Australians at War Film Archive

William Travers (Bill) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:40 **Bill, could you give us a quick summary of your life to date?**

Yes, well I was born in 1915. My father was away at the war. I never saw my father until he came back from the war in 1918, so I was three then. We grew up at Bondi.

01:01 I went to school at Shore [Church of England Grammar School]. I finished up there as a senior prefect. I then went to the university and studied economics, and then the war broke out. When the Munich Crisis was on, I joined the militia. And when the war broke out I volunteered and went away with the 2/1st Battalion, fought

01:30 in Libya, Greece and Crete. Became a prisoner of war and after the war, I was a prisoner of war for four years. After the war I worked in a newspaper company and finished up as a general manager of production and distribution, at Consolidated Press.

02:00 Had two children and both—I've got four children, and my wife's got two, so we've got six children between us. I've been married three times. My first marriage

02:30 fell apart in the war. The second marriage, my wife died, and the third marriage was after she died, years—I married again, and that was over twenty-two years ago. Anything else you want to know?

Well, that's a very good summary, Bill. That's exactly the kind of summary we need to begin the interview. That's terrific. Congratulations for being so concise.

03:00 **Now could we go back the beginning, and could you tell us whereabouts you were born?**

I was born actually in Neutral Bay. My father was away at the war, of course. I was born in Neutral Bay, but we lived, all my life, at Bondi near the Waverley Park. That's where I grew up there, until I went to school. I went to school as a boarder, and

03:30 stayed as a boarder for three years, and then the Depression came, then I had to switch and become a day boy.

So you were boarding at Shore at that point?

Yes. That was quite an interesting experience. I think we were very lucky to stay on at Shore, because the old man, his income was cut by sixty percent, so we were a bit lucky to stay on.

04:00 **Just before we move on to other aspects of your schooling, could you tell us a bit more about your father? What sort of a person he was for a start.**

My father, my father was the son of a policeman. He was in the public service, in the Lands Department, and he was also in the militia. When the war broke out,

04:31 he was married to my mother just before they left—he went to New Guinea, with my grandfather who commanded the expeditionary force in New Guinea in 1914. Then after he came back he was in the 17th Battalion, then commanded the 26th Battalion

05:00 in the war. He was wounded in Gallipoli. I think he came back from the war, went back into the public service, reckoned he could do something better and went to work for Smith's Weekly, as a director of—

05:33 I suppose he was a publisher. That was what his position was. Then he went on, worked in the Associated Newspapers, and eventually, when Frank Packer started The Woman's Weekly, he went over to The Woman's Weekly, and worked for The Woman's

06:00 Weekly for the rest of his life. Ended up as a director of Consolidated Press.

That's quite a remarkable career and life, actually. He certainly packed a lot into his lifetime.

Did your father ever tell you very much about World War I?

Never spoke about it all. Not the odd things. But no, he never spoke about the war.

When he did mention the odd

06:30 **thing, what would he talk about in relation to the war?**

I don't recall him talking about the war at all. I don't recall it.

What about other people that you knew? Did anyone else mention World War I?

Not to my knowledge, no. I don't think people talked about the war when I was young.

And yet it had clearly quite a major impact on Australian

07:00 **life and society.**

Well, I suppose so. My father never tried to prevent me from joining the army. First of all I was in the cadets at school. I was a cadet lieutenant. When I was at the university, I worked during the day and went to university at night, so I never

07:30 had the chance to indulge in any outside activity, other than play football for the university. And then when the time of the Munich Crisis came I joined up. Well, I must admit my father helped me there, because I went into the 1/19th Battalion, as an officer, and I think the old man must have pulled a few

08:00 strings to get me in there, because he knew the commanding officer of the 1/19th Battalion. But apart from that, we never talked about the war.

Just looking further at your father, could you describe his personality for us?

He was bit like Jiker.

Now I remember Jiker, but for the more general audience—

08:31 He didn't suffer for it badly. You did your job and that was that. I don't think he was a great—he was a fellow who carried out orders. He wasn't a great man who thought up orders. But if something had to be done, that's what he did. He saw that it was carried through.

And by the sounds

09:00 **of it he was very efficient at carrying out orders.**

He commanded the 26th Battalion, he had a DSO [Distinguished Flying Order], and he a [Unclear] of the DSO, but I don't know what they were for. I have never really been interested.

And what can you tell us about your mother?

My mother was the daughter of General Holmes. General

09:30 Holmes was in command of the 4th Division in the First [World] War, and he was killed in action in France. She was one of two in the family, and they grew up in the barracks, my mother and her brother. Their father was a

10:00 regular army officer, and he moved into the barracks when they were the first regiment to occupy the barracks in 1840. So they grew up really, in the army. Basil Holmes, that's my uncle, he went to New Guinea with Dad, and with my grandfather. He went as my grandfather's

10:30 ADC [aide-de-camp]. And then they went to the 17th Battalion, and eventually, in the last years of the war, he joined the Indian Army and he stayed in the Indian Army for the rest of his career. He finished up as a brigadier.

And just looking at your mother's personality, what sort of person was she?

She was a very sweet person, very gentle, she

11:02 insisted that you did your job, and did it properly.

Now I'm interested in the story of your grandfather, General William Holmes. He was with the expeditionary force in New Guinea. Can you tell us a little more about his involvement in World War I?

Well, he was born in the barracks, grew up in the barracks, went to school at Paddington. But he didn't

11:30 become a soldier, he was a citizen soldier. He was a bugler, because his father was in the barracks. He joined as a bugler. But he went to—educated in Paddington, won a scholarship to the Water Board. Finished up being secretary of the Water Board. He was secretary of the Water Board

12:01 when he was given leave to go to New Guinea. Prior to that time he fought in the Boer War in Africa,

and he won a DSO there. He was quite a well known soldier. Citizen soldier, one of the first citizen soldiers ever.

Now I know you didn't talk to

12:30 **your father or your grandfather about the New Guinea campaign—**

I never saw my grandfather.

That's right, he was killed during the war in France.

Yes.

So, have you ever been able to ascertain much about what they actually did in the war against the Germans in New Guinea?

Well, I don't think so.

13:00 Not anymore than that they landed, they—my father won a DSO there, because he captured a radio station there. Then he got a barter DSO in France. In New Guinea—I think

13:30 they signed up for New Guinea for three months, and they were there for a bit longer than that. And when they came back here, it was halfway through 1915. They just joined up with the 17th Battalion and away they went over to Egypt.

Very little's known about the New Guinea campaign of World War I. I've read very little about it,

14:00 **and I've not seen interviews.**

The Germans had occupied the northern part, not Papua, that's the southern part of it, the northern part of it. And they had the [SMS] Emden [German battleship] running around. It was based there, and then of course, being German territory they took it over. The expeditionary force was formed to

14:31 invade New Guinea and take it over, and deny it to the enemy.

And of course it became an Australian territory after the war.

It became not Australian territory, it was—well under the auspices of—German New Guinea was never Australian territory.

15:00 **But ultimately, I think, under the Versailles Peace Treaty it became either a territory or a protectorate?**

A protectorate.

A protectorate. Now, you had one brother who was just a couple of years—

Yes, my brother was born in—when my father came back from the war in 1919. I think I was just a couple of months turning four.

15:33 He joined up, he was in the university regiment when the war broke out and he transferred to the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. Transferred into the 2nd Battalion, as an officer. And on the way over to the Middle East, we sailed in the first fleet, he was

16:01 notified he'd been appointed a Rhodes scholar. And he went on as Rhodes scholar, stayed there, but went to Oxford after the war. But when General MacKay was appointed to command the 6th Division, he took Jiker as his ADC. And Jiker went as

16:30 his ADC. What happened to him during the war I don't know, because I was always tied up in the German command.

I often wondered how your brother got the nickname Jiker?

Yes, he got the nickname Jiker because—his real name was Basil. Basil Holmes, after my uncle. My father didn't like the name Basil.

17:00 So he thought—there was a little poem called "Little Jiker Jiker, all the darkies like her. In her Sunday clothes and pinny. With a wattle blossom, and a joey possum, she's a good Australian piccaninny. She hails from Benalla, where her father Outagalla, eats snakes for breakfast every morn. He kills them with a waddie, devours the head and body, and little Jiker Jiker eats the tail." Now when

17:30 you'd tell him that story, he'd say "Not me!" So that's how he became called Jiker.

That's a great story. I've never heard that, and I've certainly never heard that poem before.

You haven't? There used to be quite a number of them. They used to be published in The Bulletin I think.

Were they? So before you went to Shore School, did you go to any junior school?

I went to public school at

18:00 Bondi. And I went to Shore when I just turned ten.

So you went to the prep school?

I went to prep school in 1928. And Jiker went too. The both of us. I went into the second form, he went into the kindergarten, or first form or what it

18:30 was I suppose. And mother went for a trip overseas, and that's why we were sent to school. She went for a trip to England. She was away for nine months. And that's why we were sent to school. We stayed on as boarders until the Depression came, and the old man couldn't afford to send us as boarders anymore, so we switched to become day boarders. And I think, if my memory serves me right, Jiker won a scholarship then,

19:00 He was a lot more brainy than I was.

So, what are your main memories of the school at that time? What are the stand out memories of Shore at that time?

Well, I think we enjoyed being there. We always did our best. We tried to. We played football, we played cricket. I was

19:30 captain of the GPS [Greater Public Schools] football team. Jiker captained the football team, also played in the GPS cricket team. So we played quite a sport there, and we were both senior prefects so we took a pretty good general part in the school.

