

12:00 different things and they had to deal with us and all very 'no no no' at the time.

That's what makes the army go, doesn't it?

Yeah. We looked after them and they looked after [us], and same with the Americans. We'd swap them gear, they'd give us gear and our captain, he was only a new bloke when we first got there, oh, you've got to return this, you've got to return that, and after about a month or six weeks he just didn't see it, and he ended up a real top guy.

12:30 **So did the Australian soldiers have a preference for ration packs?**

They seemed to go for a bit of both. American ones for a change I think rather than ours, but it was mainly Australian. No, hang on, the first part was nearly all American

- 13:00 ration packs from the start because we used to take the odd one ourselves. The packs, they were about the size of a. Their ration packs were say a small carton of XXXX [4X Beer] cans and in that, I'm only guessing now, were about a dozen of these square packs. Then the Americans also had what they called a comfort pack and after their troops, (and we got them too, not us, but the infantry) after they'd been out in the bush for
- 13:30 ten days, I spoke to some of the guys about this and some say yes and some say no, but we handled them so we know they went out. After 10 days this comfort pack went out and in that comfort pack, probably about [the size of] a large dozen, a large carton of wine, but probably about one and a half times that size, and there'd be like writing paper, razor blades. There'd be chocolate, heaps and heaps
- 14:00 of chocolate. Really good. Not chocolate you get here, chocolate that wouldn't melt in the tropics. You'd get really good get up and [it would] keep you going, chocolate. There'd be cigarettes, a couple of thousand cigarettes, soap, ('cause when we left the Yanks gave us one between every two blokes and I swapped all the cigarettes.) I had about 30 pound of chocolate and I ate it for the last week I was there. I ate what I could eat and then when I left I just went
- 14:30 'Whoosh, here's the chocolate fellows'. And Dial soap. I brought back a few packets, few boxes, not boxes, a few cakes of Dial soap. But they were after the infantry had been out 10 days. They gave so many between so many, one between so many guys and, the chocolate, that was a bit of a pick me up.

So did you smoke?

No, I never have smoked.

Did you ever feel almost encouraged

- 15:00 **to smoke?**

It was because there were cigarettes in every ration pack. And after that night we got mortared I had the shakes. I don't reckon I was the only one that had the shakes, but the blokes, the thing after a contact out in the field, all the blokes just automatically lit up, just to sooth their nerves. I can understand that, yeah.

So what did you turn to if you couldn't light up a smoke?

Just

- 15:30 nothing. Just didn't bother me. When I came back for a week, when I came back I was that ill, I was that ill all I did was vomit for a week.

That was when you came back to Australia?

Yeah, yeah. So maybe being there one day and we flew out, back, and in 24 hours I was in Sydney and when we first got there you realise there's tension, but after you've been there a while you sort of get used to it and then you, it didn't

- 16:00 worry you. But apparently I must [have], I come back to Australia and just the change, I don't know, I was just so ill.

We'll get back to that later on. I just want to get back to you going from Vung Tau to Nui Dat.

Nui Dat, yeah.

How did that happen again?

I was a forklift operator and was, (had about nine or ten of us up there.). We were handling the foodstuffs.

- 16:30 Even though when the convoys come up and first of all we were going up and giving the supplies straight off the back of the truck, but later on we were handling, coming up to us in bulk and then we were hand handling it. We also had an ammunition bloke with us from Ordnance, he was attached to us and he was destroying old ammunition or stuff that was doubtful. There was about nine of us up there and it was good, it was

- 17:00 a break.

And how did it come about? Did you apply for it or were you asked whether you wanted to go?

No no, just sent up there, yeah. They had about five or six there nearly the whole time and there was about three or four that were changed every few months and so well, it was a changeover. It was pretty good because there was no night work or before dark, everything, no matter what you were doing, just stopped.

So before you got to

- 17:30 **Nui Dat, how did you feel about going from a rear area to a forward?**

I was pretty keen about it, yeah. I thought, well I might get to have a go at these buggers.

And what were your impressions when you got to Nui Dat?

Well, it was pretty tough because we had tents. We had no floor boards. Monsoons, the water ran through the tent. Your boots mildewed over night. The pits were full of water, ones that were dug. There was, we didn't have any wash up basins, we had our

18:00 helmets. We took, the helmet there, took your liner out and that was your washing up, your helmet, your helmet outer. That was where you washed and shaved. The living conditions to put it [mildly] were pretty bloody tough, but the thing was, you were wet all day but you had a dry tent at night. It was the conditions, living conditions, and you hear later on some of the (UNCLEAR), Oh God, but I'm

18:30 glad I was there when I was looking back. A bit exciting I suppose.

What do you think about when you think back on your time in Vietnam? What strikes you, the weather, the temperature?

Well, the weather and temperature just, you got like into a steam bath. When you got there it was just, everyone remarks on just the temperature, particularly the people who flew over and got out at Tan Son Nhut [Airfield], out of an air-conditioned aircraft. They just literally....

19:00 Everyone comments. And you said the smell? The place had a [smell], vegetables, the markets or wherever you went, food you wouldn't eat yourself but generally pass and it didn't bother you, but it had a whole different culture, different everything.

Are there things now like smells and things that take you back?

19:30 Not really, no.

Does the smell of diesel ever remind you of the army?

No, not really. Some nights on, when we go to our bush camp. We've got (Vietnam vets) we've got a bush camp which is really something out near Mount Wheeler, and I was sitting out there on my own there

20:00 and the trees and everything all around, coming on dark and you sort of, if you're on your own, (usually sometimes people are stopping there) and you sit there and you're looking and think, "Oh yeah". Your mind goes back to when you were sort of wandering, coming on dark up at Nui Dat in Vietnam, trees and everything around you, and thinking back, oh yeah, yeah.

Because you did go to stand to on sunset?

No, we generally didn't, no.

20:30 No, the infantry guys did, but in daybreak. We did for a while back at Vung Tau until they realised it was pretty right. But the infantry guys, as I said, later on they put a battalion across (when they got the three battalions there they put one across the front of us) but at the time, it used to make you think, at night.

And you mentioned about putting in to go out on patrol ambushes and things like that with the infantry guys.

Yeah, yeah.

21:00 **How did that all work?**

ARU was the Australian Reinforcement Unit who we were with. There was Ordnance, some of us, and the postal section and, I can't think. I think there was another crowd. They were the blokes that came from Australia, went there and before they sent them to the battalions as replacements, they used to go out on night ambushes and patrol out in front of us. It might be out 1,000 metres or something like that, and that

21:30 was a breaking in of them to Vietnam combat operations. And then from there, they then moved to the battalions as there was casualties or sickness. They usually had, depends, could be a week, could be a month, six weeks with ARU and that was a crowd that I knew fairly well, some of them, and they said they'd take me out with them, but my boss wouldn't be in it.

What about

22:00 **communications with Australia. Did you get letters or mail?**

Yeah, we had for a while. We had no stamps or anything so we used to put just in the corner 'NSA', No Stamps Available. There was a big balls-up to put it correctly, right at the beginning. It took, I dunno, 10, 12 days, maybe a fortnight to get a letter, but after a while things [improved]. Probably took three or four months, four months to

22:30 iron the mail situation out. A lot of the blokes bought tape recorders and used to tape messages home and things, PX things were cheap and that and a lot of them sent home a small tape recorder where their wives, mothers or whatever could send the tapes back and forth. I just got into letters, wrote a few letters, that's all.

Who did you correspond with back home?

Mum, the person I lived with and a mate in my tent, his sister.

23:00 **Can you tell us what it does for you when you get mail from Australia?**

Yeah, it was pretty good. Everyone looked forward to mail call. Same system as what you see the Americans. Someone would yell, "Hey, the mail's up" and got everyone off their feet and down to the mail call and they'd yell it out, "Owens" or "Smith" or "Jones". You'd grab your letter and everyone would wander off on their own little space, for a better word, and read their mail. It was, yeah, probably to the soldiers, to any

23:30 soldier I think, whatever country, Vietnamese or whoever he is, I think to hear from home is bloody important.

Could you say you ever missed home when you were over there?

Missed Australia, not so much home, yeah. If there had've been leave, later on there was leave back to Australia but I don't know if I would've [gone]. I probably wouldn't have come back to Australia, no. No, I would've... I went to Thailand, yeah.

24:00 **Were there any things that you in particular missed about Australia?**

Climate and the Western, our way of life. The climate and our way of life, our whole way of life, going out, having a good time, no hassles, much better food of course, yeah, I missed it, yeah, but you're there and there's a job to be done

24:30 and when you volunteer for it you haven't got too much to whinge about. You can't whinge.

What about in regards to food and beer and that sort of comfort say. Were there things that you longed for and occasionally you might get things?

Yeah, yeah, like a steak. I think we had besides this ground beef, we had T-bones once there, and missed the food. As I said, we did pretty good compared to the infantry.

25:00 Yeah, and that hot at night. Literally you'd be wet. You'd be wringing wet at night. And we had bubonic plague in the place. People were dead in town, in the streets and they'd come around and put lime around them and the Vietnamese would come into the place. They'd get them, open their pyjamas up and spray them with some sort of thing for the fleas that actually

25:30 carry the plague and we were trapping rats but you couldn't use a rat trap because once the body of the rat cools the fleas leave. So they were trapping them alive and having a big drum, fire and tipping the rat into the fire so everything would be destroyed.

And that was done on base?

Yeah, at Vung Tau, yeah, and at night you'd be in your tent and you could hear the bloody things running around and you knew they had bloody bubonic plague. That must've, that used to

26:00 make you think a little bit too.

So how well did you sleep?

I slept pretty bloody well because you were go go go, going all the time and you slept pretty well, yeah.

And the heat and exhaustion would help?

Yeah and particularly at Vung Tau. The sand, the wind would blow up that much on your tent that sometimes the side of your tent would collapse,

26:30 and we always reckoned we should've got two medals, one for the desert and one for the bloody jungle. There'd be sand drifts from there to that wall, and probably about that deep overnight. Just blow up from the wind at night. And showers. When we moved camp we had our nice little shower room we built out of knocked off timber. We had that built and that was destroyed, got bulldozed. Then we went over to a 44

27:00 gallon drum with a shower off a tank, and then you showered out in the open and occasionally someone would jump in the bloody drum and someone would take a photo or some bloody thing and the Vietnamese around the place would think you were crazy, but it was alright.

Can you tell us about the American PXs?

Yeah, they were massive places. I'm only guessing, they would've been the size of Super Cheap up in Rockhampton, 100

27:30 metres probably by 20, 30, 40 metres wide and you could buy anything from grog to the best of cameras to.. And the American system. The Americans only get paid once a month. Anyhow so what they used to

do is stock up everything before their pay day and then the American lines would be half a mile long to get in. We got paid every fortnight. We'd go there and you had a little book of ration tickets. You were allowed a bottle of scotch

28:00 this month or a couple of bottles or whatever, but the PXs were air conditioned and that was their main PX and they had like clubs, enlisted men's club, NCO's [Non Commissioned Officers] club and all, and their clubs were as good as any hotel back here in Australia in those days. As good as a four and five star. That was their clubs, air conditioned, poker machines, bloody unreal. And we had a tent.

28:30 **What sort of things, did you buy from the PX?**

Yeah, a bit of grog, a few bottles of spirits. A bottle of black label scotch was about \$2, \$2.50. Gin and vodka, that was about \$1.10 a bottle. Beer was 15 cents a can.

Did you buy a camera or anything like that?

Yeah, I bought a good Canon camera. It only gave up the ghost above seven or eight year ago. A good Canon, and I bought a really good slide projector.

29:00 Some of the blokes brought back heaps of gear but I didn't worry about it too much.

Most blokes we've spoke to have all bought cameras and all shot slide films?

Yeah, same here.

Do you think there was a culture of drinking in the army as well.

There's no doubt about that, yeah. There's, as I said, that's why later on it was limited to two cans

29:30 per person per night, but from what I can gather it was, in the main it was generally adhered to, but apparently talking to the other guys, if you wanted it, there were ways around it.

How were the non-combatant troops treated by the combatants?

Pretty good, pretty good but there was always them and us,

30:00 to an extent. While we mixed very well and everything, there was always a little bit of them and us sort of thing. Nothing that you could really say, altogether you could really ever put your finger on, but it certainly was a difference. When they went to town, they hung out on their own. We went into town, we hung out on our own.

30:30 I was at a rest centre in Vietnam for five days and there was a sergeant there and I don't know how I upset him, well I didn't upset him, but he took a very strong dislike to me and I can't think of anything I may have said or anything, but generally I used to go down to the hospital. A couple of mates were in there at various times, and there was no problems there at all. When I was up at Nui Dat I used to go down to their infantry

31:00 messes 'cause (we had our own refrigeration after a while) but we used to get an invite down. Was corporal and myself and we'd go down into their company messes and that and there was no real problems there neither. Probably not so much in my time because we were all doing it pretty hard, but living and that but even today the blokes still say, oh you bloody, jokingly and they all

31:30 realise that one could not have operated without the other. But gee, I'm glad I got bloody service corps rather than infantry. See these poor buggers coming in literally stuffed, buggered. You've got no idea. You've never seen people like it, just dragging their arses, you wouldn't believe it, covered in mud. They had to throw away their uniforms when they come back, red, red mud and they just, I don't know

32:00 how the hell they operated so long.

What about, you always hear about the nagging from the nashos [National Servicemen] and the regulars but did you see any of that yourself?

No no. Oh, the joke was, it was a joke only, "You jokers joined to get a job. We joined to do a job." That was a big saying there, but they did get it a little bit easier than us regulars. In the army six years and I never got charged, never got in any

32:30 trouble, or that I was caught out at anyway. Anyhow, a regular buggered up, he'd get a fine or something. [If] he was a nasho, he might get a slap on the wrist or they'd look the other way, But talking to infantry blokes about that, they said there was no difference with them, but certainly with us there was a, you'd see it, it wasn't

33:00 favouritism, it was just that discipline was a little light, only a little, but a little lighter.

What about their performance when it came to doing a job?

Equally as good if not better. Probably better 'cause a lot of, later on when nashos came in and that and they were all 21 by that time and finished their training and they were older and more mature, I think. And the regulars were 17, 18, 19 year old.

33:30 Certainly had it over us in education, yeah. I think they were top blokes. They were good blokes.

As a regular professional soldier, what were your thoughts when you first heard about the introduction of National Service?

I didn't know how it was going to go. I think it worked out better than what anyone ever expected, that's what I think about it. I got the dirt to some extent.

34:00 It was running the refrigeration and they brought across this National Serviceman, Ronny Thompson, and he was a good bloke, and I showed him my job, what I was doing and they promoted him above me. And some of the regs, some of the nashos at the time were saying, "Gene, have a whinge. Put in a redress of wrongs." I said, "I know it's not bloody right, but Thommo's alright", I said. But it was probably one of the reasons why after six years I did call it quits. But as I said, I was going to be promoted when I was at

34:30 the supply depot and I got over there and I was in the running for it and I should've got it. The bloke said to me, "Gene, you've been in four years, you know your job", and they give it to someone who was going to get out in six months or eight months anyhow. But he ended up staying on anyhow. So I've been in contact with all of them recently and we're getting together for the first time on Anzac Day this year. About 12 or 14 of us in Brisbane, but I think

35:00 man for man, I think they were more mature. They were, yeah, probably a better soldier.

Do you think - the current perception of National Service - do you think it's a balanced perception?