When you first began as boarders, how did you react to that experience?

I think we just went on as

20:00 part of the thing. That's where we lived. Mother was away overseas, we lived there. We used to go out to my grandfather's place of the weekend, or on a Sunday rather, and that was the school life. Were you a boarder?

No, I never was. I was a day boy.

Well you always had everything there.

20:32 And I went from a year in the prep-med, I went into Robinson House, and I was in Robinson House for two years as a boarder.

And I think the headmaster at that time would have been LC Robson?

Yes.

What are your main memories of him?

LC Robson was a cousin of my mother's. He was one of Holme's descendents, too.

21:00 His mother was a Holmes.

What sort of a person was Robson?

Robson was a very strict man. He set the standard, and you kept it. It was a little bit different from now, because the prefects used to do a lot of maintaining

21:30 the discipline.

Did they? So it was up to the prefects rather than the teachers to maintain the discipline?

If somebody was badly reported into the school as doing something wrong, then the prefects would take him to task. Particularly if it was something silly at night, of a weekend

22:00 or away from the school.

And would the prefects take their own initiative on this? Or would this be referred to them by the teachers?

Oh, no, the prefects took their own initiative on these things. Apparently it's quite different now, I don't know. We used to have a prefects meeting. If we reckoned the fellow had done wrong, we'd

22:31 cane him. And that'd be that.

So the prefects were allowed to do the caning?

Yes. Particularly the prefects that were boarders. They'd always cane their mob.

I imagine that being a prefect was a fairly good training for the kinds of leadership roles that

came with the army as well?

Well, I think it was.

23:01 I don't think there was nothing conscious about it. It just grew on you. That was part of our—I suppose I was a bit lucky in that I come from a military family. And as far as I was concerned that was something that was very important in my life.

Now you mentioned that your mother was overseas. What were the circumstances there?

Oh, she

23:30 just went for a holiday. I don't know where the money came from. She went over and linked up with the Holmes family in England.

24:00 **Bill, could you tell us a bit more about the Shore School cadet corps and your involvement in it?**

After the war, there was compulsory training for everybody.

This was after World War I was it?

After World War I, yes. Then, I think, the Labor Party got into power and they cut out the compulsory training, and when

24:30 they cut out the compulsory training again, all these schools started their own cadet corps. Well, when they started the cadet corps, I was fourteen I suppose, and I joined up. I worked my way up to become a cadet lieutenant in the school corps.

25:02 I suppose everybody was in the cadet corps, or most of them were. And we all progressed up the ladder. What they used to do was to get you—they'd get the company marching across the ground, and heading for the lavatory or something, and yell out "Get the command facing this way in that order." So you had to get the—you

25:30 had to give them the right command, and then you were promoted according to how you did that.

So that was the test for promotion basically, was it?

Well, we had Onkus. Did you have Onkus?

No. Who was Onkus?

Onkus was the sergeant major.

26:04 He was Scottish. He was the regimental sergeant major of the Scots Guard. He was employed at Shore.

So he was employed as a sergeant major on staff?

He was employed as a sergeant major on staff. But he also ran the orderly room, and rang the bell and all that

26:30 sort of stuff. I don't know what happens now but that's what he used to do.

And was he involved in the cadet corps as well?

Oh yes, he was the cadet corps.

To what extent?

He taught you everything. Everything.

And what sort of things did you learn in the cadet corps.

Oh, you just did drill and you just did rifle exercises and shooting. We used to go shooting. All that sort

27:00 of stuff. I was in the second shooting team. I wasn't good enough for the first. But we used to shoot in the September holidays. We'd go into camp at Maroubra.

27:30 In the hotel at Maroubra, and go and shoot at Long Bay Rifle Range, and that's where they had the GPS competitions. One of my uncles, that's one of Dad's brothers, was a very good rifle shot. He used to come out and coach us. Whenever he was coaching me I could shoot all right. But when anyone was coaching,

28:01 I'd get the wobbles.

Why did you get the wobbles?

I don't know. I think he just used to give me confidence. Just take it easy, and relax. When you're doing it by yourself you didn't do that.

So was that the only cadet camp?

It was a school cadet

28:30 camp.

In later years, of course, the annual school cadet camp was up at Singleton.

Oh yes, but this was before Singleton was open. It was before Singleton was open.

Now you mentioned the Depression and the impact of the Depression on your father's finances. Can you be more specific about what impact the Depression did have on your father's finances?

Well, I think they just cut his salary.

29:00 Everybody's salary was cut, and I think his was cut as well. I don't know the exact details of it. But it at least cut his income in half. And we were very lucky. We lived up here in Forbes Street, Darlinghurst. And we had to give that away, and we hired a little two bedroom house up the back of Lindfield.

29:31 It was at least a mile and a half away from the station and we used to walk in. It probably did us a lot of good walking to the station every morning to catch the train down to school.

And looking at that Depression era, do you remember any other specific impact the Depression had on people that you knew, or the general sights and sounds of Sydney?

I don't think so. Everybody

30:00 was the same. They all were affected in one way or the other. And those people on fixed incomes of course were the ones that were probably better off than the ones who had their incomes cut.

Now, after leaving school—

30:31 **you left school in 1934, didn't you?**

Yes.

What happened after you left school?

I went to university. I went to university at night. I joined Alloway & Hardie account firm of accountants. Worked during the day, went to university at night. We went to university every night.

31:00 **What were you studying at university.**

Studying economics, in the faculty of economics.

And what were your plans for work at that time?

I was working in this firm of accountants. Did an ordinary job, junior assistant clerk. You couldn't get anything lower than that.

31:31 Actually, in this firm, there were four senior prefects from Shore. Alstead, White, Harry Winston and myself. There must have been some tie-up because they get these senior prefects every year.

And could you all see yourselves continuing on in the accountancy business?

32:00 Yes, I did. What happened? I think….no, I kept on in the accountancy business until I graduated, then I went to work with Lever Brothers, and I was there for about six months. When the war broke out, I just joined up.

So what were you doing for Lever Brothers?

I was in industrial

32:30 sales department. I never said I could be a salesman, but that's where they put me.

Were you travelling around the traps?

Yes.

You were. What sort of places were you going to?

Well, industrial sales, you know, where they use soap. Not for washing, but for all sorts of cleaning matters.

33:00 **And Lever Brothers, I think, at that time were based in Balmain, weren't they?**

Yes

So did you travel to work?

No, I was on the outside staff. I used to go there about twice a week and get instructions, and be given a list of people to go around and call on, and try and sell them soap. Industrial soap.

Interestingly, if I can be a little autobiographical for a moment, I later worked for Unilever in a company called

33:30 **Jay Kitchen & Sons, who were doing exactly the same kind of work.**

Well, they were the, Kitchen, they were the competitors to Levers.

And at that point we were supplying soap to hospitals, factories—

Yes, that was my job. I was only in that for six or eight months, and then the war broke out.

Now,

34:00 **in the meantime you had joined the militia, hadn't you?**

I joined the militia at the time of the Munich Crisis. I reckoned there was a war coming, and I might as well be in it. So I joined up in the militia. And I'd finished the university you see, when the war broke out. I'd graduated in 1938, and the war broke out in 1939, so

34:31 I was in the—I joined up at the time of the Munich Crisis.

We're always interested to know how people found out about international events. How were you informed about what was going on in Munich?

Well, you read the papers, you had the radio. There was no TV,

35:01 you read the papers.

And what was it about the Munich Crisis that made you want to enlist?

Well, I reckoned the war was coming and I may as well be in it. And, of course, my father and my grandfather, all the family had been in it, so I suppose it was normal, following the family tradition. Jiker, see Jiker was at university at that time. He was

35:30 in the SUR.

The Sydney University Regiment. To join the militia, what did that actually involve?

It involved going to camp, I think for fourteen days in the year, and one night a week at the drill hall.

36:01 I mean we just learned how to manage the Lewis machine-guns we had in those days and tactics. A bit of tactics and everything like that.

Whereabouts did you join the militia?

At the barracks.

At Victoria Barracks?

At Victoria Barracks, yes. It's where the band

36:30 is now, down there at the southern end of the barracks.

It's where the military bands are based currently?

Now, yes.

And what was the first that you knew of the outbreak of World War II?

What was the first of it? Oh well, I think it was the—heard the,

37:02 after Munich, you know, then they came back and said—a broadcast by the prime minister saying "We're at war," and that's that. I was joined up right away. My number was NX57, so I wasn't too far from the top.

37:30 **When you enlisted and obviously, this would apply to your involvement in the militia as well, did you see yourself as somebody who was enlisting in support of Australia, or the Empire? How much was your decision to join the militia and then to ultimately enlist motivated by**

38:00 **serving the Empire or serving Australia?**

I don't think it was anything to do—I think it was you got into because everyone else was and you had to, that was all. I don't think I said "I'm starting off here to save Australia, or save the Empire." You went, because you were at war.

How strong was the British Empire in people's thinking at that time?

I think it was pretty strong.

38:30 I mean everybody here in Australia, we were all ex-pats, ex-Brits. Either they'd come as soldiers or they come as convicts, and that's what virtually they were.

I believe a lot of people still referred to England as home?

They do. Not all those Muslims and not—

39:02 There are more Greeks in Melbourne, than there are in Salonika. So, you know, that's the sort of race we've got now.

Tape 2

00:35 **Bill, could you recall for us the process of your enlistment?**

The process of enlistment. Yes, the officer for the 1/19th Battalion were selected by General Leaf, who was the first commanding officer, from the 1st Battalion, the 45th

01:00 Battalion and the 30th Battalion, and Leaf went around them all and interviewed them all. When he came to interview us at 1/19th Battalion, all those that had volunteered, one by one you went into a room and you sat in front of him and he said, "Why do you want to join the Army?" and all that sort of business.

01:31 And they were there for about half an hour, more, being grilled by him. When my turn came to go in, "Why do you want to join the army?" I said "Well, that's a picture of my father, that's a picture of my grandfather, and that's a picture of my great grandfather." "Oh," he said. "Okay." And that was all. I was in.

02:01 So, there we were. That all happened up in the barracks.

After that did you have to go through the normal routine of medicals?

Oh yes, I suppose we did. I don't recall that at all, but you see, I was a lieutenant, when that happened, so I was just transferred from the

02:30 1/19th Battalion to the 2/1st Battalion, I was just transferred. I was in the army and I was just transferred from one unit to another.

Now at some point in the chronology, and I don't know whether it's relevant to deal with it now or slightly later, you became engaged and married.

Yes.

At what point was that?

Oh, about—while I was at the university I was mashing up this girl.

03:01 And we got on pretty well together, and we just got engaged. She was a daughter of the headmaster of Cranbrook School. Ivan McKay. And we were engaged when war broke out.

And what was her name?

Jean. Jean McKay.

03:31 **And so you became engaged, and when did you actually marry?**

Well, we married about a week before we embarked to go overseas. The reason we married was, she decided to go overseas, too, and she couldn't travel. She couldn't get a pass for it. As a single

04:00 girl. So we married. And when she got her passport she travelled, eventually got on a boat going to England. It went through the Suez Canal and she got off the boat at Port Sheepos, or Alexandria. And didn't go on to England. And that's where we met up,

04:30 there for—

Now can you give us a bit of a description of Jean as a person? What were the qualities of Jean that attracted you to her?

I don't know. We got on well together. We were at the university together. She used to follow us playing football, it was just a—

05:02 you'd be better off asking that question of Rebecca [interviewer] not of me.

So what was she studying at the university?

She was studying arts. I think she was in third year Arts, I think. She graduated in arts, anyway.

We'll get back to her reuniting with you, in a while. Once you'd enlisted and done the medicals and so forth, what happened

05:30 **then?**

We were into camp. I suppose we were into camp at Liverpool, and then we went on the first convoy to leave. That's Christmas time, 1939.

06:00 **Now just staying with Liverpool for a moment, did you do any training there?**

Oh yeah.

What sort of training?

Oh, route marches, movement, fire and movement, all those things that infantry soldiers had to learn to do.

And I think you were a platoon commander there, weren't you?

I was a platoon commander, yes.

And what did that involve you in on a day to day basis?

Well, how to platoon.

06:34 We went to a school, I was sent to the officer training school at Narellan. I was there, I suppose, for four weeks.

Sorry, where was that school?

At Narellan.

Narellan, yes. Not far from Liverpool.

No. And after that, when I came

07:00 back from that, I was promoted to being second in command of the company. And that was the rank I held when I went away.

Now when was it that you heard that you'd be travelling abroad?

We always knew we were going, it was only a question of when the ships were ready. And they were all

07:30 convoy tied up here. They were all passenger ships which were in Australian waters at the time war broke. And they had to go back to England. So they all had their crew and stewards and cooks and bottle washers and everything on the boats. So they administered on us as they went back.

08:01 **So, what do you recall of your farewell from Australia?**

What do I recall of it? I had the job of getting all the bloody baggage on board for the unit. And you came down on the train, and the boat was pulled up at Pyrmont. The train went alongside the boat, you got out of the train and walked up the

08:30 plank and into the boat.

Was there any special farewell by members of the family?

No. They knew that we were going. I suppose we were in Liverpool for three months before we embarked.

Now at that point was Jean also making plans to travel overseas?

No, she wasn't.

So how did she feel

09:00 **about your embarkation?**

I don't know. You'd have to ask her.

So, what was the ship that you were on?

The [SS] Orford.

And this was a former passenger liner, was it?

Yeah.

So what were the conditions like aboard the ship?

Very good. I didn't have a first-

09:30 class cabin, but I had a second-class cabin, and there were three or four of us in this cabin. We shared it. The rest of the mob had hammocks and things like that. The officers had accommodation that was there for travellers, not for the crew.

Not for the crew.

10:00 **So what route did the ship take?**

We went to—down around the south of Australia. Perth. We stopped at Fremantle. We then went from Fremantle to Colombo, then from Colombo to Alexandria. And left the ship there.

Did you stop at Colombo on the way?

Yeah.

10:30 Oh, stopped for a day or something.

Any chance to get ashore and look around?

Can't remember. If we had got ashore there would have been nothing we could have done.

Now, your ultimate destination when you got the Middle East was where?

Ultimate destination was—we got off

11:00 the boat in the middle of the Canal. We got into a train and went up to Palestine, into a camp called Julis. A place called Julis where we took over a camp from one of the British regiments that had been there.

And at Julis what did you actually do?

We were there for something like

11:30 twelve months, in the 'Phoney War', and we did a lot of exercises out in the Hebron Hills and all that sort of thing.

Why do you call it the 'phoney war'?

Well it was—no war went on. There was no war in Palestine. And it wasn't until the Germans really invaded

12:00 or the Italians first of all invaded North Africa, and started to invade Egypt that we really got into fighting.

Because you'd got here fairly early on, hadn't you?

Pardon?

You'd left Sydney just after Christmas, '39?

That's right. We were in Palestine for about twelve months. That's why we called it a 'phoney war'. We weren't fighting, we were just training.

12:30 **So what sort of exercises were you going on?**

Well, they'd have company exercises, battalion exercises, and brigade exercises. They'd put a situation up and say you've got to attack this or you've to attack that. Or would you go about defending this or how would you go about defending that. There we were.

13:00 **So what was the morale of the men like during this period?**

The morale was very high. We were all keen to get on with it.

Did you have chance to take leave in the nearby towns and cities?

Oh yes. You went on leave. We went on leave to Tel Aviv. We went on leave to Jaffa. Went on leave to Jerusalem,

13:34 most of the places around Palestine. Now see, Palestine was a British protectorate then. Mostly a lot of British troops there.

14:05 **Now in the meantime, I think it was during this period that your wife travelled to the Middle East, didn't she?**

Yes. We played a lot of sport. We played football. We went up to Beirut and played the French Army in football. We played football against the New Zealanders—

14:30 well no, that was later in Cairo. But we had quite a lot of travelling around there.

And of the cities you travelled to, which would include Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, what are some of the stand out memories of trips you made to those places?

I only had one cause to go

15:00 on leave and that was to join up with Jean.

And whereabouts did you run into her?

Well she was working. She worked with the Comforts Fund, and the Red Cross. They were there, either in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv.

Now just to establish

15:30 **the Comforts Fund. This was the Australian Comforts Fund?**

Yes.

What was the Australian Comforts Fund?

Well the Australian Comforts Fund was a non-military organisation that brought comforts I suppose you could say, to the troops. They provided, when you went on leave you went to Comforts Fund, and you got a meal or—and

16:00 there were quite a number of Australian women there. Wives of people that were in the forces.

Did they organise social occasions?

No. You went there and had a meal. You see, generally when you went on leave, you went for the day, or it might have been two days, but generally you just went

16:30 for the day and come back at night.

So you'd take a day trip into a town or a city?

Yeah. And you'd get a meal, there.

So when you met up with Jean again, you then went on leave together?

No we didn't. Because I didn't have any leave, I just had to be part of the army. Whatever the army was doing, I had to do that.

17:02 We were sent to a school in Cairo, for about three weeks. She came down to Cairo with us. But no, most of the time we were just in camp.

So it must have been good to see your wife again?

Oh yeah,

17:30 why not.

And how were you both getting on at this time?

We got on very well together. See, her father was the original commander of 6th Division, at that stage. So she had her father, and Jiker was his ADC, and me, so she—

18:01 and any other Australian officers that were around.

So how much were you able to see her for at this time?

Not very much. Not very much.

On average would you see her once a week?

Once a week, probably.

And would that be on the weekends or just at any time?

Whenever you got leave. If the battalion went out on an

18:30 exercise, it was three, four, five days exercise. So we had to fit in with all that.

Now after this twelve months in the Middle East, what happened after that to you?

What happened? Well, when the Italians invaded Egypt,

19:00 we were immediately sent to repel the invasion. And the Italians had got as far as Salome in Egypt, and they had the fortress of Bardia and

19:30 the fortress of Tobruk. And from there they were raiding into Egypt, and they got as far as well, they got

into Egypt. And that was when the 6th Division was moved to occupy and take over from the British Armoured Division which was repelling the

20:00 invasion, and fight back and invade Libya. So that's where we went.

So you went to Bardia, basically?

Yes, we went up into the desert first of all. Eventually we finished up, what's the word? Investing

20:30 the fortress of Bardia.

When you say investing, do you mean occupying?

No investing it.

Oh, investigating?

Investing is the military term saying you're fighting them. We sat down outside Bardia, and Bardia was a fortress, and

21:00 eventually we attacked the fortress and took it.

Can you describe in more detail how you actually took the fortress?