Yeah, I think most people realise when they see these young blokes, what's happening to old people. I think politically, I think a few

35:30 polls I read, that most people, probably 60 percent, would support some form of National Service but not overseas and not for two years. I myself would like to see National Service for maybe six or nine months but not force them into it. If they didn't want to do it, (or not just didn't want to do it, but if their strong religious [beliefs] or a fair dinkum excuse. Work on the Peace Corps

36:00 or some other form of service) but I myself would like to see it brought in for the discipline side, respect, motivation, and I'd think they'd find a bit of camaraderie (UNCLEAR). That's just me.

At the time, did you feel that the 12 weeks that you spent at Pooka was probably the hardest thing you'd ever done in your life?

Yeah, it was, still is, still the hardest period of my life.

36:30 **In what way did that improve you?**

Well, for a start I put on quite a bit of weight even though it was hard work and everything. I was aware of being part of a team, something I enjoyed doing. I could see the results, I felt everything was positive. Before that sort of, a couple of jobs I had before,

37:00 that were just sort of going to work and working, but [in the army] you had a lot of people your own age all doing the same thing virtually, all in the same boat for a better word. I thought this until the day I got out. I still, I've never changed that, never changed.

What about when you look back on your life? Has the army, your time in the army and your time in Vietnam has that

37:30 **sort of ultimately been a positive thing?**

Yeah, real, really positive, yeah.

In what way do you think?

I don't know. It's a bit hard to say. Something that I really liked was the people I met and friends. Met one that I haven't seen since the early '60's, just recently. Met some really first class people

38:00 and even though the old army saying, "Greatcoats on. Greatcoats off. Hurry up and wait." I've heard that a million times, but I don't know, the camaraderie, the mates and people you know like even back in Australia. If something was wrong, they'd be there for you and that what was in Vietnam in the army. They wouldn't leave you. You'd, there'd be always

38:30 someone there for you.

Did you ever feel like there was that, like you'd grown up reading about the spirit of Anzac and that sort of thing, did you feel like you were part of it?

Oh yeah, I still do, I still do today. I'm happy when I've got a green shirt with the rising sun on it and I've got in my cap and you can see, I'm still happy. I'm very proud to say I was a soldier.

39:00 **We might just stop there.**

Tape 5

00:35 **Can we get you to go through and tell us again if you can, everything that happened when you were at Nui Dat during the Battle of Long Tan?**

As I said we were, we got some inkling that something was on a couple of days before. Apparently later on the SAS had been out and [there were] a lot of radio messages. They were picking up radio and that but they didn't know who was in the area.

01:00 Anyhow about two days before, we got an M60 which is a general purpose machine gun. Anyhow we got a soldier's five on that, on the use of it and so forth and took that down to the bunker and we had a shotgun, pump action, and another light automatic and our own rifles. Anyhow that night it was about 2 o'clock, it might've been half past two and I said,

01:30 **Righteo, you're right to go. Do you just want to continue on from after getting the soldier's five on the M60?**

Yeah, anyhow it was about two, half past two in the morning and all the, looking down towards the artillery lines and they used to fire harassment and interdiction at night. Let off three or four rounds on a trail somewhere or something, and I'd seen all the explosions down there and I thought, "Bloody hell". I thought, "What's going on?" and then all of a sudden,

02:00 explosions started coming up towards us, walking them up towards us, and I thought, "Bloody hell, they're a bit short tonight" because they used to fire them just out the front of us into rubber plantations and we'd be on the hill singing, "Whoops, there goes another rubber tree plant!" half full of booze. Anyhow my mate said, "That's not us, that's them," and I was pretty well right then because I thought we were copping it by our crowd. Anyhow they put them right

02:30 passed us and then the alarm went off and some bloody thing happened and everyone sort of roused and then anyhow the next lot they fired, they left that area alone pretty well down there at the taskforce and artillery and across the back of us. The first lot were in front, about 25 metres in front and the next lot was about the same behind us, and that was sort of in a bit of dead ground there, but the next line they took up was right through the infantry, right

03:00 through their lines, tents and through the postal unit. Anyhow, they were pretty lucky because, sorry, one of the rounds landed on top of, they had a big bunker, landed on top of that, didn't injure anybody. And one of the personnel, two-man holes, one landed smack in that and no bugger was there and then one hit a tent and by that time they were all out of the tents. And then when the next time, the next

03:30 lot that come, when they were firing, what used to happen, they'd fire for a bit and all our guns would just silence down and they were trying to get a fix with the radar locating battery where the shells were coming from. But the buggers were within 1,000 metres of the camp and they needed a 20 second or something flight time to direct back on to. Anyhow, when they stopped firing, all our guns would open up and plaster, had an

04:00 idea where they were and they'd go to town maybe 15 or 20 minutes and hammer the Christ out of the area and then they'd stop and you'd hear out in the boondocks, 'Boomp, boomp' and you'd hear them coming in again then their turn. You know, they'd fire a few more, few more and then they'd quieten down and our guns would hammer the Christ out of them again and that went on until about just before sunrise or light sky,

04:30 sky was starting to lighten. They had mortars and a recoil-less rifle.

Can I just ask you there Gene, what did your position consist of during that mortar attack?

I was in the bunker as a picket guard, whatever and a watch out, and just after it started the CSM [Company Sergeant Major] came down and I said, "I reckon they're going to come in under this". (UNCLEAR)

05:00 Anyhow, then the Australian firing flares up over the are. The whole area lighted up. They thought too they might've come in. Anyhow of course they didn't. Anyhow they wounded the three posties up where we were behind us and then a couple of infantry blokes were injured. Nothing

05:30 real serious amongst them, was down the other end where they, they blew up our forklift. We got a direct hit on the tyre on the forklift and blew a bloody great hole in that, but so I (UNCLEAR) a couple of our tents, but we were pretty lucky.

Did that thought ever cross your mind, that you were in harm's way?

Oh yeah. I was alright when it started when I realised it was them. After that, I had no problem,

06:00 but when it was all over and I was shaking a bit, yep. I've spoken to a few blokes that's been, a few good

mates and that after it, and they said, when it's all 'go go go' you're hyped up, your adrenaline is going, you come on, and then after it's all over and everything settles down, everyone sort of, or most people I've spoken to, all said they get the shakes and usually have a cigarette.

And the bunker that you were in, was that a properly constructed bunker?

06:30 I don't know. I looked at the infantry one later on and I said, that is a good one, and I looked at ours and I thought, jeez, I'm glad it didn't land on the roof of ours. I don't know. I said from then on, bloody hell, shovels, picks, everything was at a premium. No one wanted to do too much before that, but after that....

And you were in the bunker with another bloke obviously?

Yeah, yeah, another fellow, yeah.

And what sort of conversations were you having through all this?

None really, none I can remember.

07:00 I don't think we were even talking, just, I was just looking out.

So what happened at sunrise?

Well the last round came in apparently about seven o'clock in the morning, well and truly sunrise. It landed down, didn't go off though but heard later the last round was in at seven but we got out, looked around, went and had a look at the holes and everyone sort of walked around, had a look at where the damage, everyone else's damage and what was going on.

07:30 And we had reports in about so many injured and one had later died as a result of the attack, yeah, and there was 22 injured, probably four or five up where we were.

Can you describe what the feeling might have been in the base at that stage?

Probably great relief that there wasn't real, wasn't much happened. I mean in

08:00 terms of military effort, it was bugger all and they put a lot of holes, quite a lot of holes around the place and they buggered up a tyre on the forklift and a few were injured, but as far as effect or anything like that, everything was normal. But it was real funny the way these ARU infantry guys were facing, they were facing the airstrip which had a battalion on the other side of the airstrip. I always thought those buggers, some of them should've come down to us or

08:30 should've been some of them down at our [camp] because there was about 80 of them, 80 or 90 of those blokes and there was about nine [of us] and there was another section of transport service corps and there was probably about six or seven of those, and then we were facing the right way but they were facing [the airstrip]. They ended up they killed two of their own blokes there too, the infantry guys. They come up from Australia, not that night, they come up from infantry, come up from Australia all gung ho

09:00 and twitchy. They don't know what they're getting into either. Probably what gets through the whole experience over there was this, a married bloke, he got there in the morning and that night he was dead. I often think what did they tell his wife, and anyhow after you'd been there for a while certain things you sort of let go a bit, you don't worry, and this guy got there and the infantry all in and out of the place, they sort of had a lot of new blokes there all the time.

09:30 Anyhow they challenged this bloke "Halt!" and he gives the first password, not like in Australia, "Halt, who goes there?" You just say, "Halt Smith" and it might be "Smith, halt!", or 2P, you give the first, he gives the second. And this bugger that was there, didn't give the password and anyhow one of his own gunners let him have it, and then that night he was bloody dead. And another guy, I don't know what happened to him, I know they

10:00 got another one, but in the end they got two Viet Cong anyhow. Buggered how they got into the place but they were walking down their road between the airstrip and, they were facing the airstrip and the infantry and they were walking down the road chatting. Anyhow bloody lightening lit them up. Lightening lit them up and these two blokes on the M60 let them have it, and so the joke was, score two all, us two, those two. But that's the thing, probably gets through the whole thing was how they explained

10:30 to the bloke's wife. You could understand if he was there was a month or two months, but she would have said goodbye to him, 12, 18, 24 hours whatever [before]. I don't know, but anyhow that's how it goes.

Did you leave a sweetheart back in Australia?

No no. I had a lady friend but not, no, not particular, no.

So you didn't have any sort of worries with

No, no one, no, no. Wrote a few letters to her, but nothing

11:00 great, just..

So everyone's walking around in amazement I guess looking at the damage and stuff?

Just looking at the damage, what happened and

How did the day evolve from there?

From there on just dig, dig, dig for the next week. That day everyone was, every shovel you could get, every sandbag you could get, bloody every pick, crowbar, doesn't matter what it was. Everyone was just digging in because they didn't know, they still, well, we found out later they [the Viet Cong] headed for the

11:30 Cambodian border. But we didn't know at the time whether they wanted to come back for another go or what the hell. Brought home to everyone that they were fair dinkum.. Everyone realised that if they would've got in to us there would've been hell to play.

And what did you think was going to happen with the concert?

Well that was when the guns started really going to town and everyone realised something was on then and they flew Little Pattie, Col Joye and someone else,

12:00 they flew them out of the whole, out of Nui Dat, just got them out of the area.

But the show went on, didn't it?

No.

No?

No no. After about 15 minutes, 20 minutes that was the end of the show, was stopped and everyone went back to their units, and no one really knew at that stage. Everyone knew it was a big contact because of the amount of fire, but no one knew really how big it was or whether they were,

12:30 well, they were fairly close. A couple, about three, two and a half, three kilometres.

So as the day went on, D Company's gone out to look for these guys?

Look for them and they walked into their lead, their lead section and they chased them. 11th Platoon I think it was, Bob Buick got an MM [Military Medal] out of it, and now some of the section of the Australian platoon chased these guys. They didn't realise it was a bloody

13:00 regiment plus a battalion and they ran right into them. The platoon ran into them, that section, and they were the ones that took nearly all the casualties.

What were you hearing back at Nui Dat about what was going on?

Not much at that time, just that there'd been a bloody big battle. As I said, the artillery fire went for three hours, maybe a little longer and when you knew fire like that is fast as everything could go flat out, you knew that there was,

13:30 it was pretty big. Because there'd been other contacts where there might've been firing 15, 20 minutes, 25 minutes but not drum fire, sort of fire, but that fire was was just.....And talking to blokes later, they said it was dangerous around the guns because the gasses and all that sort of thing from the cordite and then they used all the ammunition there and they were getting it out of the

14:00 underground storage. And then later on after the battle they flew Chinooks in with more ammunition because they didn't know whether these buggers had gone for good or whether they were foxing, for a better word, bloody hanging around, but they'd had enough, they'd had more than enough.

What other sort of air support did you see?

Well, went around the hills

14:30 and there'd be forward air controllers and there was, you'd see the jets usually in threes, in flights of three and we had Warburton Mountain [nickname for the Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai hills] over from us and we had Long Hais back towards the ocean and you'd see even, just out in the rubber plantation, there'd be the forward air controllers firing rockets and these jets would fire, drop napalm

15:00 or whatever. You'd hear the cannon going, ripping off, and that night on Nui Dat was a bit of a show because we were on a bit of high ground and you'd look over towards back Baria and all the villages, local Vietnamese, the (UNCLEAR) type Vietnamese, they'd get a bit windy and they'd open up on some, or they could've been, well they were out there. They'd open up and there'd be a fire fight anywhere from 3 or 4 to 10, 12 kilometres away, they'd be into it

15:30 and there might be half an hour, an hour, and then that would die down and then over there, there might be some more firing. No, but that didn't sort of worry you. Just say, "There they go again". That was par for the course, and then they used to bring this American down. Anyhow they introduced, this is whatever his rank was. He flies in this area, it's his area and he flies Phantoms, and he said, "Next time I'm down, guys,

16:00 I'll give you a run, and we thought, "Oh yeah". Anyhow, well one bloke did. They used to run over the place low and going like a bat out of hell, and the trees were 30 feet, particularly back at Vung Tau, the trees were no higher than 30 feet and you would see them down lower than the tree tops. You'd miss them the first path because when they were gone you'd hear the sound behind them and then you'd follow the twin trails as they came around and they'd do it again and they'd get rolled over. Well

16:30 late at night they'd come across your bloody camp and turn on their afterburners and 'Boom, boom', massively loud and shake the Christ, and said, "Those bloody so and so's!" just being smart. Or they'd be doing a bomb run up to the Long Hais and they'd deliberately do [it]. And then we used to have ships off shore from Vung Tau. They'd be there for two or three days, three days, just get on the gun line and fire, fire, fire. They'd sail off,

17:00 another one would come in, do the same thing again. I don't think they ever did much good, but just part of the deal.

And you never had to do clearing patrols or anything like that while you were in Nui Dat?

No no. The other guys following us up, I don't know what period, but they did do them later on.

You mentioned earlier when you were doing, riding shotgun

On the trucks, yeah.

on the trucks, you said you had a heavy barrelled SLR?

Yeah, it's an

17:30 automatic. It was a unit, only light automatic we had. It's SLR with a heavy barrel, no woodwork and a 30 round magazine and fully automatic and I thought, when I went in the convoys I used to leave my rifle and they had a box of ten 300 rounds and I thought, "You buggers ever had a go, I'll give you what for. I'll make it worthwhile anyhow." So I used to drop my rifle, leave that and

18:00 take the heavy barrelled SLR and the box of magazines and I'll give you what for.

A lot of blokes we've spoken to tended to find or acquire pistols and things like that from the Yanks.

Yeah. I had one, yeah.

You got one?

Had one in the early days.

How did that come about? How did you get it?

I just went into the airbase and talking to Yanks and, yeah, I've got a pistol, do you want to buy it? It was a beauty, little 32. It was the nicest weapon, I've fired a lot of weapons. I'm in the military rifle club and that,

18:30 and one of the nicest little weapons I've ever fired, yeah, but we carried them around quite openly for a while and then as things got settled after about a month...It was real funny. I think I mentioned in the other interview, a mob of cowboys when we first got there, bloody, every bit of coloured rag you could get, everybody tied it around their bloody neck and looked so bloody....Looking back, you can laugh about it now, but a lot of blokes had pistols on their hips. Anyhow after about a month the word came through,

19:00 get rid of those bloody rags around you neck and the only weapon you can carry is issued weapons. So that made the NCO's. A few carried pistols but then we had, we still had our rifle but all this other stuff had to go. We still hung on to it and take it down to one of the sand dunes and have a blast away occasionally and that.