Yeah. The 6th Division—the 16th Brigade of the 6th Division, which was the 2/1st, 2/2nd, 2/3rd, made the break in.

21:33 The 2/1st Battalion actually broke in through the wire, and the other battalions came in and took the fort.

And what was your involvement as part of this action?

My own involvement was I was a second in command of the company. The second in command

22:00 of—were left out of the battles, because if anything happened to the fellow in command, the second in command immediately took over. But in my case, I was a bit lucky because we were one officer down in the company, and I was put in to take his place. So, the battle consisted of an

22:30 approach march in the middle of the night. The blowing of the wire that was around the fortress and occupying the posts that were there. I had the job of—you see, this was a march in the middle of the night. There was no trees, no anything, except

23:00 scrub. Salt bush. And you had to be very careful that you kept straight. And you kept sight by looking at the stars. Well, my job was to keep the company straight by looking at the stars. Now the stars move, so every twenty minutes you had to pick a new star. We had four or five practise

23:30 runs at that before we did it. To get on the same angle. And I had to set the start line. The brigade major had set the start line. He'd been there the night before and tied bits of four by two onto the—so we knew where the start line was.

24:02 But you had to get to the start line in the middle of the night, and it was dark. No moon, no anything. So that's a job. And you had to watch the start and keep a straight line, and count the number of paces you took to find the start line.

So how far did you have to march on that basis?

24:30 Oh, it might have been two miles. When we got to the start line, then the barrage came, and as the barrage lifted we moved forward until we got to the tank ditch, which is around the wire. Then the

25:00 engineers, or a party of engineers came with Bangalore torpedoes, do you know what they are? Anyway, they're pipes. They blew the wire, blew a hole in the wire, then we went through the hole in the wire and took the post.

Who was firing the barrage?

Our guns, our regiment. It was the highest concentration of

25:30 artillery that had ever happened. Even higher than anything that happened in the First War. The concentration of artillery. British and Australian artillery.

How did you react when you first heard the barrage?

When I first heard it? Screamed. Of course we were going—the only noise that you heard was your feet, swooshing through the

26:00 salt bush. Suddenly one, two, three, then a whole lot of shells going over your heads. On top of you. They're screaming. The shells scream. Did you know that? Well, of course you can jump and shout and let off steam. Before that we had been quiet, we couldn't make any noise. We didn't want to give the

attack away.

26:32 **So, you were in charge of this platoon. Once you advanced beyond the start line, what did you do? Can you talk us through?**

Well, what happened was, our company commander got wounded and taken out, so I took over the company. We occupied

27:00 posts—various platoons, three platoons occupied three posts, and kept up an opening, so that the next platoon came through and went round, like that.

So in other words, I presume you both occupied and guarded those posts?

Yeah. That was our first

27:31 job, to break in and make a bridge head so the second battalion could come in. They came in behind us, and then they worked their way around the posts, one after another and cleaned them up.

So the posts that you were occupying, was this part of the fort?

Oh yes.

It was. So what did that

28:00 **actually consist of?**

It consisted of concrete trenches. Each post had its own anti-tank ditch around it. And concrete pill-boxes. I think we were a bit lucky that

28:32 the barrages frightened the hell out of the Italians and they didn't fight too much.

Did they take to the hills at all?

No, they just gave up.

They surrendered?

Yes.

So for how long did you occupy this post?

The post? Oh, I suppose the battle took,

29:02 the battle must have taken two days. The fortress was quite a big fortress. There was something like eighty-odd posts around it.

Could you give us a description of what the fortress itself consisted of?

The fort?

You described your post, but what did the fortress of Bardia consist of?

29:30 The fortress itself consisted of a series of posts, sighted so one would protect the other, cross-fire. And outside that, was anti-tank ditches, and barbed wire, and around the posts themselves was an anti-tank

30:00 ditch and wire.

Now you mentioned that your company commander was wounded. What was the name of the company commander?

The company commander was named Walter Dillon. He was commander of C Company. And he was wounded, badly wounded. He was carted off.

Did he survive?

Oh yeah. He survived the war, but

30:30 he didn't fight anymore because he had bad wounds in his legs.

So, did you know become the acting company commander?

The acting company commander, yeah.

What were conditions like there? Living conditions?

In the desert? Very cold at night. We had—we were given

31:01 leather jerkins to put on, because we only had shorts and shirts and that. We were given leather jerkins to put on. It was very cold at night and very hot in the daytime.

And what sort of equipment were you carrying with you?

Ordinary rifles and Bren guns. The ordinary soldiers defence.

31:30 **And you'd have a backpack containing personal possessions obviously?**

I had a rifle, a rifle and bayonet, a water bottle and a pack, with iron rations in it.

What were iron rations?

Biscuits and a bit of bully beef in a tin.

32:02 We were lucky if we got the tin. Bully beef was, I think, one tin between three men. So you had a tin of Bully beef, you shared it with three others.

Why were they actually called iron rations?

Iron rations? Because you don't have to cook them. Hard, hard biscuits they were.

32:30 **Hard as iron by the sounds of it.**

Yeah.

Now for how long did you stay there at this particular post at Bardia?

Well, the Battle of Bardia took two days before—you see, we had to go around to each post and round them up. That took two days. Then the whole

33:00 division was moved on to the next fort was at Tobruk. Then we did the same thing there.

You went to Tobruk yourself?

Yeah. It was the same sort of division as at Bardia. The same forts.

So the fortress of Tobruk was on the same layout

33:30 **as Bardia?**

Yes.

So how did you approach the fortress of Tobruk? Was it on the same basis?

Yeah. It was exactly the same.

Was it a night march once again?

Yes, except at Bardia the 2/1st Battalion was the first battalion to make the bridge head. At Tobruk, one of the other divisions was put in first, and we came in

34:00 afterwards, we were the battalion that went around and took the posts, one by one, after the bridge head was formed. At Bardia we formed the bridge head. At Tobruk, I think, the 2/3rd Battalion formed the bridge head, and our battalion went around one post after another and took them. We cleaned them

34:30 all out.

I presume you remained company commander throughout this period?

Yes.

So, you've described the process of navigating by stars, what were your other day-to-day, moment-to-moment responsibilities as company commander?

While you're in a battle, anything goes. Whatever the enemy do, you— you're attacking, you're attacking

35:00 all the time, or the enemy attacking you, and you're defending it. In Tobruk, the battalion had the job of going one place after another, around the perimeter. We had our company,

35:31 one company, taking the posts and we were on the inside to prevent anyone attacking the battalion. So we marched around, I suppose, half a mile inside the perimeter. We never

36:01 had any fighting to do at all. In fact, the company ammunition expenditure in the battle of Tobruk was sixty, sixty bullets. We had no fighting to do.

So once you arrived at a post, what would happen?

Well, they'd come out with their hands up. See they'd been hammered pretty

36:30 strongly with artillery, and that's a frightening thing to have shells lobbed in at you all time. In fact, in the battle of Bardia, the first platoon area we got into, the first unit, the officer in charge was killed, he was dead, so the rest of them,

37:00 they just gave up.

The Italian officer was killed?

Yeah.

Now you've described what the platoon and the company's general objectives were, but if we can place you in that situation, what were your own responsibilities on a moment-to-moment basis?

Well, you just had to do what—you just had to keep moving. You knew what the plan was and you just had to keep up with that.

But if we can

37:30 **place you there almost as if you are a camera, even if we have you reliving the experience of being there, could you describe for us the range of responsibilities that you had?**

Well, a company commander—you had three platoons, and they are spread out, two forward and one back, or one forward and two back, or in a

38:02 arrow formation, and the company commander is in the middle and he's got to move the platoons according to the action that's taking place. Keep the platoons moving according to the battalion plan. In Tobruk, I seem to remember we—

38:30 I think from the time that we started, we marched something like twenty-six miles. From the time we got to our objective, and we had all settled on our objective, then we got orders that we had to move again to another objective. So we did twenty-six miles, I reckon.

You refer to keeping them moving, did this involve

39:00 **you calling out orders?**

Well, you had runners, you couldn't call out orders. It's too far. You had a runner.

So what was an average message that you would give to a runner?

Oh you'd say you have to do this or do that, or move here or come there or do whatever you had to do.

Tape 3

00:35 **So, Bill, we were talking about Tobruk. You've just arrived and you were explaining what your role as CO [Commanding Officer] of the three platoons.—**

OC [Officer Commanding].

OC, sorry. Were there any other roles of the OC that you would like to describe?

It's a very minor role,

01:00 OC of the company. The main role of the fighting unit is the battalion, which consisted of three companies and the headquarter company. When we went away to the war we were on a four basis. In other words there were four battalions to a division, and

01:30 four companies to a battalion, and four platoons to a company. When we got over to Palestine, the British Army was on a three basis. So they changed us from a four basis to a three basis. So instead of the 16th Brigade, being the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th

02:00 Battalion, they took the 4th Battalion. In the 17th Brigade they took the 8th Battalion. They made them into another division. So, in other words, they changed us from a four unit into a three unit battalion or company or whatever. I don't know

02:30 why they did it, but apparently because it was a—they found in the First War, the Brits were all on a four battalion basis, and they couldn't fit through the streets in France, so they had to reduce it. That's the story they tell, whether it's right or not I don't know.

It's very practical.

Yes.

03:00 **So, you started to talk about Tobruk and you mentioned, briefly, what your role was there. Could you go into a bit more detail describing what actually you were involved at Tobruk?**

At Tobruk. It's what you call in the army "fire and movement." In other words, you're given a

03:33 place you have to take or capture, and then you decide how you're going to do it. The battalion commander decides he's going to have one company there and one company there, and the company commander decides he's got to have, in a smaller space, one unit there and one unit there. Then you have to see, you have to know what the whole overall picture is,

04:00 then you have to adjust your own units to fit in with the whole overall picture. And, of course, if there's somebody shooting you at you, you've got to make up your mind if you can change it or not, to what's happened. That's the way it goes.

So could you talk us through, step-by-step, what you were doing on Tobruk once you arrived there?

04:30 Once we arrived there. You mean once we got through the wire?

Yep.

As I said, we had two companies going around taking one post after the other, around the perimeter, and C Company moved inside it to stop anyone counter attacking the two either companies that were going on.

05:00 **So you—**

One company would go and take this post, and then the company at this post would go and take the next post. They were hopping, one over the other. We were on the inside of the perimeter in case any counter-attack came. To ward off any counter-attack while these people were leap-frogging one over the other.

05:31 Over the posts.

And what happened when you came under fire?

Well, you tried to do what you could. If you could silence, you did. You just had to fight it. Fight.

So what guns were you using at this point?

We were using rifles and machine-guns. Bren guns.

06:04 **So was that the Bren gun and the Owen machine-gun?**

Pardon?

Was that the Bren gun? You mentioned a machine-gun, what type of machine gun was that?

Ordinary machine gun. Bren gun.

So could you, because I've never actually fired a Bren gun before, and just for the sake of the record, could you describe the Bren gun for me?

Bren gun.

06:32 It's like a glorified rifle, with a stand in front of it. It's carried. You carry it. It's got a stand in front of it, a barrel on the end of it. And it can fire—instead of five

07:00 bullets which you put into a rifle, it could fire thirty bullets which you put into a magazine. It's just a concentrated method of firing bullets.

What was it like being under enemy fire?

07:30 Oh, you just hope you didn't get hit. But you didn't think about that. You just had to do the job and do the job. That's what you did.

I believe that, and you may or may not have seen anyone who's suffered from shell shock, but I believe that shell shock did happen. Did you experience that in anyway?

08:02 If a shell went off near you, which it did with me on one occasion, it bursts—it blew me over, anyway. I don't know, it's just like—I don't think there'd be any

08:30 difference between being hit by a bit of shell and being hit by a bullet. I've never done either, but I've been close in both.

So where were you when you had that experience of the shell going off near you?

On the approach march to the battle of Bardia. One of those shells being fired by our side was what they called a drop short. In other words,

09:00 it didn't go the full way. And it blew at the back of me and blew me over. But then, that was what happened.

So what affect did that have on you at the time?

I don't think it had any affect on me. They said "Get up and go on with the job." And funnily enough, I did. Because I was directing, I was

09:30 working on the star, so I had to keep that going.

Did you ever see any of your men, or other men, who were suffering from shell shock?

No. Not to my knowledge, but before we went into battle—subsequently in battle, the CO picked

10:00 out some of our men that he reckoned were a bit shell-shocked, or not shell-shocked but frightened. And he sent them back.

Sorry, where was that?

He sent them back.

Where were you when he sent them back?

Oh, when this happened? This was in Crete.

Well, that's a bit later on, isn't it? So we'll

10:30 **come to that a bit later.**

I don't think—you're on all the things you don't think about. I mean, you go to war, you're liable to be killed, you're liable to be wounded, but you've got to do your job, and if you're killed or wounded. Finish. You've still got to do your job.

Yeah.

11:00 **There seems to be those who do cope, and those who don't. It's quite interesting, actually, yeah. But just getting back to Tobruk, you were describing the role of the C Platoon that you were a part of, providing the cover for the other two that were hopping, and getting**

11:30 **each post. So can you, first of all, describe how long that action took at Tobruk? And then what happened after.**

Well, as I say, in the first twenty-four hours, from the time the battle started, we marched something like twenty-six miles, most of it under fire. You march

12:02 three, well, depending on—the marching pace is three mile to the hour. But when you're in battle, it depends on what the conditions are, how far you move and how far you don't move. I don't think there's any reason why—

12:31 I can't answer your question in any way other than that.

So what happened after Tobruk?

After Tobruk we were withdrawn back to Alexandria, and we went Greece. The whole division

13:00 was withdrawn. And the division, that's the 6th Division, was taken over by the 9th. In other words the 9th Division moved into Libya, and the 6th Division was withdrawn from battle, back to Alexandria and shipped to Greece.

13:31 **How much leave did you have in Alexandria?**

We didn't have any leave—actually, yes, we had a week or something. And I'd had a bit of sandfly fever.

14:01 I got a week's leave and went up to Cairo to see my wife. And while we're in Cairo, along comes the commanding officer, Blamey, and he said "You better get back to Alexandria, because your mob's going to Greece tomorrow." I got up and

14:30 got in a taxi and went down from Cairo to Alexandria and found the mob and got on the boat with them.

So you mentioned you had sandfly fever, was it? What are the symptoms of sandfly fever?

Oh, I don't know. You just get a temperature, and don't feel very well.

15:01 It was a long while ago, since I had it. So I can't tell you.

And I take it that the fever got its name from the sand fly?

Yes, obviously, that's one of things you picked up in the desert.

So what was it like seeing Jean again, after all this action?

Now come on, you shouldn't be asking me that question.

Why is that?

15:31 Yeah, well, you married?

No, I'm not.

Well, you'll learn one day.

I imagine it must have been lovely.

Yeah, it was.

I mean you're actually quite unique in that your wife was over in the Middle East with you.

Well, there were quite a number of Australian wives that were there. At various times.

16:00 And they all mucked in together and did what had to be done to help the troops on leave.

It must have been really lovely having her over there.

It was. I was a bit lucky, you see. There'd be sixteen thousand others who didn't have their wives there. They were in trouble.

16:34 **While you were at Tobruk and other places away from your wife, were you able to correspond with her?**

No.

You weren't. What about other communication with family back home?

Well, you wrote letters, you got letters. But whether the letter got there or not,

17:03 that depended on the mail that came up to you. You didn't get it—

What about censorship of letters?

Officers had to censor their troops' letters.

17:30 Which meant that you read the letter, to see that it didn't have anything in it that would give away to the enemy, if the enemy got the letter, what your plans were. You didn't read the letter as such to find out whether—how the kids were or anything like that. You read it—see it just

18:00 what was of any military significance if it fell into the hands of the enemy could be used against you. That's what censorship was about.

What was that like for you as an officer to censor your men's mail?

Well, you just did it. That was one of the things you had to do. It was a bloody nuisance, really.

Okay.

But you had to

18:30 sign it, you see.

So, you mentioned that you had leave in Alexandria—sorry was your wife in Cairo or Alexandria?

In Cairo.

In Cairo. Could you describe what Cairo was like as it was back then.

No. I don't have the faintest idea. I don't think it was much different to what it is today.

19:00 But I haven't been there so I don't know.

So what happened after Cairo? You mentioned that you went back to meet up with your—

I grabbed a taxi. What? Cairo to Alexandria was a hundred and fifty miles or something. He drove me down to Alexandria, where I rejoined the unit.

19:33 Actually, I rejoined the unit just as they were getting on the boat to go to Greece. So I just made it.

We've spoken to other men who talked about the loyalty and the connection that they had with their unit. And what you just described to me is like an example of

20:00 **that. You're very keen to get back and not to miss your unit?**

That's right. If you weren't with your unit, you were like a fly on the wall. You were out on your own. So when you were with the unit, you were part of whatever was going on.

Was mateship important?

What do you mean by mateship?

I mean, you're

20:30 **obviously going through a lot with these men in your unit. I imagine you would have started forming friendships.**

Yes, everybody helped everybody, that's really what you mean. If you were in trouble, you helped somebody that was in trouble.

Did you have any particular close mates that you can recall?

21:00 Oh yes, I've still got them now. There's two officers here—there's only, I believe, about forty-odd of the battalion left. The original battalion. And two of them are here. And two of them are here, one's in Brisbane, one's in Sydney. The rest of them are gone or I don't see them.

21:30 **Could you describe these mates you started to develop friendships with?**

No I don't think I could.

Did they have any particular qualities about them?

Well, they were all officers. They had the same qualities that I had, I presume. They stick around, they do their jobs, that's what you had to do.

22:01 I don't think you didn't do something—you did everything you had to do, and you did it with the rest of them. There's no point in arguing about it.

Was there a real division between the officers and other men in the unit?

22:30 I don't think so. There was no real division. I mean, one was as good as the other. Each one had his job to do and you did it. That was that.

Obviously you as an officer, you had to have certain qualities as a leader, to perform well, and I'm wondering if you can describe to me

23:00 **what those qualities were as a leader, that you needed as an officer?**

Well, I think the first thing was that you had to do the best for your troops. You had to see that they got the best. Or the best that was available. But, you're with them, they're with you.

23:30 You just shared what you had. When you get into a battle or something like that, or get into a tight situation, you just shared it. You helped one another.

Were there any other qualities you needed to be a good leader?

I don't know.

24:02 You did what you had to do. Just did what you had to do. If that meant some discomfort to yourself, you had to do it. That was that. I suppose you had to try and stay alive, too. Because you were not a leader, you were dead.