So you also mentioned about

19:30 **seeing some of the blokes coming back from**

From operations, yeah. Literally, talk about people dragging and stumbling, just beat, literally beat, red uniforms in the wet and just red mud and just no talk. They were just too beat, just walked back in.

What about, what was sort of the wash up like after everything had sort of happened at Long Tan? What happened

20:00 **in the wash up of that?**

Yeah, it was, those poor buggers at Long Tan were only carrying 60 round of ammunition, patrol ammunition, and the wash up was that they had to carry a minimum of 120. Everyone had to carry that, plus if they wanted to carry double that they could, but everyone had to carry a minimum of 120 rounds. Not us back in the base, we had access to enough of what we wanted, but the blokes who went out after that had to have 120 rounds and if they wanted to carry

- 20:30 200 they could, but they were, it was pretty sobering. Before then, while they were around, the buggers were around, see we really didn't get up there in June. We got there in April and the infantry, no, we didn't get there till early May. We had Anzac Day at sea so we got there early May and the battalion, 1st A Battalion came down, had a few days on the Back Beach and then they went up there. That would've been probably towards the end of May, and then
- 21:00 the other battalion came in and they were supposed to stop at Back Beach for a week but there was a fair bit going on and they wouldn't let us up there then, and then the 2nd Battalion went up instead of getting a sort of climatisation period, and then it would've been early June, maybe middle of June even. The 2nd Battalion... 5 and 6 Battalion were the battalions there. I think 5 was first and 6 was about a week or something, 10 days later. Anyhow when they got
- 21:30 established up there and there was a lot of movement and a lot of blokes would've been nervous, trigger [happy]. This crowd I knew they used to, there was that much firing, they were doing that much firing in the end the word come through if you fire you've got to get a body and that eased them up a bit. Because our toilet, we were here and the toilets were in the middle and they were there over the back and we weren't game
- 22:00 to go up to their bloody toilets. We thought they might let us have it. So you'd get out in the scrub just 50 yards from the tent and dig a hole and use that, or if you went up there you'd be talking and singing and yelling out. Because same as in the Yank camps at night. You were walking around them getting out of the place and there'd be two or three Australians singing and whistling and bloody talking real loud, I can tell you. We were more worried, in my case I'd have been more
- 22:30 worried about Aussies and Yanks than I really was of the Charlies, that's to be quite honest, yeah. I was more worried about the Yanks and our blokes.

Did you see the bodies of dead and wounded soldiers coming back in?

I seen some Australian, three Australian, that upset me a bit, three Australian dead. I was in the Yank base and they were taking them into CASEVAC [Casualty Evacuation], 36 CASEVAC Hospital. They didn't have

- 23:00 body bags at that stage. Anyhow they brought these three guys and there's mud and blood and one bloke had a horrible look on him, must've died pretty hard, and then I shouldn't have been awake, but I (UNCLEAR) I don't know what it was. I knew it was a medical helicopter coming in, there was a bloody emergency pad at the hospital and they just put pads in and the hospital door 10, 20 feet away, and we hung around to have a look and I thought, "Oh shit".
- 23:30 Anyhow from then on I, all I wanted to do was do some of those, I tell you. All I wanted to do after that was do some of them. Never come about, but then I saw a couple of their wounded, their dead didn't bother me. When we went through the villages when the Australians did the ambush they'd lift the bodies next morning and put them on display in the village square and they'd put an Australian sentry on them and at nightfall that night
- 24:00 they'd let the villages take them and bury them, but we went past them a few times, didn't worry. I must admit at the time I was quite happy about it.

Did you see how the Australian sense of humour helped blokes that were serving over there?

- 24:30 We'd be sitting there and there'd be machine gun bullets going over the top of your head like when we were up in the back of Vung Tau at the end of the airstrip, the Yanks were always firing and carrying on. We knew we were in a basin so all the fire was just going over our head. Some of the blokes carrying on and this (McReedy's dead now, I found out just recently) he'd dig a bloody hole in the sand and throw something and say, "We should just bury the hatchet with Ho Chi Minh and all go home".
- 25:00 We had this bloke who was a comedian, but there was a bit of black, probably black humour but certainly a lot of humour and if you read some of, and I've got most of the battalion histories here. There's quite a lot of black humour, but it is the Australian. There wasn't much you couldn't laugh at or have a laugh. Even things might've been tough and that and someone would make a smart crack,
- 25:30 some smart-arse remark for a better word, and everyone, sort of broke things up a bit, sort of eased the tension a bit or something.. Someone would say something, you'd just laugh and then it would sort of be better. I don't know if you know what I mean, but 'cause Australian humour is, the Yanks don't have, I dunno, to me they don't have that sort of humour. Australians, when things aren't real
- 26:00 good or not, someone will make a wise crack or a bloody something and everyone will laugh, but the Yanks just are very, I wouldn't say dour, but I dunno, a different crowd. I was in Vung Tau one night, me and a mate. They reckon you never hear the one that gets you. I don't know, I still don't know, but I was in this bloody bar drinking and they used to throw grenades in and that. Anyhow
- 26:30 these Yanks, there was a training grenade, a thunder flash, noise just as big and a lot of smoke and bloody that's about all, and they threw this bloody thing under our chair and I just looked at my mate and I thought, heard the bang and I thought, "This is it". I'm just sitting there and I turned around and looked at him, he looked at me, and by this time all these Yanks outside, about six or eight of them are pissing themselves laughing and we went out and abused the Christ out of them, got up them. They

brought us grog for the rest of the night.

27:00 That wasn't, that wasn't, it happened in a millisecond, I thought "This is it". I don't know whether you'd know, I still don't know, but just very... yeah.

You must've seen a lot of fights and things as well.

Yeah, we had two Aussies there. They were real good mates and at 13 stone

27:30 they were super fit and big blokes at 13 stone. They went to Back Bar, the American bar. Anyhow they stood shoulder to shoulder at the bar and they done these six Yank big black bloody Negro bouncers and they done the six of them and bang, one bloke got a cut lip, and it was the talk, but if they weren't fighting Yanks, these two blokes, they would fight each other, and where you saw one his mate would be in his shadow. As I said, if there were no Yanks to fight they'd fight each other.

28:00 Crazy.

What about the black American soldiers? What was your interpretation of them as opposed to the white Americans soldiers?

They were good. They were a lot of fun. They loved music. If you were going along to their canteen they'd be up jigging and carrying on and we didn't, and generally back in the rear areas, or it was, I saw it, the blacks generally drank in this area, just say, and that area over there would be predominantly whites in the

28:30 rear areas and we didn't give a bugger where we sat. If there was a spare table down there we sat there and we got along real good with them. No hassles, joke and carry on, but apparently up in the American infantry battalions apparently there wasn't all that much segregation. They realised everyone had each other's lives in their hands and there was more.... less than back certainly around the air base and that. But what, in their R and C Centre,

29:00 they had a Rest in Country Centre and the infantry guys and all that would come down from the north and a beautiful building, you've got no idea. When you walked in they had a little running water and a little bridge over, this is real early in the piece, and all this. And they used to put up a plane with TV, they'd broadcast TV, and this bloody Combat with Vic Morrow and some other stupid bloody show was on, and you couldn't get to the bar there'd be that many Yanks and as soon as those shows were on,

29:30 whoosh, off up to watch Combat with Vic Morrow and some other bloody thing. You know, we got free run of the bar then, so we didn't mind, we didn't bugger off. We used to sit back and, but the places they had were just, they really did look, even though their officers treated their blokes like crap, as far as looking after their troops they really did, they really did look in that respect.

You don't think that made them

30:00 **in a way softer as well?**

Yeah, probably, yeah, yeah. Just, we had a couple of Green Berets came down to us at Vung Tau once and we had access to food, whatever we wanted pretty well. We gave them a fair bit of gear and we got talking and they said they'd been through Kanungra and quote, they said, "If all of our blokes would go through Kanungra,

30:30 there'd be a lot more going back home alive", and there's a Colonel Hackworth in the book, About Face, living here in Australia now and he said, he used to send his second lieutenants and lieutenants down to the taskforce. In his book, he was a full colonel, regimental, the three battalions, and his superiors had hauled him up and say, "What are you doing sending the best trained soldiers in the world down to the Australians?", and he said to these blokes, he said, "the Australians

31:00 are the only ones over here that know what they're doing" and that's a quote from Colonel Hackworth and he is America's most decorated soldier in Vietnam.

In your time both in Vung Tau and Nui Dat, did you see any of the high ranking Australian officers?

Yeah. At Vung Tau we did, the Brigadier was leaving for Australia and we had to parade up and down the beach, march up and down the beach. We knew it was coming,

31:30 we knew it was on. We knew everything of course, so we told some Yanks and someone got around to the right ones and then while we were marching up and down, he's trying to make a speech and they had a bloody couple of their aircraft propeller jobs literally buzzing the whole bloody thing and I just couldn't keep a straight face. You heard bugger all and we were just cheesed off that we had to parade, we were so busy at work, we had to parade for a bloody, for a brigadier 'cause he was coming back to Australia.

32:00 **What about, did you see any pollies, politicians?**

Yeah, saw them from a distance. I think Fraser or Peter what, the Minister for the Army was there at the time [Malcom Fraser was Minister for the Army from 1966-1968] Yeah, I saw some, Lorrae Desmond and had a drink with them in the canteen once, but yeah.

What about some of the,

32:30 **there some of the acts that were getting around were quite lewd, weren't they?**

The acts from the Americans, what the Americans provided were very, yeah. The Australian girls and some of the blokes had a few beers and would be yelling out in little skimpy tops with bikini pants on. The favourite thing they used to yell out was "Get it off, get it off!" but anyhow, the American ones in the American camps were virtually no holds barred.

33:00 All the gear came off and then the show started. It was... yeah.

Would the Aussies get invited to those or would they just gate crash?

We just turned up, just gate crashed.

And in your particular job, do you think maybe you guys were privy to a lot of information before other blokes would get it?

Yeah. We had a good captain and every night we had an O, we called an Orders Group, an O group and

33:30 our boss would tell us what was going on in the area and I'd rather say something not with the camera going, but with the sound going, that's all.

Can we just stop it for a tick?

I was very interested in the whole damn thing. I thought I'm here, I'm interested, I'd like to win.

And what was the official way that soldiers would be informed of news and that sort

34:00 **of thing?**

The O group was generally at about six o'clock at night. The corporals went up to usually a captain or lieutenant and he would brief the NCO's what had happened during the day, what was going to happen that night or what is expected to if there was any concentrations of enemy. If you heard something, they were in the area, you went to bed fully dressed of course.

34:30 Things like that. Things we weren't told which I don't think they even knew, was these B52 strikes. It was about, I don't know, half past two, three o'clock one morning, we had one a few kilometres away and the tents and the trees, and you could've got out and read a newspaper, just the ground and everything. I thought it was an earthquake first, I just thought it was an earthquake and then we got outside the tent and just everything just blood red,

35:00 the sky. Wasn't went for long, 15, didn't seem that, 10, might've been 10 minutes, 10 or 15 minutes, but just, 30 ton bomb loads they had. They missed the group they were after anyhow, that was the end result of it and later on the Australian battalion had a group on the beach, the battalion they'd been chasing and we had, whatever we had six or seven dead and about 12 or 18 wounded.

35:30 It was a political war, the word had come through, break contact. It happened a few times. The Australians had them cold, then we took this six or seven dead, 18 injured, was always pull back and ambush and withdraw a kilometre and then set ambushes and as they got out of the trap they're the ones they'd get.. They had them on the beach at this stage and the word was pull back again and ambush and we'd taken those casualties

36:00 and anyhow, and then they put a B52 strike on them, on these buggers on the beach, but they'd gone, and we, I think we got about 70 all up but it would've meant the Australians having to go in and it would've been almost hand to hand. It would've been going in and getting them one at a time. We would've taken, I don't know, no one knows, but we would've taken a lot of dead and injured. That happened two or three times to

36:30 my knowledge, just got to that stage.

When you first got sent to Vietnam did you know how long you would be there for?

Yeah, yeah, a year. I had a year and a day there actually.

And every time you watch a film about Vietnam you have all the countdowns.

Yeah, that's right, that's fact, yeah. The last, you don't know your exact date until about a month before or maybe even a little bit more. You've got an idea which week

37:00 but the actual day, and about a month before you know exactly what day you're going and flight and everything. So then it is pretty big deal.

And were there any particular days, like was half way a momentous occasion?

No, the momentous occasion was one night, not the night I left, the night before we went and got our tent, there was two Queenslanders and two Tasmanians and I went and got two bottles of Black, 'cause I was one of the first to

- 37:30 go, I was one of the first three or four out of my platoon to go. Anyhow we got a couple of Black Label and we downed that and I said, "I'm going over to the canteen to get some beer." OK, and I was alright when I left and I got a dozen or whatever it was, cans, and walking back out I walked into a steel picket and split my head down here and by the time I crawled back into the tent every bugger's flaked. So I just dropped everything and crawled in to my bed. Anyhow the next morning,
- 38:00 that was the last day there actually, I had to work, shit, this green bile, that's all I was bringing up and my mate said, "Gene", he said, "Get up and go to bed." He said, "I can carry on." He said, "Just go, get out." "No," I says, "Last day, this is it." I says, "I'm sticking", so I did that bloody day's work and I've never really drank scotch again. It was so funny, we'd be watching movies in the open. I don't know what the bloke, he must've had a box or something, but the screen and everything was in the open.
- 38:30 Anyhow you'd be sitting in the rain just watching the bloody movies, just normal. (UNCLEAR) wrong with these fools, but underneath the vehicles they turned up, the sand would be dry, and these silly buggers, they're soaking wet anyhow and they rolled underneath the vehicle in the dry sand and when they came out everyone just pissed themselves laughing. They're just all bloody covered in sand and they were wet and it was easier just to sit there and get wet. We got the very latest movies. Yeah, got the very latest,
- 39:00 but always started off with bloody baseball. Before the baseball, what was happening over in the US before we got the latest movies, but I dunno, we didn't have that many movies. None up at Nui Dat because everything had to be in darkness, but Vung Tau we, I dunno, I can't remember. I think we might have had them once a week or once a fortnight or something.

Can you remember any of the films you might've seen?

Cat Ballou I think. I saw Cat Ballou there, rapt

- 39:30 Yeah, I think that's where I saw 'Cat', but they were released over there. I said looking after their troops, before they were released in Australia, probably before in the US in a lot of cases. I saw Nancy Sinatra. That was the highlight of my trip over there.

Actually we'll just stop there.

Tape 6

- 00:32 **So, the Nancy Sinatra concert?**

Yeah, fantastic. The Americans of course come from miles around and it was done on the back of a truck, on the back of a semi-trailer truck, little short skirt and boots and she sang that, and everyone just went like off their brain. Now she advertised, it was in their movies, Stars and Stripes, in their newspaper. Now she advertised for a pair of combat boots and they got enough, a pile without

- 01:00 exaggeration, like that, and she had a photo taken sitting on top of these old combat boots. I had the photo for a long, long time but I don't know what eventually happened to it. I cut it out of the newspaper. Actually 6th Battalion made it their marching song, 6th Battalion did, and it was used up to probably, I don't know about now, but it was used up till probably about 10, 12 year ago.

And was there

- 01:30 **kind of a bit of a light show with it as well?**

No, just the back of the semi was lit up and I don't know, I couldn't even guess how many people. I'm only guessing, I'd say that probably 2,000 or 3,000 Americans, there wouldn't have been all that many of us, but very impressive yes, I was impressed.

So that's one of your favourite songs?

Yes, it is actually. Roy Orbison is probably my [favourite], Pretty

- 02:00 Woman and probably Roy Orbison music is.

You mentioned earlier that in Vung Tau the atmosphere between the men kind of got a bit, people got a bit grumpy and a bit restless.

Yeah.

Yeah, fights here and there. Was there some kind of story about a Mexican stand-off that you were involved in?

Oh, that was when we pulled guns on each other and this other bloke said, that's what we call a Mexican stand-off, where you point

- 02:30 a gun and just someone would wander up and come in between and take the rifles away and that's a

Mexican stand-off.

So what was the problem that you had with the other guys?

He used to bad mouth the Yanks, get off about the Yanks. He was right to some extent looking back but he used to get into me personally and we did steer clear of each other 80 percent or

- 03:00 most of the time because just, well we never went out together or never drank together but it got to a point a couple of times, shouting, raving at each other, went a bit further than that. But there was another fellow too, he's contacted me recently, a bloke by the name of Bubba Lewis, and he was a big bugger. I've got his photo somewhere here, great big bloke. Anyhow, and we get along
- 03:30 pretty good most of the time but occasionally he'd want to fight me, and it wouldn't even be a contest. I used to pick up my rifle, like butt, and I said, like "Come on, let's have it." He'd say, "Fight fair, fight fair." I'd say, "I am fighting fair. Look at you", I'd say. "Look at me". He'd be about six foot three, six foot four and bloody like this. Anyhow that would all blow over and then we'd be maybe good mates again for another three or four months and then, I don't know, I can't, I'm
- 04:00 seeing him. I rang him the other day, a month ago, so it's going to be interesting when I see him again to say the least. But when he was talking over the phone everything sounded alright and no hassles, but just him and I just, I don't know what, and the funny thing was, his bed at one stage before we moved into tents was right on, was about that far away. The stretcher was about that far away from mine so it's
- 04:30 funny nothing ever happened. I mean just used to be outside or I don't know what started it off but I'd, just about three or four times I suppose that happened. Come on, let's have you. I was fair dinkum, I'd have used it, yeah, fair dinkum.

So you talked a little bit about when you went on leave.

In Thailand?

Not in Thailand, when you went on leave in Vietnam, and there'd be lots of drinking

- 05:00 **and that kind of thing. What kind of interactions did you have with the Vietnamese?**

Locals?

Yeah.

Different people, different interactions. Plenty of bar girls, plenty of brothels for a better word. There was

They're pretty, it's pretty famous, the phrase 'steam clean' and all that kind of thing. Did you

No, there wasn't so much of that when I was there. It was still pretty,

- 05:30 we were the first big, including us and Americans, we all virtually got there at the same time and that was the start of the really big build up when there was, from 120,000 odd when I left a year later, there was about 350,000, 400,000, and later on there was 550,000. That was just the start of the big build up and everything was pretty basic and there was never, not many, like in the street. TV, they put it up. Towards the end of the time they had
- 06:00 TV and lamp posts in the street. The Vietnamese would get around and watch TV or they'd sleep in the streets. Yeah, it was, interaction with the people, the kids were always grabbing you for money and that, and they were doing more. They'd try and get into your pockets and you'd be pushing them away. Not like, just fending them off rather
- 06:30 than pushing I should say. We never ever, some of the Aussies might have, I don't know, but a couple of blokes we used to just go, bugger off, "Didi mau, didi mau" bugger off" ['Didi mau' is Vietnamese slang for "Go quickly"]. They had cowboys, what they called the cowboys there. They were the young blokes that should've been in the army, 18, 17, 18, 19, maybe 20 and they'd get around in groups of five or six and I believe, not so much when we were there, if you got a soldier or a couple on their own,
- 07:00 they would hassle them, give them a pretty hard time, with the intent of robbing them. I did a crazy thing a couple of times. I was in town and I walked back to camp. I don't know why. On my own. I did stop on the side of the road and got a big rock in each hand and walked up the middle of the road, and I thought if any bugger even says anything I'm going to hurl it at him and go like hell. I was fit as a fiddle, but looking
- 07:30 back, I did that a couple of times, at least twice. Thought "Oh well, I've had enough of town." There was plenty of transport. I mean there was always a bloke in the horse and carts and little bloody Lambrettas [motor scooters]. I could have always got, or come back. I don't know what it was.

So you didn't get into any hairy situations there?

Yeah, we did. We'd only been there about a week. Anyhow, some engineers picked us up and were going to drive us back to the camp.

08:00 Anyway, they got lost. Righto, we're in the back and lucky there was three or four engineers in the back of the Land Rover and they had rifles and we ended, I don't know where we ended up but there was no friendly troops, no uniforms and the people were starting to get around and get pretty excited. And these guys said to us, "Get on the floor", and they cocked their weapons and put them out over the side and this bloke in the front did a reverse, did a couple of point reverses and we got the hell out of the place.

08:30 There were certainly no friendlies in that place. I mean the Vietnamese would've been in uniform and there would've been police but, we weren't that far lost, but we were probably only 3 or 4 K [kilometres] from where we should've been, guessing now, but we'd just got there. A little bit worrying at the time, but laughed about it after.

How were you received in general from the,

09:00 **by the Vietnamese?**

Fairly well by the people. Much better than the Americans. There always seemed to be two prices there. There was a price for the Australians and there was a price for the Americans. We would barter and bloody tell them to get nicked, or we weren't gonna pay it, and we'd generally get it for what we wanted. The Americans would sort of just hand over the bloody money.

09:30 You could always tell, the Yanks were generally bigger, more beefier, fatter for a better word, and we were always little skinny buggers, and they had typical Yankee haircuts and we had, not as long as I've got now of course, but we generally had much longer hair and smaller people and very very much thinner. It always struck me with these Yanks is how big, and I don't know, how beefy there were, and

10:00 we were all bean poles. So that always got to me.

It was all that ice cream they had.

Probably.

So how did the Americans treat the local women?

Probably fairly well. Probably in that par, for that I'd say the Aussies and Australians were about the same with level. But their attitude towards them,

10:30 like I said, when there was problems was they'd push them around and yell and scream and just when these incidents happened. And to me it didn't achieve, the damage was done. What was done was done. Nothing was going to change it and by pushing, screaming and yelling, it just didn't achieve anything. I just could never see any reason for it. And we'd just laugh at the buggers, when they come

11:00 into town. Every corner, they have helmets, flak jackets, pistol on their hips, bloody rifle. One on each four [corners]. "Out, out, everybody out!", so we'd walk in the next pub, in the next bar. "Get out, get out, told you blokes get out!" "Yeah, we're going". Into the next bar, and we were the last out. It paid to be last out because a couple of times when they knew they'd bombed the town, they'd bloody mine the road, because they knew everyone would be in to get everyone

11:30 out of town. They'd mine the road a couple of times, but again it was the poor old Vietnamese that ended up on the mines. So that's pretty pointless.

Did you try any of the Vietnamese food?

Only a couple of times. I had steak and eggs once and I got I think it was monkey meat or buffalo meat. Was a little bit of burned meat about that big and it was on something about the size of a bread and butter plate, on something about the size of a

12:00 saucer. I think I got a pigeon's egg and both were unedibles. And we got what we called, you've probably heard this one before, hepatitis rolls. Have you heard of those? Ten o'clock, half past nine, might've been curfew, ten, half past ten, everyone out of town. You had to get out and get your way back. Anyhow, and the flies were that bad now, and this guy, his fingers would be as black as that

12:30 and he'd have these bread rolls and cutting them and fingers into whatever he was putting on it and flies would be all over everything, and you wouldn't eat them unless you were bloody three-quarters drunk and hungry hence the name hepatitis rolls. And if they'd get up their choppers, or even during the day they'd get their meat cleavers up to chop something and all the flies would go 'whoosh'. When the chopper came down all the flies would go 'whoosh' off again.

13:00 If you ask the blokes about hepatitis rolls, we still laugh about them. It's a wonder someone, people may have got sick, I don't know.

Do you think a lot of people felt relieved a bit when they went in town and went on leave and all that kind of thing?

Yeah, I was talking to the infantry guys. They only ever went down there probably half a dozen, eight, nine times all up, and they did all the same. They really let their hair down too.

13:30 Probably what we done I think they would've done something similar, really got drunk.

How did it work with the bar girls?

With the?

The bar girls?

Well they used to have what they called Saigon Tea which was about a dollar a drink or something and all they were drinking actually was supposed to be 'wicky coke', which was whisky coke. So wicky coke was a dollar and you gave them a dollar and the madam of the place would pour cold tea, Saigon tea into a little

14:00 glass. Anyhow and then usually the going fee was about a dollar in those days if you wanted to take a girl upstairs for a short time or out the back or whatever, so was about the going rate then. We were on \$88 a fortnight so that was fairly well, reasonably, not compared to the Americans but for those days. Nothing like the Aussies get today overseas and that but it was a reasonable sum.

14:30 What about when you were on leave in Thailand?

Yeah, that was my aeroplane flight. It was either end of December or towards December or it might've been very early in, I think it might've been November, December, somewhere around about late November, early December. Anyhow we were supposed to go down with Australian wallaby flight.

15:00 Anyhow I ended up, me and my mate ended up going on an American Caribou twin-engined prop transport, same as what we use today still. Anyhow we get aboard and they put a body in a body bag and strap that to the top of the luggage. I thought, yeah, this isn't bad for your first flight. Then we gets up, gets going and then one engine starts back-firing and missing. I said to my mate, this airforce bloke, "Hey,

15:30 what the hell's going on?" I knew it wasn't right. "It's not right", he said, "but don't worry about it. There's nothing to worry about." About an hour and ten later we get into Saigon airport and bloody, the first thing that comes off is the body off the luggage and then myself. "Gene, that's your first flight in an aeroplane! And to fly over the place, even then in, say the end of '66, bloody melon holes, bomb craters just like flying over, and that was those days,

16:00 just incredible, artillery shells. It was like an hour, about 70 or 80 mile, and when you take off and land over there on this big airstrip, you come right over the airstrip and then the plane does a wingover, comes down, just falls down and goes in rather than, same as what's happening now. They don't do an approach because of shoulder fired missiles and that sort of thing. It wasn't missiles in those days, it was ground fire,

16:30 machine gun fire and that sort of thing.

So how long did you have in Thailand?

We had a week, seven days. We got aboard a (UNCLEAR) and it was hurry up and wait. We waited about eight hours and we had a few beers in the air-conditioned bar there. Anyhow, and we got an old DC6B which is a four-engined piston propelled aircraft again. Anyway we got aboard and all the

17:00 Americans are there in their nice uniforms and ribbons and everything, and we get aboard, nothing. We had, that's right, we had polyester shirts, grey green shirts and trousers, not a ribbon or a medal between any. All these Yanks are there and lovely Pan American hostesses and I'm not sure, the flight went two and a half hours or something, maybe three hours. And the time we were coming into

17:30 Bangkok the girls had, (were covered from there to there with all these Yank medals and ribbons) three or four girls who were on the flight. Anyhow the pilot comes on and he says, "Bad news". We were the only two Aussies on board, He said, "I've got bad news for you crowd. All the girls have been locked up for the week you're here." Haw haw haw haw, you know. So we landed and they took us into a room and gave us a cold drink and a cool cloth, and they said, now while you're here, you don't do this

18:00 and you don't do that and you're visitors here so have a good time but behave yourself. Don't drink in the, don't swim while you've been drinking. So many's drowned this week and so forth in the pools. And then they put you on a bus and bus you out about 20 [mile], something like Yeppoon and Rocky [Rockhampton] distance, the airport into Bangkok. Anyhow the first hotel the Yanks got off and the bar manager came out with a big

18:30 arm full of cold grog and passed it in the bus. This is alright and we got into that. Next lot gets off, another big armful of grog comes on. This is alright, and we must've been about the last or second last bus stop and by this time we're bloody pretty rotten for a start. We've been to all these pubs dropping off Yanks and we must've been the last and there were half a dozen of us and I don't know what happened to all the beer, but we drank our share. Then we got into this hotel and we didn't realise it at the time but all you had to do, we didn't have

19:00 passports or anything. We had a fair bit of money. I took \$300 with me for the week, US, but we got \$1.20 for every US dollar those days. Anyhow so we handed our money in, most of it at the hotel into a safe, and it was probably about equivalent to a three and a half star Australian standard today. Anyhow we all had our own rooms and I shortly realised later on

- 19:30 within an hour or two that all you had to do was ring up the front desk and they'd bring up eight or ten girls and you'd take your choice. The going rate those days was \$10 a night. So anyhow, we went out on the town that night. We hired a Mercedes Benz for the week, \$10 a day or some bloody thing, and this Australian airforce bloke [said], 'Bugger it, only money". So
- 20:00 we hired a Mercedes chauffeur, Mercedes Benz. That was really good. So we did all the night spots and got ourselves, when you walked into the bars there was, there was a street of them, I mean a street a mile long both sides. Anyhow, and all the girls, a lot spoke, even in those early days, a lot spoke English, but they were beautifully dressed and they got around with like number 1 to maybe number 80, depends how many girls are in the bar. And you'd be sitting there drinking your beer

- 20:30 and this Vietnamese, not Vietnamese, Thai, the driver, he hung around with us. And drinking there, say you'd talk to number 10 or number 12 or number 20 or whatever the number was. They'd bring her over and you'd have a chat and a talk and if you weren't happy another lady. You had the lady of your choice and if you went back to that bar you could change your girl every night or you could stick with the same one.

Did they have the same numbers every time?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Anyhow I

- 21:00 ended up with a young lady for the week I was there. The same young lady, a very attractive young lady. But they used to bugger off during the day after about nine, ten o'clock and then they'd come back late afternoon. They took us down to a couple of eating places, but I wasn't, I dunno, it was certainly cleaner than Vietnam. But the Thai people are just a beautiful friendly race. I always said even in those
- 21:30 days I would never have, I didn't ever want to go, I would never have went back but if the Thais would ever, I said earlier on you talked about a threat, if they would've ever got into trouble I would've been one of the first to volunteer because they were just so friendly. You'd walk into one of their shops, there was a cold beer on the counter for you. Can we help you? Just, I dunno, they're just a happy, happy, but poor old Vietnamese, they've been fighting for that bloody long and war weary
- 22:00 and buggered and probably cynics, just totally different. But we were Americans, they didn't know where Australia was, just "GI you Gene". No, we're not American, Australian. As far as they were concerned we were GI's.

What did they know about what was happening in Vietnam?

- 22:30 Well the conversation really didn't get around to that sort of depth, but they certainly knew. I mean so many fit young people, young blokes over there and moving through Thailand. I said there would've probably only been 130,000, 140,000 and later on there was half a million but the leave places which were available when we were there was Bangkok, Taipei, Hong Kong,
- 23:00 Hawaii, (I think Hawaii had a few places) but they were generally the four main places where you could go. Later on when the Australians could come home to their wives which I believe quite a few did (if I were married or had a fiancée I suppose I would've done the same thing myself). But anyhow, spent a week, just out every night of course until one or two o'clock in the morning. Come home and have some fun and games and then,
- 23:30 at nine or ten in the morning, the girls would go and we'd grab the driver and just drive around looking at the place. And then we went out to the American PX in Bangkok. Don't ask me. I can't even remember where that was. We bought a big bottle, a 40 ounce bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label and we used to sit around the pool of an afternoon. I've got some photos of it. These guys, three story hotel and then there was a concrete, and then there was a pool and these Yanks
- 24:00 would get right back and there was a rail about that high they could dive over. And they'd run along and dive off the top of the hotel into the pool, and this bloke I'm with, the Aussie I'm with, he said, "I'm gonna do that." By this time we'd had a few bloody sherbets. "Don't be silly. Don't be bloody silly." He gets up there and he's walking backwards and forwards and looking over, and oh yeah. The Yanks are into it. They were into it. He ended up doing it anyhow, went and dived off the bloody top. I've never
- 24:30 been that drunk or that stupid I'm afraid. You could easily see how disaster, I mean when they were warning us when we first got to Thailand. They said, "Don't swim in the pools drunk. Americans have drowned."