You mentioned the word

24:30 **discomfort. Would you go about being uncomfortable for the sake of keeping your men happier?**

You all had the same conditions. You didn't have, because you were an officer, you didn't have it any easier than the bloke who was an ordinary private. You all had the same conditions to live under. There was no point in whingeing about

25:00 it, you just put up with it. And kept everybody on the go.

You mentioned joining the rest of your unit on the boat leaving for Greece. Can you describe that journey to Greece for me?

No. It was just a sea voyage.

What was the boat that you went on?

Don't remember. Don't remember.

25:32 **So what happened when you landed at Greece?**

What happened when we landed at Greece? We went into a camp at—not very far from Athens, then we were moved up onto the front-line, which was to repel the

26:00 German invasion—well, first of all it was an Italian invasion, then the Germans came in when the Italians weren't doing so well.

So can you talk us through, step-by-step, what actually happened? What was your involvement at that point?

At that point. The unit was taken up to

26:31 occupy a defensive line up on Mount Olympus. Up the north of Mount Olympus, north of the Aliakmon River. We were moved up by truck, and took up a defensive position. Where we were,

27:05 the Germans happened to go the other way. They knew we were there, they went the other way.

So what happened next?

Well then, the Greeks were fighting the Italians. Then the Germans came in,

27:31 because the Greeks were beating the Italians. The Germans came in to take them, and that's when the Australian and British forces were sent into Greece to help stop that battle. What happened then? You're in a line across a country like that. This part's pushed, gets pushed back,

28:00 then this part has to pull back, and eventually, if you don't get pulled back you just get cut off. You still have to work as an army. That's the whole point about it.

So can you describe what you were actually doing in the involvement in Greece?

Well,

28:32 as a company commander, you're just really moving your company, which is about a hundred men, a hundred and twenty men, in accordance with the rest of your battalion. You see the way a battalion is split up is that one man can't tell

29:00 everybody what to do. One man has to tell one man, and then they have to tell one man, and so on down the line until everybody is doing the same thing.

What kind of action did you see here in Greece?

We didn't see much action at all, because

29:30 wherever we went, the action went the other way. We got up to the Aliakmon River, or we came back. We were on the northern side of the Aliakmon River, and we came over to the southern side of the Aliakmon River. We took up a position in the mountains, and you have to imagine what

30:00 the country was like. A lot steeper mountains than what we've got here. The means of communication into these areas was by runner. So if you're a long way ahead, it takes the runner a long time, because he's got to up and down mountains like that to get to you. And it

30:30 took over an hour for a runner to get from company headquarters down to the first section. So if you wanted to move anybody, you had to send a runner. It took an hour to go—it's not like it is today where every soldier's got his own telephone virtually. You can move them around

31:00 as you like. But one of the things was, we were put into a position, the battalion was put into a position, and we were out of touch with the brigade headquarters for two days, and out of touch with the divisional headquarters for three days. So we were stuck up in the mountains and don't

31:30 know what's going on, because there was no communication. Or the difficulty of communication.

That must have been quite frustrating?

It was frustrating. Then, of course, when the message gets to you, you've then got to act. And if it takes two hours for the

32:00 message to get to you, it takes you two hours more to get back to where the messenger came from. So there's four hours you're really lost. So you can quite easily imagine if you're in a lot of mountains like in Mount Olympus, it's quite some time between the movement of troops and

32:30 the order being given to move the troops. And that's what happened with us. The rest of the brigade got moved, and we were still left up in the mountains because we hadn't got the message to retire. And that's what happened all the way down.

So how long were you left up in the mountains for?

33:00 We weren't left—from who's point of view? From our point of view we were told to go, we got up and went. From the division point of view it took them three days to get a message to us. So there's three days lost. And that's three days that something else is going on somewhere else. The difficulty

33:32 was, in those days, communication. Radio wasn't all that hot. That was the whole problem all the way through.

So I believe at one point, you were near the border of Yugoslavia?

Yeah.

Was that around this time? This was the mountains that you were in?

Yeah.

34:02 **You mentioned that this message took three days to get to you, what happened once you did get the message?**

You got the message, you acted on it. The message was an order to withdraw. Once you get the message you withdraw. If it takes three days to get the message to you, it obviously takes three days to get back.

34:30 You understand?

I do. It sounds like a very frustrating and very ineffectual technique. And I can imagine that often that must have created miscommunications. By the time you did the information that was out of date, and would have actually been quite dangerous in some cases.

You get lost, or you get cut off.

So you got the order to retreat, what happened next?

35:00 You retreated. We got back from the Aliakmon River, we got back to Brallos, and took up another position there.

And what did you do there?

We then subsequently withdrew from Brallos, then back and out of Greece altogether.

35:30 **Now I believe that your battalion was one of the only battalions to get off Greece with arms. Why was that?**

Well, because we didn't have any fighting to do. Everywhere we went, we were just moved by truck. And the Germans—we didn't happen to get into a fight, so we didn't lose anything. When we

36:00 got onto the boats, we had all our equipment. And when we arrived at Crete, we were about the only battalion that was fully equipped. Even then we didn't have some mortars. They weren't moveable.

So just to clarify, you didn't actually

36:30 **see any fighting action in Greece?**

We didn't do any fighting. We didn't do any fighting, or shooting. We did a bit of shooting, but no close-up stuff.

You mentioned that your battalion was the only one with arms. Does that mean the other battalions were having trouble with supplies, etc, for

37:00 **ammunition?**

No. The others had trouble getting—well, I don't know. What was the question again?

You mentioned that your battalion had all the arms because you didn't actually use any, but with the other battalions did they—

37:30 Well, they got into a fight, and they got over-run. So when you get over-run, you're in all sorts of strife. The same thing would have happened to us if we'd been in a fight. We would have been over-run too, but we weren't. We didn't get into a fight.

What do you recall of the journey to Crete?

Well,

38:00 we got onto a boat called the [HMS] Wryneck. It was about, I suppose, seven or eight hours sailing. We got to the end of Crete. We got off-loaded. The Wryneck went back to get some more, and on the way it was coming with some more, it got

38:30 sunk. So we were lucky. We got out. We got into Crete complete with our arms.

With your supplies and ammunition?

With our guns, except for the heavy ones, which we had to leave in Greece because we couldn't carry them. I mean you get on a boat, you've got to—

39:01 We didn't—the Wryneck didn't pull up at a wharf. We got into little boats and went out and got on board.

So what can you tell us about your arrival in Crete?

The arrival in Crete. We arrived in the morning, got off the boat and we got moved into an area, and then moved into a position which we had to defend.

Tape 4

00:40 **If we could take the story from your arrival in Crete onwards.**

Well, as I say, we arrived in Crete. One unit had virtually all its arms and equipment, except the mortars,

01:00 and we were sent to the most inaccessible place, because we didn't have to be supplied with anything, you see? So, that's why we were sent to Retimo. Now Crete has an island with three main towns, Heraklion and Retimo and Maleme. And three main airports. And if the German were going to invade Crete they were going to invade it by their air.

01:30 And the first thing they had to do was capture an airport, so they could then fly in reinforcements who weren't Fliegers [unit of the German Air Force]. So, the plan to save Crete was to deny the airports to the enemy

02:01 either from an attack by parachute troops or attack by navy. And Churchill said the navy will look after the sea from attack, you've got to stop the parachutes. And once they got a landing strip,

02:30 once they took a landing strip, that was the end of the battle. Because they could then fly in the planes, and this is what happened. Fly in their planes and fly in their reinforcements.

Now you got to Retimo, what did you find when you got to Retimo?

We just found an air strip there. It was being—by some Greek

03:00 troops who had never been in action in their lives. And they were obviously—just joined the army, because half of them had never even fired a rifle. So they were put there and all they did was to dig big First War trenches around the landing strip to try and deny it to the enemy. And of course that was the worst thing they could

03:30 could do. Anyway, they were—we were sent to Retimo, and the 11th Battalion was sent to Retimo, that's two Australian battalions, and we had to deny the airport against air attack and against sea attack. Other units in the Australian

04:00 army went to Heraklion and went to Maleme.

Now you said the Greeks had dug First War trenches, what do you mean by that?

Well, when we dug trenches, we dug weapon pits which you could get in, cover over and they don't show up from the air. The Greeks had just dug trenches which were great big long scars

04:30 and they showed up in air photographs. Again, this is First War tactics against Second War tactics.

So could you describe how a weapon pit was dug and how it would be camouflaged?

Yes, you dug a weapon pit, it's a hole in the ground about that deep, four feet,

05:00 which you can stand up in and get protection. You covered it over with bits of bamboo, and then put earth on top of it. So it didn't show up in an air photograph. When the Germans come over and photographed everything, they didn't know what was there. And we found this out afterwards, because we saw—we shot down

05:30 one aircraft and it had a photograph in it. We saw it and we knew exactly what they knew then. There it was.

So the weapon itself would be obviously poking above the camouflage.

No, it would only be for you to get in yourself. All you had was your rifle and your machine-gun and you fired it from there.

So you fired it through

06:00 **the camouflage would you?**

No. once they're jumping on you it doesn't matter whether they see it or not. It didn't matter about that. We had these weapon pits dug in position where you could sight and shoot and protect one another, and to protect the airport. And they were the ones that were

06:30 covered in. The ones that we lived in were right back—Retimo was terraced, like that. We just went and lived up against a terrace, in the open air.

So Retimo was surrounded by mountains was it?