What about drugs? There's a lot of stereotypes about drugs in Thailand and also Vietnam.

Yeah, with the Australians, I never personally met anyone that I thought, or could've ever been on drugs.

- 25:00 I know it happened because I spoke to a few of the blokes. A couple of them are still doing marijuana and that, more of a recreational rather than heavy, but. And some of the blokes I spoke to said, "Yeah, we know people that was on it." Signal blokes from signal regiments and a battalion bloke, he was an army conscript. He quite freely admits that he smoked it over there, but he's really stuffed in the head, he's from Mount Morgan. I was a welfare officer for about

25:30 six or seven years with the RSL in Rockhampton. So I was doing the pensions in 1990 to about 1997, '98 before I came down here. So I did get to see a lot of people and hear their stories and that. And when you hear one, you hear virtually the whole of their problems, headaches and rashes and

26:00 losing their cool very quickly and this sort of thing.

Did they ever talk about how they got hold of them?

No, I don't know how they did, I don't know. As I said, I never saw anyone. I was wrong there because when the Jeparit [MV Jeparit] was in, the Australian supply ship, as I said I was on the ice truck at that time and we used to take ice down to the engineers running the boats backwards and

26:30 forwards to the supply ship. So they took us out to the supply ship and we went aboard and they cooked us a real nice meal. Anyhow we went down to the cabin with one of the blokes, me and my driver, we went down there and this guy got some white powder and put it in with his tobacco, but that was the only drug. He was a civilian on the Jeparit. That's the only drugs I saw. There's a bit of a funny story. They wanted to have a barbecue on Back Beach.

27:00 Anyhow, we went back and we said to the boss, "They want to come down and have a barbecue. Can we use one of the trucks, pick them up, their booze and all their gear and take them to Back Beach?" He said, "Fill out a request form", which we did, and the barbecue was that night. So anyhow I didn't know at the time, but my mate on his own bat jumped in this truck and when everything should've been 'no movement', oh, there was a few leave vehicles going, but he got in his bus and picked them up with a

27:30 pallet of beer and they went to Back Beach. And later on he spotted me and he said, "Gene", he said, "we're going down for a drink after." He said, "I took those blokes down to Back Beach." So after we'd eaten and that we wandered down there and here's this pallet of bloody beer so we hopped into it with them. And what made me a bit mad, the Aussies that were there, they were picking up cartons and walking off with them and to me, they were good enough to invite anyone that came, doesn't matter who they were, Aussies,

28:00 Yanks, Koreans or what, just have a beer. But I thought it was pretty rich for people to go picking up a carton and carting it off. But anyhow, the whole crux about a fortnight after the ship had sailed, we got authority to pick them up and take them down to Back Beach. That's the army.

You just mentioned the Koreans then. How did they fit in with it all?

They had a rest centre on the Back Beach and they were real tough.

28:30 They probably were about my height, they weren't little buggers, five eight, five nine, big buggers and they used to work out on the Back Beach on the sand and they were real killers in Vietnam. Tiger Division, the White Horse Division. They had three divisions there, Tiger, White Horse, I can't think of the third one. Anyhow, they were killers. They used to drink up at our canteen, two or three of them, and you tippy-toed around them, You wouldn't make a half smart

29:00 joke. Anyhow, they used to come up to our place and buy cigarettes and all that. "How are you going?" "Hello" but you wouldn't sit around them. Anyhow, one day we said we'll go into their boozier and see what happens there. So we went down to their boozier on Back Beach, me and my mate. We were sitting there like this, having a beer watching over our shoulders. We only stopped there, as soon as we could finish our beer we were 'whoosh', we were gone. Never went back. They just sit there and no one smiled, talked,

29:30 laughed..."Oh no. Shit, we're getting out of here!" But to see them work out on the Back Beach throwing judo and all this, chops...Christ, they'd kill us. But then talking to some of the training team blokes that went through some of the villages that they went through, they would do anyone that looked crossways at them, they would do them. As I mentioned a couple of blokes here had a bit to do with them. He said their kill rate was much higher than

30:00 anyone else because anyone that looked at them, they'd think nothing about it.

And you never had any contact with them with the store?

No.

They had their own rations and things?

Yeah. The Americans paid them their pay and everything. Paid them, clothed them, everything. The Americans wanted to give us combat pay on top of what the government gave us but the Australian government said no. So we could've got a bit of money (I don't know how much more money) but we could've done better.

30:30 **Was that a source of conflict amongst the men?**

No. Bloody stupid government was the most frequent comment because more pay would've been great. I mean no one's ever knocked back more money and we felt the Koreans were being paid it by the Americans and so forth and yet the Australian government wouldn't give the American...They wanted to pay it to us but the Australian government wouldn't be in it. Anyhow,

- 31:00 the time come to leave Thailand and this young lady said, "Do you want to stay on?" I said, "I'd like to," I said, "but I want to go back home to Australia too". And that was probably one of the hardest things, from living like a dog in a tent and hot and working pretty hard and doing things, and leaving air-conditioned... like a major city and having a great time and to go back to,
- 31:30 to know what you were going back to. That's probably one of the hardest things I've done too. But yes, I've got a lot of time for the Thais. I think they're just a gentle... like every race, good and bad, but generally they seem to be very gentle, caring, very nice.

Were there many fights between

- 32:00 **the Koreans and the Australians?**

No, these two blokes, they fought plenty of Yanks but they never seemed to have a go at the Koreans. But we didn't... their rest centre was sort of... I don't know. There was only these two or three that used to drink up in our canteen, and you'd see them on the beach working out, like just about killing each other on the beach, but you wouldn't.... In town one night they killed a

- 32:30 Yank. There was a fight in the pub I was telling you earlier on. Anyway they raced out. Everyone raced out. There was going to be a fight, this Yank and Korean, and this Yank whipped out a pistol and [the Korean] just flew at this Yank, put about five rounds into his head. That's when we knew he was dead, and this is when the Yanks went ballistic and pushing and shoving and screaming, and we were just standing there, just sort of par for

- 33:00 the course. But I dunno, they're crazy... I dunno, crazy crowd the Yanks. "But the Korean", we said, "what happens when they catch him?" They said, "There's no court martial there". They said, "Just shoot him." That's how they, if you fouled up in their army particularly over there, you were shot. There's no court martial, whyfores or wherefores.

The American government were using lots of new technology for the first time

- 33:30 **in Vietnam.**

Yeah.

Did you come across any things that were really far superior to what the Australian government had supplied you?

The technology they had when I was there was in bombs, weapons. They had two aircraft, Mohawks, and they had a heat sensor underneath the main body of it and there was two of them in the air at all time to guard around the province. They would pick up

- 34:00 camp fires at night. There wasn't any truck engines down where we were. They were capable of picking up truck engines. They were supposedly capable of picking up ammonia off your body, off a group of people. But I know they could pick up body heat off a group, camp fire heat, exhaust, hot engines and mortars if [they'd] been fired. They'd pick up the heat from the barrels. That sort of technology and

- 34:30 two would take off and two would come in to land. What they used to do is fly one with this big pod underneath, like a big cigar for a better word, and they'd have a bloke flying right up his rear and the second one would be armed with rockets and machine [guns], weapons or that, and this first bugger would go around with his lights on and try and pick up any heat source, or particularly if they were mortaring. Anyhow this other bloke would fly behind him with no lights

- 35:00 on, and then when this first bloke, if he drew the crabs, drew any ground fire, he'd switch off his lights and go and the second bloke which is right on his rear, he would give every bugger on the ground in that area, he would give them a bit of a hurry up, and that's how they operated. They were in the air 24 hours a day and mainly looking for heat sources.

- 35:30 **Did you have any guards on the stores?**

Any?

Guards, guarding the storerooms.

There's a funny story. We had a great, (with all this Australian food) they had a great big massive bloody, not a warehouse, it was canvas. So to guard it they put us first of all inside the bloody place, but we're flogging, eating that much, all

- 36:00 the good stuff, all the tinned fruit. They had some nice stuff. I can't remember exactly what it was but something we normally didn't get. So we were flogging and taking that much they ended up saying you've got to do your guard on the outside. That was a real good one. I enjoyed that.

Just out of boredom it was better to sit there eating?

Yeah, sit there and eat something. Like a kid in a lolly store. You went in there, "Oh jeez I like this!"

- 36:30 It was great. And as I said we kept a stocktake. If we took things off the shelves and that you were supposed to write it down, date it and sign it, and these poor buggers that were actually running that

part of the deal, I don't know how they got on. They certainly knew it was gone and they knew the night guards were flogging it because the day blokes weren't. Oh, it was alright, it was good, that.

37:00 **What was the living environment like in Nui Dat?**

Really, really basic. As I said, we washed out of our helmets, shaved out of our helmets. Clothes, as long as they were dry you pretty well wore them. Again it was a jerry can of water per person per day, and the mud, the uniforms were red most of the time. At best you had one

37:30 dish, and you just went swish, swish, swish with your clothes. It rained every day and as I said, there was water running through. We had two pallets under each stretcher and you put your boots on the pallet, but the water was literally running through the tents. [It] was pretty basic. It was that hot that you worked during the day and mud and everything, and when you got up in the morning your boots would be covered in green

38:00 moss. That was just humidity, that's fair dinkum. You ask some blokes, all the blokes will tell you that up in Nui Dat, and that was six months or seven months of rain. Then you got the dry and hot, and when it started to rain over there, if you weren't from here to that door from shelter, don't even try running because it just comes, you got two or three drops and then all of a sudden it just came down. At Vung Tau, where we were in part of the wet season,

38:30 the pallets were floating in about that deep of water through the tents and everything there was on pallets floating. It was sand like. Within half an hour or three quarters of an hour it had all gone away, but that's how heavy it was.

What about the wildlife in Nui Dat?

Oh yeah, monkeys and snakes. Monkeys, snakes and there was a white

39:00 monkey up there. Our toilets were between us and them. Anyhow, someone seen this white monkey and everyone paid him out. You're full of heebee geebees. Anyway another couple of people seen the white monkey. You blokes are heebee geebees, but there was an albino monkey up there 'cause too many in the end, I didn't see it, but too many blokes saw it for it to be anything else but the white, an albino monkey.

39:30 But when the infantry went away, they locked everything away because, (it's in some, all the Vietnam books, that lot along there), they would come in and grab their gear and take it up into the trees, thief their gear, go into the tents. And they were a problem particularly when you first hear the movement in the trees and the movement, (and 98, 99 percent of the time that's what it was, monkeys) but there was always that in the background, "Is it....?"

40:00 It was always monkeys, but you used to think.... yeah.

We'll just stop there.

Tape 7

00:31 **Vietnam war films that you've seen and how you relate to them?**

Yeah, the Odd Angry Shot I think is brilliant. One of the most underestimated movies made on the Vietnam War, particularly on the Australian side of things. They call them SAS patrol but that was more of an infantry section patrol. But the black humour, the humour, and it would be the nearest you would ever, of all the films I've seen

01:00 that would be the nearest you would get. And like the humour of the bloke saying, "Who gives a rat's about it? "Who really cares back home?" and the humour with the priest. And that was generally, if you can imagine just real, real lots of mud, and artillery fire all the time. Brilliant, brilliant movie and another good movie, "I love the smell of

01:30 napalm in the morning."

Apocalypse Now?

Apocalypse Now, I've got that over there. Anyhow that was quite a good movie. This crowd's going to start talking out here. But anyhow, that was a good movie. I've probably got half a dozen Vietnam War movies. They're all, but that Australian one is probably one of the better ones.

How does it make you feel when you're watching 'cause I know of spoken to some like RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]

02:00 **bombers and RAAF bomber pilots from World War II that just cannot watch stuff like that?**

I watched that We Were Soldiers, (Mel Gibson) and not being in an infantry role, I can fully understand. And some of the blokes wouldn't go. Some of the blokes, the vets I know, would not go and see it, and

some did,

02:30 but I find it a little hard I suppose. But it was good acting, good movie. I've seen it once and I don't know, I'd probably like to watch it again.

And do they

03:00 **upset you at all when you watch them?**

Yeah, I get a little bit teary eyed and think "Bloody hell, what a waster" I just think, "What a bloody waste. Good people, good people, and I've got to admit too from their side of things a bit too.

The Iroquois is very much a part of Vietnam folklore. What interaction did you have with the choppers over there?

A fair bit.

03:30 We used to load, unload quite a few. There was, (and the blokes would tell you when you speak to blokes on special days we have) we'd get a Hughie fly over rather than a Blackhawk or a Kiowa. They've got a sound, and when we had the reunion in, actually they opened the memorial, Viet vets Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Canberra, four of them flew over and everyone reckoned the hairs on

04:00 the back their head stood up. And if you still talk to the guys, (and we had one recently) and they said the same thing. Just the 'wop, wop, wop' and you hear it getting louder and louder and louder. A little spooky, a little bit spooky, yeah.

Because I've asked people what their first thought is that comes into their mind when they hear the word Vietnam, and all of them just say straight away, they say, choppers.

Well that's the series,

04:30 Vietnam, the Helicopter War.

What's the first thing that pops into your mind when someone mentions the word Vietnam?

The war mainly and helicopters. They lost 6,000 choppers. I've got a book in there, every aircraft, date, time. They did lose 6,000, a lot were recovered and put back in order, but that's what was shot down.

You talked a little bit about the interaction between the army guys and the navy guys. What about the airforce?

05:00 The airforce fellows, I met a couple of them and got on extremely well with them. And what I'm going to say now is, it might be a little bit controversial but, (and they say this is the reason, some say yes and some say no) today why the army has got the helicopters is the Battle of Long Tan. It was mainly the American helicopters that came in and got the wounded. The Australian choppers got a few,

05:30 they weren't there that long, they were inexperienced and for a better word, they fart arsed around and the American choppers just came straight in and straight out with the wounded, and I've heard, but don't get me wrong, the Australians later on in some of the mine field accidents were just as good, but, (and some people agree with me, some don't). But they think that because of the reluctance of several occasions,

06:00 I spoke to a couple of RAAF fellows about this and they say it wasn't the pilots, it was the command that wouldn't let them take reasonable risks with the helicopter 'cause of losing the choppers. With the Americans for the Aussies, there was just no hesitation. They would come and it didn't matter what it was. And I think maybe there's something. This is why the Australian Army today is

06:30 flying their own, flying all the choppers.

I guess in a sense the Australian Army values every single piece of equipment whereas with the Americans it's all disposable, isn't it?

Yeah, that's as they said, (a couple of airforce blokes) to me, "Gene, it wasn't that we weren't willing or game, we were told if there's any risk you're not to do it, and like every good officer or every soldier you do what you're told."

I guess in the

07:00 **years since that you've had to ponder Vietnam, are there any things that you think should have been done differently?**

Yeah, that they used the bombing and not stopped the bombing assaults. I think the war would've been over about '68, '69. I mean every time they were hurting the North Vietnamese cried stop the bombing assault and we'll talk. They stopped the bombing assault. They decided whether they were going to talk around a square table, a round table, an oblong table for eight or

07:30 nine months. And every time the Americans, every time they were hurting, they said, "We'll talk", and they stopped the assault sometimes for...One of my friends was a training team bloke up around the demilitarised zone. He said the bombing halt was on. He said the trucks were coming down at night

with their lights on. He said, streams and streams of trucks, and he said when they had all the supplies build up in Cambodia or on the border areas....Bugger this talking and everything was back

08:00 in place. I'm sure if they had....I mean airfields weren't on the targets until late in the war. They wouldn't mine the harbours. I know it sounds hawkish, but the Americans said, "We're going to fight now. We're going to win." It was never, they never had a plan. It was never a win situation. They escalate, we escalate, they escalate, we escalate. To me there was no clear plan. It was a war of attrition

08:30 and the people back home got tired of their people coming home in body bags. If they would've used their power, they had the power and that.

How did it make you feel when you realised it was really a political, (I guess all wars are political) but this one was being run by politicians instead of generals?

They were picking the targets, they were picking the targets, Nixon,

09:00 LBJ Johnson. [Lyndon B. JOHNSON, US President 1963-1969]. They were picking the targets and running the war. I said there was not ever a clear plan to win and looking back on the whole, I'm much older now, 21 at the time, we should never....Make war the very, very last resort of anything 'cause everything ends up getting talked out anyhow. I think the Israelis and the Palestinians, the only chance for peace

09:30 is to talk it out. This is not doing anything, and I think you've just gotta talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk and more talk, I'm afraid.

How do you feel the Australian taskforce was run?

Well, very well, really well bar the mine field which was classed as the biggest, only really big blue we made.

10:00 They ended up calling it the Viet Cong warehouse. It's where they got all their mines, and we had over half our casualties in Vietnam were mines and it was from our mines that we laid. Ran contrary to all ideas if you put in a mine, you patrol. The Vietnamese said they'd patrol it, but they never patrolled it and then all the mines were booby trapped. They lost a lot of blokes getting them, but they worked

10:30 out.

What was your impression of the South Vietnamese Army?

Fairly poor. I felt very very sorry for them. They'd been at war 20 or 30 years, at least 20 years at that stage. They were very poorly led. Certain units fought better than the Americans, as good as they did, really well. Poorly led.

11:00 And their wives got nothing if they were killed or anything like that. So we were down at Back Beach, their troops would be hanging around if we were having a barbecue and I just go... They'd come over and give them a beer and a hamburger. I really felt sorry for them, but with that, it was their country. I don't know, it's a long time ago. I felt very sorry for them.

So you talked a little bit about your last wackie?

11:30 Yeah.

Green around the gills.

That's the word, that was the word.

How did that day pan out for you after doing the actual work being on duty?

Actually I can't because that was the night, it wasn't the last night, it was the night. I'm glad it was too. Anyhow, that night certainly we had a few beers. Oh yeah, I know how it went. Our relief was there, or the start of the relief was there,

12:00 and we got in the bloody canteen. I don't know where the Johnson's baby powder come from but some of the blokes were pouring Johnson's baby powder in their hair and then pouring beer into it and rubbing it. That was my last night. I remember that now, because the relief was there and everyone knew it was just a matter of a week and they'd be all gone. There was a bit

12:30 of mayhem that night but I think I would've been feeling still not that well. All I could do was sit and laugh and it was great. It was a great night. I remember the bloody Johnson's baby [talcum powder], I don't know where the hell.... I never saw it over there, but it was certainly baby powder and beer in their hair, and noise and ruckus. It was good.

And this was at Nui Dat?

No, this was back at Vung Tau.

Back at Vung Tau. When did you return from Nui Dat back to Vung Tau?

It was about June, July, sorry, August.

13:00 Was 18th of August. Would've went up there early, middle of July, August, probably middle of September, August or September, about 12 weeks up there. It was good though.

And what was the process for coming home?

About three months before we left, the HMAS Sydney went across. It mightn't have been the Sydney, probably not the Sydney, the Jeparit. And all our trunks...we put all our excess gear and uniforms and stuff we wanted, send home,

13:30 put it into them and didn't snap the lock closed because Customs in Brisbane or wherever we came into Australia, Sydney actually, were going to go through the trunks and then snap the locks after they inspected. Anyhow I did that, I brought back bugger all compared to what some blokes did. Anyhow, so that's the preparation, probably about two months before we left, and I only had

14:00 uniforms, a little bit of gear in it and it got lost. I got back to Australia and no trunk. I thought, "Oh well, it was only uniforms and nothing of real value in it". And I was out home about eight, nine months and I got a phone call through to the unit I was with back at Ingleburn where I left with the same unit. "There's a trunk down here on the wharves for Gene Owens" at Point something, Cook's River in Sydney, and so the boss,

14:30 our second lieutenant, he drove me down and there's my trunk with all my gear. So probably around about 12 months after I posted it off. I thought I'd never see it again, didn't expect to.

So you came back on the Sydney as well to Australia?

No, came back on a RAAF Hercules transport, an A model Herc. We left Vung Tau at about 11 o'clock in the morning local time, lost an hour on the time line into Darwin. We left there at

15:00 11. We got into Darwin at 11. We were given one little plastic, paper bag with sandwiches.

So you were telling us about coming home on the Herc on the RAAF?

Yeah, we left there at 11 in the morning and got given a bag, a little paper bag with some sandwiches and I was coming home.

We'll try that again. Tell us about the flight home in the RAAF Herc?

Yeah, we got aboard at 11 o'clock in the morning with a brown paper packet

15:30 of sandwiches and left there at 11. I couldn't give a bugger, I was coming home anyhow, so I sat on the wing. Anyhow, we got into RAAF Darwin at 11 o'clock that night and the RAAF were really good. They put on T-bone steaks and all the goodies. They kept the bar open for us. There was about 40 of us. We came home with a lot of, bringing back gear. 40 of us. We went to their boozier

16:00 and had a few beers and real steak and it was pretty good, but on the way back was a long flight, 12 odd hours and the blokes were taking it in turns to get up into the cockpit. It was the only place you could smoke. Anyhow we had about two hours, a bit over two hours in Darwin while they loaded all our gear onto another DC6B [Douglas aircraft], all prop driven job. Yes, worth coming home, so we took off

16:30 probably about one, half past one, somewhere around about there in the morning and got into Sydney around about midday, around about half past eleven, midday or something. Anyhow we flew over Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was fantastic. I don't know whether he done it on purpose or what, but we were quite low over Sydney Harbour Bridge and we didn't sleep much. Everyone had drinks sort of thing

17:00 but everyone got off the plane alright. No one was drunk actually. Everyone was very happy. We handed in our rifles at the air terminal and quite a few people there to meet different blokes and that. So they said, "Goodbye, We'll catch you out at the camp tomorrow", which was the following day and we'll pay you. I'd saved about 1700 bucks for the year I was there.

17:30 So yeah, I did have another chance to go on another rest out of the country. I had an offer to go to Hong Kong 'cause a lot of the married blokes either went home or they were saving their money, and like a bloody idiot I said no and I didn't. I could've got to Hong Kong and had another great time really.

Did you manage to pick up any souvenirs while you were over in Vietnam?

No, I didn't. Oh, I did have a

18:00 few leaflets after these B52 raids, they'd fly over and drop these leaflets with a picture of the bomber on it and say, this is what got youse last night and there's plenty more where this came from basically, or they'd drop their program leaflets which was, "Surrender and the government will look after you", and that sort of thing. But when it's all around you don't.....There's millions of them more, hundreds of them, you don't worry about them. Looking back now

18:30 for the same thing, you pay \$40, \$45 for one of those leaflets now.

You mentioned the feed that the RAAF gave you when you went to Darwin, before you came home did you blokes used to fantasize about what you were going to eat when you came

home?

Yeah, steak. That was the last meal actually before I got really sick, when I got to Sydney. Was after that I went out, I met some people I'd been writing to and we went out to the St George's

19:00 Leagues Club which was the 'in' place then, and I just couldn't eat anything and that was that afternoon after that, but at RAAF Darwin I was perfectly OK but it was good to come home.

Was there anyone there to meet you when you got home?

Yeah, there was a lady, family I wrote to two or three times. They took me out that night to

19:30 the Leagues Club. It was alright.

What was the attitude of people that were meeting you and finding out that you had just come back from Vietnam at that stage?

Generally at that stage, '67, April '67, a couple of days before Anzac Day, was quite supportive. There was no ill will. Well people didn't say very much.

20:00 As soon as I got home I changed into ordinary civilian clothes and at Anzac Day I just took it low key, walked around, watched the parade and there was no real problems then. The problems were later, probably another 12 months down the track.

What happened when you went out with your friends and you got crook?

I just couldn't eat at

20:30 that stage, that night I just couldn't eat, and then next morning. I went back to the camp that night and I didn't take any money or anything. Luckily I had a few, might've been only a few dollars on me, so I got my way back to Randwick where my room was still there, not locked, so I just jumped on the bed there, and next day I went out to camp and got all the money I wanted. But that part wasn't very, I was talking to the blokes later, they paid them there, they got

21:00 their plane or train tickets there. It was done properly but with us it was, I wouldn't say a mix up but it could've been done quite a lot better.

So can you talk about everything that happened from there?

Yeah, afterwards I got paid and that day I started being violently ill and for that week I stayed in Sydney two or three days, got up to

21:30 Brisbane, stayed another day and a half, and I couldn't eat. All I was doing was bringing up white froth on the train from Sydney to Brisbane. Again I was vomiting in Brisbane, I was vomiting. I got up to Rockhampton up here and I was home, it took about a week. It was two days on the train or two full days on the old trains those days. When I got up here I think it was just, I don't know, being home

22:00 (as in home here). I don't know, but I was OK. Actually when I was in Brisbane, I was thinking about got to go and see a bloody doctor and see what the hell, what's going on, just dry retching and just white froth, nothing. I hadn't been able to eat. No, just didn't want to eat, couldn't eat. No hunger, no, just didn't want anything. And anyhow I got up here and the upset of it all, I

22:30 put a stone on in a fortnight, 14 pounds in 14 days, but I was like 'that'. A few people that saw me said, "Gene!", and I said, "Yeah, I'm alright." But everyone over there, there was no fat people over there. Americans were big and beefy but they were big men, but all the Aussies were just bloody....

When you thought about being sick when you got home, have you put it down to anything?

Yeah, I said to the psychologist, Bruce Hackett in Rockhampton,

23:00 and also to Jenny Barry which is a psychiatrist here I see occasionally, and she said it's probably something about leaving and coming home. What they do now with all the troops from the Falklands War even and a lot of the battalions, they came home on the HMAS Sydney and they like to take the troops home by ship where possible to get together, talk about things. All the people that come back from Timor now, the first thing they do when they

23:30 get back to Australia is debrief them. We just, same as the Nationals [National Servicemen], get off the plane, See youse later. Have so much leave and come back when you're leave's up. I've got some books here on killing written by an American psychologist and a British psychologist, psychiatrist, and they go into it in a pretty big way and they say it's better for people to mix in their

24:00 own peer group and discuss and have a leisurely, have time away from everything, and to take things relatively easy and talk about what's happened.

So you see the rapid return, the way you came home

Yeah, and a lot of National Service, not just Regs [Regular Army], I believe, that's what the psychiatrists and psychologists feels it may have been. No one's dead sure but

24:30 they think, it affects people, some people it probably didn't affect. I don't know, but I know when I put it to one of them, I can't think which one, they said they hadn't heard of that before. I said, well I can tell you it happened to me.

What had the biggest impact on you in Vietnam?

25:00 Probably seeing our own dead probably. That would've been the single biggest thing. This guy that got done in by our fellows, being there a day, they were the two, really two outstanding...

Do you think it's hard say for men, Australian men, Australian soldiers to

25:30 **talk about things like that with each other at the time?**

It would've been over there, would've been pretty hard. Not so much now because we get together. See, we have a bush camp out here at Mount Wheeler, it's on the web, the internet, Cock's Comb, and we talk a little bit but not much. We get anywhere from seven to eight to about thirteen guys there every Tuesday and

26:00 we just joke and laugh and have a few beers and say funny things that happened to us, wouldn't believe. Or someone will say, did you ever know so and so or run into so and so. More talk about it, being there and people they met and funny things that happened rather than, you know, just... yeah. Just laugh and yeah. We say we're saving the government money because we get out there and meet

26:30 and everyone's pretty....laugh and act the clown a bit and silly so and so, you call him a silly bastard or all the brain cells are turning to mush, that sort of thing.

So what sort of leave did you get when you first got home?

I got nine weeks leave. I didn't have that week I went away I think. I must've had three weeks or two or three weeks, whatever it was, annual leave because I went like before and then I had that and then we all

27:00 had, all of us got a stack, we had a day a month for a start and then there was nine weeks leave.

And did you find people asking you about what you'd done?

Yeah. At that stage people were really curious what was going on and when I got back to Sydney, back in the army I went out a few times in uniform with ribbons on and a few people then were just starting to... it would've been

27:30 the end of '67. People then were starting to let you know that they weren't very happy. Not everyone, but mainly the younger people. Mainly the younger people my age or a little younger, 19, 20. Older people that I was with, I was going out to what they call an Hawaiian Eye nightclub down there and I used to have a ball. I used to go down there and dance and get full and some would want to

28:00 argue the point and I've never....If I go out, I go out to have a good time and laugh and have a few beers. If people want to fight, that's their business. I couldn't give a stuff. I like to go out and laugh and have a good time and I'd just say, bugger this, this is my opinion, we should be there. And that didn't help and they used to stick on to me about what I mentioned earlier about the Geneva Accords about the '54 elections. Well, I've got to admit I didn't know anything

28:30 about that at the time, and I thought oh well, if that's the case, fair enough. You're entitled to your view but this is my view and then I'd bugger off or they'd...As I said I'd be out for a good time.

So people started to simmer a bit?

Yeah.

When people asked you what you'd done (UNCLEAR) did you?

Yeah. I used to say I was supply and transport and it's pretty good, wasn't too bad, I said, compared to the infantry. I said I had it pretty which I did have it pretty good compared to the infantry. I had

29:00 a dry bed every night or virtually every night and things were hard but it was hard for everyone there so. It didn't bother me. I've always been honest with what I'd done over there.

So what did you think when the public opinion in Australia really

Pretty upset about that, how the public turned. I believe the war was lost,

29:30 whatever the public opinion. Had gone on that long and they had no real plan to win or wanted to, and I think in some respects they had the right to be angry but not to take it out on the soldiers. Looking back now I can say not to take it out, which won't happen, on the Iraq blokes or any... I think how we were treated will never happen again. It'll be taken out on the politicians and they're the ones

30:00 that should be voted in, voted out or what. But looking back, I don't know whether we should've. I don't know, I honestly don't know. If we were there, well we should've went to win anyhow, not to, and the people just got tired of us saying, we're winning, we're winning and getting ahead, and it wasn't

happening.

How does it make you feel when people stand up now and say in retrospect we shouldn't have

30:30 **gone? I mean you may even feel that way yourself, but how does that make you feel when people say that?**

No, doesn't bother me at all. I say you're entitled to your opinion and a lot of things I agree on. I agree Natis [National Servicemen] should never have been sent. Bloody.... had national service, still should have national service but they shouldn't have been sent. If you're a volunteer... if you're a regular you're a volunteer. You're a regular, joined the army and I say to some of the regulars, I say, you can't join the army and expect to sit on your bum for 20 years and get your pension. And my idea when I joined, I wanted to get overseas, I wanted to get around and

31:00 see what was happening, going on. And I've said this for a long time to the young blokes, I said, if you join the army, I said, don't expect to sit on your bum for 20 years and get your pension. I said, it doesn't work that way 'cause you're a volunteer. You take the good with the bad, and that's life generally. That's how I see it. If you volunteer for something and it goes to crap for want of a better word or it doesn't work out, well you volunteered for it.