No, Retimo was on the seaboard, with mountains at the

07:00 back of it.

So when you say it was terraced, you're referring to the township itself, are you?

No, where the landing strip was, was out in the open. Now most of it was vines growing, or olive trees. So we

07:30 lived under the olive trees, just out in the open. But the weapons pits were sighted so they were protecting one another. We didn't live in the weapons pits, we only got them and sighted them and had them ready for an attack against the enemy.

So just to clarify the object of a camouflaged weapon pit was to conceal

08:00 **that location from aerial observation?**

Yes.

Once people were parachuting in, the camouflage could be knocked aside and you could spring into action.

That was the whole point about it. They didn't know. When they attacked, and they eventually attacked us, these planes flew in, with parachutists in them, they flew in, they couldn't have been more than three hundred feet up in the air.

08:31 and they jumped onto what they thought was the end of the airport. In fact they jumped into a cone of fire from eleven hundred blokes all shooting at them.

Now how long had you been there before the Germans attacked?

We'd been there for about three weeks, I suppose.

And

09:00 **apart from the weapon pits, what other preparations had you made?**

We didn't make any other preparations at all. There was nothing we could do. We only had to deny that landing strip to airplanes coming in and landing reinforcements there. That was the whole plan. To do that, to

09:30 take the landing strip, the Germans had to land on it and keep the runway clear.

So what was the first that you knew of the German approach?

The first that we knew of the German approach was early in the morning, we saw them fly and they didn't fly up, they flew down the coast and landed at

10:00 Maleme. That was the first we knew. It was about four o' clock in the afternoon.

And could you describe for me the German approach and the defensive action?

First of all you heard the noise, airplanes, jumpers, low flying things. Then you saw hundreds of—

10:30 they dive-bombed what they thought was trenches and everything the Greeks had dug, about five or ten minutes before. And then airplanes came in. They came in from the east, down about three hundred feet, that's a hundred yards. You try to shoot a hundred yards, you don't have to worry. You just shoot.

11:00 Well, they're eleven hundred blokes shooting out rifles, at about three, four shots a minute. There's a fair amount of bullets going up in the air. We brought down six aircraft by small arms fire. Six German aircraft. As they came over,

11:30 get over the airport, they jumped out of their planes. Well, of course, they come down as sitting duck shots. And the German commander who we eventually took prisoner said, "You shouldn't have been shooting my men, they couldn't shoot back at you."

He was trying to quote the Geneva Convention was he?

Yeah.

12:01 This was about four o' clock in the afternoon, and they came in and landed. They landed on high ground to the east of the airport, which is on the landing strip, flat bit, high ground there (UNCLEAR). Well, you're not dead accurate when you jump out an airplane,

12:30 you're falling, you know the wind's going—

So there was a fair amount of swaying as they were coming down? In the parachutes?

Oh yeah. A lot of them were shot coming down.

Approximately how many German casualties would there have been amongst the parachutists?

I think we took four hundred-odd prisoners, and we buried another three hundred-odd.

So three hundred were shot parachuting down?

Or shot in the air.

13:01 The fighting went on for a week. Where they had landed, on the eastern end of the airport, they got themselves into a factory, which was just a bit out of range. At the same time at the western end of the airport they got themselves into a village.

13:31 Well, those were the ones that survived. The rest of them we just cleaned up.

So how many Germans were there and how many Australians at this time?

About equal numbers. There was a German regiment that landed on us, about eleven or twelve hundred. And two battalions.

So how likely was it at this point that the Germans would be successful in taking Crete?

How likely?

14:00 **How likely did it seem to you that the Germans would succeed?**

Never thought at all. See we had no radio communication. That was the point. We were thirty mile from one town, fifty miles from the other. No radio communication at all. The only radio we did have was the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], we could pick up. For a

14:30 short time we were in radio contact with the headquarters on the island. Once we lost that we were done. We just didn't have any contact at all, except the BBC News, which you picked up at night. Which was five days behind anyway.

So why did you lose that radio contact that you initially had?

15:00 Well, we didn't, radio communication was not a battalion affair. It was a headquarters affair, and the sets weren't good enough to keep the contact. They'd run out of batteries and all that sort of thing.

Was it also a question of mountainous terrain?

15:31 Oh, it could have been. Yes. Could have been.

So during the parachute landing and during subsequent events, what was your own role?

Well, the 11th Battalion was on the western end of the airport, the 2/1st Battalion was on the

16:00 eastern end of the airport, and the eastern end of the airport had the high ground, which covered the airport. The companies were spread around, each with its own field of fire. C Company was near the eastern end of the airport, just

16:30 at the foot of the high ground. On the high ground was the A Company. Well, the Germans landed on the high ground. Well they would, if you're coming in to take something, you take the main feature. And that's where all the fighting went on. We did have

17:02 guns. We did have French two hundred millimetre guns, without sights, without gun sights, so they had to put them on top of the hill so that the gunners could look through the barrels and aim them.

17:30 So we had those, and we had, I think, two hundred millimetre Italian guns, which weren't all that hot anyway.

And apart from those, what other weaponry did you have?

Only rifles and machine guns. We had some mortars, but they didn't have base plates. So they weren't much use.

18:00 **So it sounds to me like you were drastically under-equipped in terms of firepower.**

Oh, it certainly was. Certainly was. And even then we still shot down six German troop-carrying planes. With small arms fire.

That's quite an achievement.

Yeah.

It must have been very frustrating to have so little firepower.

Well, that was the whole

18:30 story all through Greece, all through Crete. Nothing could be—nothing could be replaced, from what

we'd lost in Greece.

Now I asked you a moment ago about your own personal involvement in this and you started to answer the question but then talked about the placement of the various companies. Can we talk about what you were actually doing during this action?

Well

19:02 my company was on the eastern end of the airport, just before the hill. There was a wadi running through there. A wadi, a stream. We called it the Wadi Bardia. Well, my company was across the Wadi Bardia,

19:30 and we had the airport down there. We still worried about troops coming in to land by ship. Because we didn't know that the British Navy had got stuck into all the ships that were coming and bringing troops over by ship. We didn't know that. So we still expected

20:00 the Germans to come in and land, on the beach, by the airport, and that was where my company was.

So how did that influence your positioning of weapons?

Well, that was one of the things you were taught to do. You sighted your weapons so they covered the field of fire and gave protection to one another. We all sighted all that.

20:31 The CO came round and looked at it and approved it. We dug all these weapon pits and covered them over. They were there, and when the attack came we just occupied it and fought from there.

Now did the fact that you were expecting a sea invasion at that point, influence your positioning of weapons?

Yes. But the landing strip was pretty well right on the beach.

21:05 We had to deny them getting onto the landing strip. We had to prevent, deny, the landing strip to German aircraft landing on it.

Now were you still a platoon commander at this stage?

No I was a company commander.

Company commander.

21:30 **So what was your responsibility as company commander on this occasion?**

Where you had your company, where you had your field of fire, all your troops allocated to their various jobs. And that was that.

So you would have establish the field of fire. How did you actually work out the field of fire?

Well, it's simple, you see where the bullets are going—

22:05 When you fire something, it goes along, so you put them so that they cross one another. Nobody can—wherever anyone's attacking you they have to come through a line of fire. That's the way it goes.

And that relates to what you were saying slightly earlier.

22:31 **And in terms of your communication with the men, were you able to use any kind of field telephones at all?**

No.

You weren't? How were you communicating?

By runner. The only way, we didn't have any of that stuff. You see, that was all lost in Greece.

Oh, your field telephones had been lost in Greece.

Yeah. We had some telephone lines. We had

23:00 from CO's headquarters to the guns on the eastern end, and that was the only bit of telephone we had, and that was a wire. Nothing to do with company.

So was the CO able to communicate with you?

Only by runner. You know, there wouldn't have been more

23:30 than—the two battalions were spread over I suppose two miles, three miles. Two and a half miles.

And where were you in relation to your company's gun pits.

Where was I?

Yes.

I was in one of them.

You were in one of the pits?

Yeah. When the battle was on, I was in one pit

24:00 directing the fire of a machine-gunner that was in the same pit. That was it. We were in the stage where it was everyone for himself, then. We were only from here to the water away from them.

So this was the first time you'd actually been in a battle?

Oh no, I was in the battle of Bardia.

24:30 **Bardia, yeah.**

Oh, the first time in Greece, yes.

In Greece and Crete. But it was the first time, I presume, that you'd been under sustained fire?

I suppose so. Yeah.

And what was your own personal reaction to that? To the intensity of the fire?

I don't think I had any. You had to do what you had to do. I suppose I was lucky. I got

25:00 a bullet through the bloody hat. Through the brim of my hat. If it had been two inches higher up it would have got me.

That's extremely fortunate. And could you describe the sequence of events over that next two or three days, once the Germans had landed?

Once the Germans had landed. They landed

25:30 in two areas. At the olive oil factory, which is on the eastern end of the air strip, just over the hill. There was an olive oil factory, they got into that. Some of them did. And at the western end, they got into the village of Perivolia and they held up there. And that's where we had them bottled up.

26:00 The ones in the olive oil factory, after about three days, took off and left, went up the coast, because they were just getting bombed out. The ones in Perivolia, they couldn't flush them out, so they were still there

26:30 when the reinforcements came.

The German reinforcements?

Yeah.

At what point did the German reinforcements arrive?

Well, that was after they had taken Maleme, reinforced Maleme. And the island was being evacuated by us. But we didn't know any of that, because we didn't have any communication.