Besides having that

31:30 **spell of being ill when you got back, did you have any other problems when you got back from Vietnam?**

My children have had a lot of problems. I've got a daughter that's very ill, since she was six and she's 33, 34 shortly. No, 33 shortly. Anyhow it's Stills Disease and I don't know a lot about it and she's in a wheelchair at different times and she swells up and bloody red massive temperature and the boy,

32:00 he's had some trouble with no muscles in his eyelids when he was born, but that's alright, he's OK. But she has a massive lot of health problems, on chemo for the pain and bloody, I don't know what's going to happen there. She's 33 and things don't look real good for her at all.

What do you attribute that to?

Well talking to guys out in the camp and fellows who come through, one bloke out there with two brothers and himself served and all his kids have got, three boys have problems with their

32:30 kids. The three that stopped home, two girls and a boy, no problems, and I've talked to, as a welfare officer I've talked to quite a few people and there is more than a chance Agent Orange has something to do with that. I honestly believe they're, all of the Paludrine [anti-malarial drug], not Paludrine, we were taking some drug, it's a drug for leprosy we were taking [Dapsone was a leprosy drug used in Vietnam for its anti-malarial properties] and I believe that has got some bearing on all of this, but it's just too

33:00 coincidental that the guys you talk to and the amount of their kids that have problems. It's just, it's just too many.

Can you recall ever seeing the defoliant being sprayed?

Oh yeah. Aircraft were going, not directly but within a few kilometres from where they were spraying it out of the helicopters. they were using the same tanks for DDT [A commonly used insecticide of the day which was banned in Australia in 1987]. Sprayed the camps with DDT all the time.

33:30 One time one of the blokes, Fole, I've had a bit of contact with. He just said, "Don't you remember all the leaves dropping off in the camp, all the leaves off the trees?" And I said, "Yeah". He said, Well, that was a part of that". And our water supply, when we were there, it was just a well, but I've got some photos in there of the camp and it's a great big water hole, and all this stuff was sprayed. Trees would have washed off into the drinking, and the poor old Vietnamese they're in a real fix.

34:00 It's probably the worst single thing in the war is that bloody Agent Orange. There's a woman written three or four books about it, Children of the Mist [Children of the Mist-Agent Orange-The Future Generations by Australian author Jean Williams] meaning the mist, spray, and she's written three or four books highlighting the problem of Vietnam vets and their kids, and that is the sad, sad part, and for the Vietnamese too. As I said, I'm glad just the whole thing finished when it did. We mightn't have come out on top,

34:30 but everyone had a gutful.

How was the reaction of the RSL when you first came back?

Actually I got welcomed very well here. I gave them a hand as an ordinary person and then a mate across the road, Second World War bloke, got me to join, and then the first 18 months I was Vice President and then I got President after about two or three years and I was President for 10 years. I was the youngest bloke, I was the youngest President they ever had in Rockhampton.

35:00 I was 29, and I was the longest serving outside of a First World War vet until another chap just recently, but I got treated quite well. But a lot of other RSLs treated them very badly, but Rockhampton treated them pretty good from what I can gather, but a lot of places, they said you weren't in a real war. But the

Vietnam vets now, and I'm sorry to say and I've pulled a few up,

35:30 the infantry that were in Timor, they're getting infantry combat badges and our blokes which have them, the infantry guys, are saying, well, they weren't in a real war. No one was killed, or one or two were killed in accidents. I said, "Hang on, hang on", I said, "What were you told? You were told you weren't in a real war and now you're telling these blokes". I said, "They walked the jungles, they did the same job", and I said, "Thank Christ none of them were killed in combat. I said, "That's great. I said.

36:00 It's funny I can see what was put on us. In my age, Second World War blokes would've been a little bit younger than me and they were trying to stick the same sort of crap on the Timor guys. I pull them up, pull them up and just say, "No, you're doing exactly the same as how we were treated."

How did you find you were treated by the army, being a Vietnam veteran, when you're still serving,

Really good.

when you first got back?

36:30 The last year in the army really, we did a year and the unit was pretty well broken up. Strange enough we nearly all kept together as a unit, as a platoon anyhow, and it was good. We actually had a bludge, we just played volleyball everyday and we built a fish pool for something to do and it was great.

Did you feel like you were treated differently than before you went away?

Well,

37:00 my time in the army up before I went away was always a job.

Yeah, you were talking about...?

Yeah, I always had a job like in the bar, a barman. In Vietnam in the warehouse always had a job like, nine till five job for a better word, and when we got back the crowd that was already over there, they had a full twelve months to go and we'd done our turn, done our job and we were

37:30 sort of in the backwater and sort of forgotten. And I did a few exercises and things like that and played enemy to a couple of groups, different groups but we really had a real holiday.

Long Tan has really become a symbol of Australia's involvement in Vietnam. How do you feel about that?

Yeah, first of all it was called Long Tan Day, because a lot of vets thought they were lost out, left out and there was only that 100

38:00 odd in the company. They renamed it Vietnam Veterans' Day which I think is a great idea. Most Veterans still refer to them as Long Tan Day rather than Vietnam Vets' Day. Some, if you say Long Tan Day some get a little hot under the, not hot under the collar, but just say, "No, Vietnam Vets' Day." Either way I couldn't give a bugger.

38:30 **When did you have any symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, like when did**

About '73 it started on me.

When did you get out of the army?

'68. About 1973 I was diagnosed with some problem and then '84 I got boarded out of Australia Post. I was really crook. I had the stutters, the shakes and I was taking up to 21 tablets a day, and not long after, about the same time, I had a headache for 10 years and that's not an

39:00 exaggeration. I'd wake up in the morning, I'd go to bed with it. It might last a week, eight days. I might have a period of say two or three hours and then I couldn't sit down, I couldn't stand up. I had brain scans and nothing. Anyhow that went for 10 years and gradually, not gradually, I shouldn't say gradually, just like that. They gave me, I was on that many pills. I was staggering when I walked.

39:30 I came down here six year ago and went to a doctor here. I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease going back quite a few years now. I didn't tell my wife, I didn't know what the hell to do. Anyhow went to the doctor down here and he went through this bloody heap of tablets I was on. That's interacting with that, that's no good, that's old medicine. I got off nearly everything and I've had reasonable, actually pretty good health. I go to the gym

40:00 every day, five days a week. I didn't today because you people were coming, but yeah, I'm cruising, I'm enjoying myself.

Have to do some curls tonight?

No, very light weights.

What other sort of problems beside the headaches? Were there other any other problems?

I was having panic attacks. I was having a lot of panic attacks which I didn't know anything about them for a long time. They thought it was heart problems. I put on a hell of a lot of weight, I went up to 119

40:30 kg at one stage. I had three heart attacks over two nights going back. That was when I was down here, actually about 1998. I was, bloody all I wanted to do that time was see the year 2000. That was a big ambition then, but otherwise I've been pretty, the last three odd years, four years I've been spot on.

Tape 8

01:34 **First of all, if I could ask you what was your motivation for getting out of the army?**

Well what I explained to you early on was my early childhood and I wanted my kids to have a better... rather than moved every two years, different state. I wanted them to have a stable education and a better life for a better word. That mainly was my motive, not because I didn't like it. It was

02:00 I wanted [more] for my kids than what I had.

So you were engaged at this stage were you?

Yeah, I met my wife after I come back from Vietnam. That's when I first met her.

And did she ask you about what you'd been doing?

Not really, no.

You didn't really talk to her about it?

No, no. Just didn't say much and then we were together about eight or nine months and my time was up to get out. Well there was really no, I was getting out, that was it, and

02:30 I had a job I was putting through. I could've joined the Customs Service but I thought I'd be getting postings everywhere, every two or three years and that's the only reason why I really left the army.

And did you have a plan for life after the army?

No, I didn't. The job was,

Um?

You asked me what I had planned when I got out of the army.

Yes, plans for

Not really, no, I just went to this wine and spirit

03:00 place in Rockhampton and got a job as storeman. I was running the cigarette store and the glassware, hotel glassware, and that was not too bad. The pay was bloody pretty awful, and after that a job, a vacancy came up in Australia Post or PMG in those days, Postmaster General's Department job came up. I put in for that, got a postman's job. Three

03:30 of us joined. I got that the 2nd of January, 1971 but about 18 months later I had cancer in that eye and had quite a bit, a lot of problems. Anyhow, and then I went inside and just after that things started (UNCLEAR) going on, or just things started going down hill and I used to leave at least one year's leave hanging and I never took any sick leave.

04:00 I was bloody sick 'cause I knew something wasn't right and then by 1980 I, when I finished work in '84 I was boarded out. Yeah, I was boarded out in '84, sorry, no, '82? Around about '83, anyhow, '84. Anyhow I had the shakes and stutters and I was bloody crook and panic attacks all the time and I went to a psychiatrist and he just said, you can't work anymore.

04:30 **What sort of network of ex-Vietnam veterans did you have?**

At that stage?

At that stage.

None.

So you weren't really aware? Were you aware at all what was happening?

No, no, I didn't know.

Had you heard of PTSD?

No, no.

And you didn't keep up with any of your old mates that you went over there with?

No, no.

So when was the first time that you were told that there was a bigger problem?

- 05:00 '84 when I got boarded out. I went a year before actually to this doctor, RN, Royal Navy doctor psychiatrist. He didn't say much, he just said, look, if you have problems, he said, if you have problems come and see me, and it was a year nearly to that time that I went back to see him, and he said, "What did I tell you?" He said, "having problems, come back." And he gave me a bit of serve, a bit of a blast, and anyhow he put me on leave and after 14 weeks with the
- 05:30 Public Service they send you to their doctor which was my doctor anyhow, and the government medical officer and he just said, "Gene," he said, "you can't go on." And anyhow they sent me to another doctor and he was bloody rude, didn't understand. He was bloody rude and (UNCLEAR). Anyhow I rang my psychiatrist at the time, this RN, ex-RN fellow. He said, "Don't worry, it's my
- 06:00 report that counts." Anyhow they just said, "What do you want to do, stay on sick leave or get out?" I said, "Look, I'm no good." And I've been [like that] until about three or four ago. I couldn't drive a car, I staggered when I walked, and even the drive to Yeppoon. My wife would drive to Yeppoon and I'd close my eyes and the shadows across the road were like blows to the side of my head. I had to close them and then you could still see the shadow through.

06:30 **You mentioned how it affected your work, ultimately it ended in you losing your job.**

Oh, yeah.

How did it affect your marriage?

It did, and that's what I couldn't work out, my wife, doing my stack. I was drinking rather heavily, quite heavily but not as bad as a lot of the blokes I knew, but I was drinking and my wife stuck by me all that time, and then 12, 18 months after I came OK, and I wanted to handle money

- 07:00 and do things, take sort of back over again, my wife just said, "that's it". That's what was so surprising, she put up with so much to be quite honest and then when I thought everything was going pretty well and that was it.

When did you first hear the words Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Middle '80s, I suppose, late '80s because it was nice having,

- 07:30 looking back and talking to vets and that. I had panic attacks, shortness of breath and shakes and just didn't know what, and even my doctor didn't even know. I'd go to him and say, "Can I have a day off work?" And he'd say, "Are you that sick?" I'd say, "Yes, I'm that bloody sick". And then after a while he got to realise that I was crook. I turned up there a few times in the middle of a panic attack. He didn't, I dunno.

08:00 **Once it was given a name, did that make it any better or any worse?**

Yeah, I think it made it better. At least I knew it bloody wasn't, well it is up here, but I mean at least I knew something, I knew. I could sort out my medication and that and just take a heart tablet and a small blood pressure tablet and a

- 08:30 Simvastatin for cholesterol. That's all I take now, from 21 tablets a day. I don't know how far I could drive, I don't know, but if I drove for half an hour, giving my wife a break, my hands would be white around the wheel and I'd have a pain from here right back down the back of my neck. I just wasn't capable of concentrating for anymore than about half or three-quarters of an hour at the outside.

And since you've

09:00 **spoken to other fellows and found out that they all have similar problems, how did that affect you?**

As I said, when you talk to vets, we all have the same problems. I'm a bit older than most of them. Most of them are about 55 bar the training team fellows. There are some 52, 53. I'm 59 in a few weeks, and it's taken me [from] age 55 virtually before I could accept.

- 09:30 I don't know what it is. Before, everything sort of ironed itself out. And these young blokes now I see what they're having, is what I had. Drinking one hell of a lot. I don't drink anything like I used to. I do go off the deep end occasionally but I never want to....One bloke, a very level headed sort of top bloke I always got on well with, he'd be 54, 55, he went off the deep end about eight, nine months ago
- 10:00 and wrecked his bloody house. And of all people, Graham, Christ. And I wouldn't have gone off or shouted or carried on or anything now for a couple of years I suppose or something. Living on my own, I don't know, but I don't get into a shouting match even out at Cockscomb [Vietnam Veterans' Cockscomb Retreat in Central Queensland]. We have a difference and that's that. But these fellows, I feel,
- 10:30 pardon me, I don't know if it's age or maturity or I don't know what it is, but I would say I certainly have a lot less problems. I never had a lot less, but I certainly have less problems than what I see out there.

What have you found to be the best help to deal with it?

Just going out there in the bush and laying down reading. I'm a great reader. Getting out in the bush, take my book with me,

- 11:00 read Time and Newsweek every week and I love reading. I just love reading and just go with the flow a lot. I mean I make plans to go to Rocky, I make a lot of plans, and if they don't come off, so what. If it's too hot, I've been going up to Rocky all last week, too bloody hot to go to Rocky so I don't go to Rocky, or if I go up to Rocky and I make plans going here, going there, going there, I might do three or four things and say, stuff it, I've had Rocky,
- 11:30 I'm going back to Yeppoon. So I don't know if you get my drift and I sort of say to people, I'm cruising along, no problems, no hassles, no worries and I don't know if you know what I mean but I'm sort of.... I do the same old thing, I go to the gym of a morning, come home, shower, change, go up to the Sailing Club up here, read the newspapers, spend an hour and half, (they've taken away the TAB [Totalisation Agency Board]), I used to have a dollar each way bet on something
- 12:00 and I wander home about midday. I might go to the pub and have some fish and chips or make a sandwich here and then in the afternoon go down the beach, go for a walk and then half past, get cleaned up, read for a couple of hours, say half past one till half past four, read, get cleaned up, go up the pub for an hour and half, half past four till six (happy hour) and wander back here, watch TV and read, basically. Or boating, I got my boat and to get on my boat,
- 12:30 just put on automatic pilot, sit back on the back deck and have a beer. Bugger the world.

What about talking about your experiences? Do you find that has helped at all?

No, not really, no. As I said, the last few years nothing has bothered me all that much.

And like a lot of the vets of all wars that we've spoken to, World War II and Korea, a lot of them have come home and read a lot to try to fill in the stuff that you don't know when you're

- 13:00 **a soldier on the ground. What way do you find that helps?**

Well, which I spoke to you about, we weren't never there to win. We were never sent there to win and they said the Vietnamese Government asked for troops. Well they didn't, we offered troops to the Americans. Things like this. Just we were also giving wheat to China and those ships were being diverted and sent to North Vietnam at the time.

- 13:30 The wheat was... well the government may have believed they were for China but the Chinese were aiding and abetting North Vietnam for a time, and then when you read about some of the decisions made, and I don't mean on the military, but political decisions and there was never any....It was '73 when the war ended for the US, the recession and all that set in. Everyone was making bombs, bullets
- 14:00 and everything was going pretty well when the war was on. The war ended and the price of wool went up and that's when the big recession was, '73. But yeah, I just think this bloody war, they've just got to talk, I don't care, talk talk.

With your PTSD I guess you'd have people saying, well hang on, you weren't a combatant,

Yeah.

but like you said everyone that was there was doing it tough.

Has the same problem, yeah.

So in your own mind have

- 14:30 **you sussed out what you reckon it was?**

Yep. If this video, and if you get it, if it's available, (my copy is lent out) I've got a copy for the doctors up at the doctors' surgery and the psychiatrist has got one, and they put it down to the training. It's a big thing, you're rewarded, everything you do you're rewarded either a pay rise for your military skills and/or you're out in the bush for a fortnight or three weeks, and you come home and you get on the booze. Things have got to be done

- 15:00 a certain way. What you did in the army keeps you alive. The proof is that other people are dead and you're here today. This is this video, how they go on about, and then it shows a cup half, three-quarter full and then....It's really a top video and they'll mail it out no charge, free postage, everything, from the Vietnam Vets' Free Counselling Centre in Melbourne. But it puts it down mainly
- 15:30 to the training. But everyone in Vietnam, everyone there, even people like myself, when you first get there, you don't know anything and there is a certain amount of tension, build up of tension and you think as you're there longer it goes, but I think maybe you get used to it, and I said, just becomes a part of everything. On the roads and that it could happen, but you don't feel anxious or anything like that. You've got your eyes about you and your wits about you, but
- 16:00 you're not upset, unduly upset or...And I said I wasn't in infantry, but coming home that was a sudden,

like I was a fortnight getting there, but didn't make a difference when I got there, I was still pretty anxious but when I came home, (UNCLEAR).

Have you had trouble sleeping?

I used to not sleep for a night, a night and a half at a time. Last

- 16:30 couple of years I take Hypnodorm which is a special prescription tablet I've got. I've got to go through DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] in Brisbane to get the prescription. I was taking two of those a night and now I'm down to one of those a night. Since I've been going to the gym I feel so.... I do an hour, really solid hour. It doesn't look like it but I do a real solid hour and I only take one tablet, one sleeping instead of two and I sleep better.

What about dreams, do you have any bad dreams, things like that?

I had one one night or two nights ago.

- 17:00 Not often, no.

What about marching on Anzac Day?

I didn't last Anzac Day, I was upset. I couldn't, I just dunno, I just, I have nearly all of them, dawn services and everything but last year I walked down. I didn't even dress up, I just put my medals in my pocket and I thought if I march, I march. I got down and the parade was lining up and I thought, I really

- 17:30 don't want this, so I went out to Cockscomb and there was about seven or eight of us out there. A lady from Rockhampton, a counsellor up there, brought down a wreath. Got a little thing out there, a shrine sort of thing and so we just stood around and someone just said the 'Ode to the Fallen' and we laid the wreath and that's how we spent Anzac, half a dozen, eight of us out there, Anzac Day.

Do you know why your feelings in that regard have changed?

I don't know.

- 18:00 I just couldn't march. Just, I don't know. Whether it was the lead up to the Gulf War, here we go again sort of thing. I don't know. I just, I know I just couldn't march. I walked down, had a look and no.

'Cause you talked earlier obviously of your interest as a kid in Australian military history and that sort of thing and you wanted to be a soldier,

Yeah, yeah.

what did you do for Anzac Day when you were a young fellow?

- 18:30 Didn't go to Anzac Days, no.

So when was your first involvement in Anzac Day?

After Vietnam. Well, the year '67, I came back a couple of days before Anzac Day, and I went. I was in civvy clothes [civilian clothes, not in uniform] and I went and watched the Anzac Day parade. So, that's pretty neat so from then on I usually attended. I missed one a few year ago, wasn't all that over-fussed about

- 19:00 it in Rockhampton. I'm going to Brisbane, all these guys that have rang me up and I've rung them up and I haven't seen since '67, so I'm looking forward to it. It will be good. Rung a few of them and we've had a bit of a chat on the phone. There's two blokes from Tasmania from our tent, they'll be up, and the other bloke from our tent, they found him and he'll be there. So

- 19:30 the tent will be there. Talk about that night.

How have you found the support process that's in place for you guys?

Good, I don't know about recently. Going back seven or eight year ago I rang the Veterans' Affairs Counselling Service one night. I was in a hell of a mess, I was crying and really really upset and I got a young lady, I mean a young lady on the end of the phone and all she could say was, in the morning go and see your

- 20:00 psychiatrist. That is all, I said to Bruce Hackett at the time, the psychologist in Rocky, and he said, "Gene, it's probably a second year university psychology student", and he said (I haven't seen him for 18 months or something now), he said, "If you ever have any real problem," he said, "give me a ring." But I believe the service is better now. That's going back quite a few years, but someone else has had the same problem going back years too. They rung up all they got was just.....

- 20:30 That's why you ring, that's why I rung.

Is it fair to say when you blokes first got back, no one really wanted to know about any problems that you had?

Well the problems weren't really manifested. Some of these problems that have manifested, some of the blokes have only been on TPI's [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Pension] some of them haven't

manifested until about eight or ten year ago, or even as late as three or four year ago. Some

- 21:00 of the blokes have only finished work because of their PTSD. Not everyone has PTSD, some have coped rather well, some are not coping, some are coping and working where they should be on some sort of disability pension, but different horses for different courses I think.

Can you see there being any preventative way for soldiers of future conflicts and wars?

Debriefing.

- 21:30 Long trips home. What they've got now for the troops is ringing home every week. Their children and spouses being looked after. They fly mothers, parents, people to be with them while the husbands are away. They get to talk on e-mail, they get to make telephone calls, more videos to send home. They only do six months, which is long enough. They get

- 22:00 briefed. They've learnt so much from us and our crowd, they don't want it again. They don't want it to happen again and I think they're on the right track. But I hope that there's never.... I really hope that we can talk all our problems out rather than have to, but in cases like Timor, I think, I believe that was a necessity there, but I say talk, talk, talk. But you've got to really really look after troops

- 22:30 and don't shun them when they come home because they're only doing the bidding of the government of the day really.

At what stage of the game were you in that Counselling Service in the RSL?

About '90 to '97.

So you'd already had your own?

I've had all my, I was still having all my problems and yeah...

- 23:00 I knew as soon as the blokes come in and told, can't sleep, and you just knew it was the same problems. See, it's hit everyone, transport guys, electrical engineers, mechanics that were over there in workshops, all have the same, exactly the same thing. That's what mystified everyone. Why like these guys out in the jungle all this time with mines and everything, fair enough, you could understand

- 23:30 the but blokes like myself that had it fairly, reasonably easy, think well Christ, what am I doing with all this? But it's got right across all jobs, everyone right across the board.

The big march that they had, the Vietnam Veterans, the welcome home parade?

In '88 or '89.

Yeah, yeah.

I was really sick then, I was really sick. There was a bus from Rocky went down but I couldn't have sat in that bus

- 24:00 for the noise and all the blokes were on the grog and I just, anyhow I didn't know at the time they had an aircraft going through which landed at Rocky to pick up sick blokes and that, but looking back I'm still sort of glad I.... 'cause I was, well that was when I all had the headaches and all the tablets and I was really sick and I was pretty happy not to have been, but I went to the opening of the memorial in 2003, sorry 1993.

- 24:30 I wasn't, I couldn't drive or anything but I enjoyed that. That was good, yeah.

Despite the fact that you couldn't go down for that parade, did you feel there was a significant change in attitude?

Yeah, I've spoken to blokes out there that did go down and they say (and it's not a cliché) they thought it was a healing between the public 'cause the public turned out in such number apparently, hundreds of thousands if you can believe it,

- 25:00 and they seem to think that their service was actually being, was being, what's the word, recognised. Their service was being recognised and that the people really weren't against them. I've taken a couple of anti-war people out there and they've stood there and just said, we were anti-war at the time. I say to them, well, that's your right, doesn't bother me. Would have then but it doesn't bother me whatsoever.

- 25:30 **Have you ever contemplated going back to Vietnam to have a look?**

Yeah, I've thought about it. A lot of the blokes that have been back have been quite amazed. I probably eventually will get back there some time. I'd just like to go to the Long Tan Cross and Vung Tau and have a look around. I've seen it on TV and that of course, but probably more what I'd like to go, was to go to Gallipoli. I was going last year to Gallipoli but with all the terroristy things around... I made

- 26:00 a couple of plans, a couple of years I'd planned to go last year and my mate wouldn't even go. He's not a vet but no way in the world was he going to fly with all these madmen. So I thought no, I've got to agree with you. A couple of blokes that have been there Anzac Day said you're better off going at another day

because you can't see much because there's so many people there. He said, you're better off going at another time and walking and having a good look.

It's so big now

26:30 **they're doing it over two days.**

Oh, but whether I get there we'll still see, but that would probably be the only two trips I'd ever be really interested. I love this country, I haven't seen, I've seen very little of this country and something I want to do before I got much older next winter, from next winter.

How do you feel when you see Vietnamese people in the street?

By being Vietnamese will not affect me, what makes me

27:00 awfully mad is when I see the drugs and the Vietnamese that you see in handcuffs in Parramatta or Vietnamatta or whatever you want to call it. Cabramatta sorry, not Parramatta, Cabramatta. I don't blame them for getting out, coming here and having a better life and the AF, Federal Australian, Federal Police Commissioner when he got out about eight or nine months ago he said, the Asians in Sydney, the Vietnamese, are running drugs, the drug

27:30 cartel in Australia, and that makes me mad. Not because, it doesn't matter what race they were, Australians or, Australians are mixed up in it, but they seem to be the people that's organising behind the scenes. But he said it was anyhow, and I quite believe it from what you see on....As far as a race, doesn't bother me, but as I said

28:00 to see them mixed up so big time in drugs...

It's just that I know one Vietnam Vet that I spoke to, he says every time he sees a Vietnamese person he just, it's like one of those

Switches off?

links, you know like some people have that smell thing or if you hear a song that takes you back.

Yeah, a couple of blokes I've spoken to have, brings back bad memories and they don't like them as a race. I must admit as I said to you earlier on,

28:30 I'm not overly rapt in them as a race compared to the Thais, but I have no ill will towards them.

Was it hard for you as a young white Australian, who probably wasn't that worldly, to go to a country like Vietnam where you were suddenly engaged in war against Asians and then going to Thailand where it was the exact opposite of that? Was that hard to deal with?

29:00 No, not really, no. It was all strange when I first got there of course, and then the change from Vietnam to Thailand but there was no...As I said, I think the Thais are a bloody beautiful people, a lovely race, but then as I said when you look back what the poor old Vietnamese have been through. I mean they fought China up to the year 1100 and I feel sorry for the poor buggers in some respects

29:30 I'm just glad there's peace there now. It mightn't be the greatest system of government.

Are there songs like, besides the old Nancy Sinatra song?

Yeah. 'We've Gotta Get Out of This Place', I love that. 'Khe Sanh', I like that, and Metal Road, something Metal Road or something like that. They play them up here at the pub every Friday and Saturday night and they have a band and everyone goes ape.

'Copperhead Road'?

Yeah, Copperhead Road,

30:00 Everyone goes, sometimes they might play them bloody twice, and I think this is great and I get up and dance. I enjoy them.

Do they bring back good memories?

Yeah. No bad memories, no.

What about when Saigon fell?

Fell?

Yeah. What did you think then?

30:30 Yeah, very, very disappointed and the writing was on the wall when the Americans pulled out. I didn't think they'd last as long as they did actually (the South Vietnamese) and knowing what the American might and power that was there, they couldn't win, they certainly weren't going to win on their own. So I expected it and when it happened, I didn't think they'd go so, right at the end I didn't think they'd go

so easily in about a fortnight. Bbut well actually

31:00 I was quite glad. The upshot I was glad that the war was over, and that's the upshot of it, disappointed but just glad, yeah.

What about all the Vietnamese refugees and the boat people that came after that?

Yeah, I supported them for getting out of the place.

Do you see their situation any different to the current situation we have with boat people?

I do strange enough, yeah. I don't know. I'm right

31:30 behind the Vietnamese. I think in a lot of cases, the refugees now, I agree with this government with their strong stance (they're taking too long to put them through the processes, that's criminal that is) but I agree with locking them up and giving them thorough medicals. A lot of them have TB [Tuberculosis]. Quite a lot of them have TB with, now looking back, which didn't apply to it then,

32:00 but with this terrorist sort of thing, they've got to be vetted. But it's taking too long. But when people destroy their identity cards and won't give information where they're from and all this sort of thing. A lot of them are not war refugees, a lot of them are political. That was political, Vietnam refugees, but also economic refugees, and to me they're illegal, they're illegal. And

32:30 these poor buggers, these ones that are jumping the queue, are making it tougher for the ones that want to do it, but the ones that are coming here and are proven if they go back they're going to get killed or, they really should be sorted and they should be left here. Three and four years is just too bloody long but I agree with what the government's doing but not in that time frame.

Did you ever see any Australian journalists or photographers when you were in Vietnam?

33:00 No.

Was there any army newspaper or anything like that?

We had the regular army newspaper that was issued to the army, but I can't remember seeing one in Vietnam. But they'd line us up occasionally (it probably was a morale thing) and say more troops were killed in Australia since pay day this week than were killed... (they used to do it fairly

33:30 regularly). We lost more troops in Australia this week than we lost in Vietnam. There were more killed in road accidents in Australia than was killed in Vietnam this week. That was it was safer to be here than in Australia, I don't know. But when I was in the army, drinking was a culture and particularly on pay day. Everyone just went and got blotto and it was a problem in the military, the amount of road accidents in Australia. As I say, whether that was their way of saying,

34:00 you're safer over here, I don't know, but certainly they did it a few times, quite a few of them. I could say at least three or four times that I was actually told in a group, a fairly big group, that more were killed in Australia this week than what we are over here.

All the blokes, like World War II blokes we've spoken to all talk about getting Red Cross packages and things like that. Did you ever get anything like that?

Not Red Cross, from the RSLs.

34:30 RSL would be usually two cans of beer, might be a bit of chewing gum, a few goodies, a bit of chocolate, little, probably about that by that by that. And what happened, cakes, fruit cakes, they come over by the thousands and they all went to the post office over there and if you wanted a cake for a cup of tea you just wandered down the post office and they'd give you one or two. You'd take it back to your unit and have cake

35:00 and the Vietnamese were, "Jesus, how could a country have so much food?" And they'd seen how we were fed. We weren't starving, and they couldn't work out how a country had so much tucker they could actually send it. And they had a cup of tea with us, well not tea, but they wanted a bit of [cake], they didn't go for it much. But we had, I was trying to change a truck tyre one day. It was hot and I was making a bugger of a job of it, (and the Vietnamese were only five

35:30 foot and six or seven stone), wringing wet and I'm doing this job and I'm making a balls up of it, and this Vietnamese comes along and he did the bloody thing in about 10 minutes. I sat on my bum and watched him, pat him, "Good on you mate." But while I say I didn't have much time for them, I felt very sorry for them. I felt they had the raw end of the stick, poor buggers. And I said when

36:00 Saigon fell I said, "That's the end of the war, that's it". Now they'd been at that including when the Japanese were there. And again we were there for a year and a day and that was long enough and those poor buggers were there for the lot.