If we can just stay with this two to three days of action,

27:00 **at the airport. Obviously there were no more paratroops coming in, so can you describe—**

Well, we always thought there could be more paratroops coming in. But of course once the Germans got an air strip on the island, they didn't bother about the other two air strips. They just reinforced what they got. But we didn't know that.

27:30 **So what was the nature of that action in the subsequent two to three days? What did that action consist of?**

The nature of the action in the two to three days was to try and clean out the two pockets of Germans. One in the olive oil factory, and one in the village. We cleaned them out of the olive oil factory, but we didn't clean them out of the village. Actually, we got into the village, we were just about to push them out,

28:00 when somebody blew the whistle to retire, or fired a fairy light to retire. So all our mob pulled out of the village. So we were in the village, we were driving them out and somebody, I don't know who it was, but the fairy light to

28:30 retire was fired and all our mob came out of the village. The Germans were still there. Not many of them, only thirty to forty of them in there.

The main question is do you feel you could have taken that village?

Well, actually it wasn't ours. It was the 11th Battalion's. So I don't know the full force of that.

Overall during the Crete campaign, were you fighting under British command

29:00 **or Australian command?**

Australian command. Our battalion commander was Ian Campbell. General Campbell, who subsequently wound up in Korea. And the 11th Battalion was under—I've forgotten his name now. But he buzzed off

29:31 and left his troops.

He ran or he was just safely evacuated?

He evacuated himself and a couple of others officers, and they got back to Egypt. But he left his battalion, he was battalion commander.

I was going to say that can't have left a very good impression.

Well it didn't. Not with us anyway.

30:03 **Now during this two to three days of action, did you have any sort of war-related stress among the soldiers?**

No.

So there was nobody for whom the whole impact of being among gunfire was too much?

No. I must say I never saw any of that. Although there were a couple of blokes in my company who…

30:30 the CO sent back.

Do you know what the circumstances were there?

No. He was of the opinion that if you left them there they would only spread alarm and despondency. So the best thing to do was to get rid of them.

I mean there is the term 'gun happy' which obviously relates to people who have been under fire for too long, certain people.

31:00 **Do you subscribe to the view that such a thing does exist, and is a real complaint?**

No, I don't really. Well, I never felt it myself and I think a lot of people probably wouldn't have felt it anyway. I don't, no.

It was certainly an issue for a lot of soldiers in World War I for instance?

Yes, but that was a different

31:30 matter. That was a different story. That was in trenches where they were copping a lot all day. You know, shells landing on them and that. But not in fire and movement, we were in fire and movement most of the time.

Sorry, you didn't do fire and movement?

No, we were in fire and movement. We didn't do any fixed trench warfare.

32:00 **So from what you're saying it was much more likely that if you were to suffer, if you were to have a pre-disposition to that sort of condition, it would be in fixed trench warfare.**

I think so, yes.

Well, that's interesting. So once you'd been given the order to withdraw from this village, what happened then?

From which village?

In Crete, you felt you could flush the Germans out of this—

Yes, well that was—

32:30 you see, that village was under—there were two battalions there. There was the 2/1st, and 2/11th.. Now the CO of the 2/1st was also the CO of the fighting there. Now the CO of the 2/11th, which were the ones that were involved in the fighting at the western end of the airport. Not the CO—

33:05 the CO of the 2/1st battalion was the one who was involved in getting rid of the Germans out of the olive oil factory. We had two Greek battalions there, but they were useless. They ran away. As soon as the Germans came they took off. But, they'd never been in action before, and half

33:30 of them were young boys.

That can't have set a good example.

Well, they were supposed to attack and never did. Really they weren't—you've got to be careful about

what you say about the Greeks. But these weren't the Cretans. The Cretans were magnificent.

34:00 **Were they?**

And I can recall a monastery near Retimo that the Germans had turned out. They had landed on top of them and turned out the priests. The priests all picked up German weapons, machine-guns, ammunition, and went

34:30 into battle against them. And you saw a Greek priest with a stove pipe hat on and a beard down to here, with a bandolier of ammunition and a gun in his hand, stalking off to shoot the Germans.

Did you see this?

Oh yeah.

You did? Where was that?

Retimo.

You said a Greek priest, was this a Cretan priest?

Cretan priest.

35:01 Well, I mean a Greek—

Greek orthodox?

Yeah.

A Greek orthodox Cretan priest. And in what other ways were the Cretans magnificent?

Well, they fought. They didn't give up. See, civilians aren't supposed to take part in battles. But they took part in battles. And they got—

35:30 the Germans just came in and shot them up.

So there were no Cretan soldiers as such?

No Cretan soldiers. No.

Purely civilians. So they were obviously defending their own territory as well?

Yes.

Now, yes, we got the story as far as the fact that you were given the order to withdraw from the village. I think you felt fairly confident that you could flush the Germans out of there.

Oh, that was

36:00 the 11th Battalion. I don't know the true facts of that. But the facts that I know, that they got into the village to flush the Germans out, and then for some reason or another, a withdrawal fairy light was fired and they withdrew out of the village. But that's you know, we got rid of the Germans in the other—that's the only reason

36:30 why they didn't get rid of the Germans from Perivolia.

So at the end of this two or three days, what happened to your particular unit?

What happened? Well, when we found out that we'd lost the island, and we found out also that the Germans were about to attack us with

37:00 tanks, which we had no anti-tank guns or anything like that, the CO just decided that it was the time to give up. There was no point in fighting anymore. We'd done our job. The island was evacuated. There was no point in us staying there anymore. There was no point in us taking to the hills, because we had no food. We'd done our rations the day before, and

37:30 we had a half a day's ammunition. We didn't have nothing. If we had gone into the hills, we would have involved the locals in a whole lot of fighting. So he decided to retire.

So after that decision to retire, what happened?

He went down with a white flag, and he surrendered. Surrendered the unit.

38:00 And then we all got orders to come down onto the landing strip, we got down onto the landing strip and we were marched off. Marched off to—we were marched off right back to Maleme, where we were put on aircraft, well the officers were put on an aircraft, and flown to Greece.

Surely there would have been some possibility of your being evacuated?

38:31 No possibility at all. See, Crete's a long island like this. The boats to come round, would have to come round each end of the island, and Retimo's in the middle. To come round, pick up troops and get back

around, in darkness, was not a possibility. They would have been attacked by aircraft and sunk. We lost

39:00 quite a number of boats sunk by German aircraft. So no way would it—

Did you know at that time that Crete was being evacuated elsewhere?

No. I didn't. We didn't know until we heard it on the BBC.

Tape 5

00:36 **Now, Bill, can you tell me a bit more about the decision to surrender? I believe this decision was made by your CO Ian Campbell?**

The decision at Retimo? Yes.

Did you ever have an opportunity to discuss with Ian Campbell why he'd made that decision?

Well he told us there was no point in fighting on. The people that would have

01:00 suffered would have been the Cretans, because they would have had to and there were over a thousand of us. A thousand of you take to the hills, no way in the world could the Cretans have supported them.

So did he make this as a general address to the troops?

No. I think he let it be known, yes. But not as a general address.

So when you say he told us, by what means?

01:30 He got a runner to say "Come down onto the landing strip. I'm going to surrender." And that's what we did.

So were you there for the surrender itself?

Not when he actually said it, no.

Now, do you consider Campbell's decision to surrender was the right decision?

Oh certainly. Certainly. I mean,

02:00 we'd done the job. The job he was sent out to do, we'd done it. We defended the airport, we denied the airport to the enemy. There was no point in us going on. No point.

So who do you think should shoulder the ultimate responsibility for what happened in Greece and Crete?

Without going into it very thoroughly, the people that were in

02:30 fighting at the Maleme airport, which was eventually lost, was the ones who—where the downfall started. Don't ask me who.

Did you hear very much about what had happened at Maleme airport?

Not very much, no. The Maoris were there. They were on one end of the airport

03:00 and the German paratroops were on the other end of the airport. And the Germans then said "Bring in the planes." And they brought the airplanes in with the mountain troops on board. And they crash landed eighty planes on the airport, and reinforced the area. There was eighty planes crashed

03:30 on, actually crashed on the airport. German planes. They landed their reinforcements that way.

So these were deliberate crash landings?

Oh yes. Deliberate crash landings.

Why did they have to be crash landed?

Because they didn't have the full airport, you see. The New Zealanders were on one end and the Germans were on the other end. And they just had to come in and land

04:00 and they didn't—when I say crash landed, they just didn't land and take off again. The airplanes were still there when we were evacuated. We were evacuated from there. So we saw them all, smashed. They couldn't have taken off.

So what were your feelings towards the ultimate British commanders after the chaos

04:30 **of Greece and Crete?**

Well, we didn't have anything to do with them. The British command, they brought in two lots of reinforcements and landed, but they were too late.

Now other people have said that Greece and Crete were futile campaigns. Before you embarked on those campaigns, would you have agreed with them?

Futile for

05:00 whom? The Germans had to take—it was part of German strategy. One army was coming through Egypt to get the Canal, and the other one was going through Greece, Crete, Turkey and down that way, so the two would have joined up and taken the Canal. That was the

05:31 final thing. The defeat of the parachute troops in Crete, they were never used again as a parachute regiment. They were used again as ordinary fighting troops. But they couldn't take Cyprus, they couldn't take Syria. They couldn't

06:00 land in those places anymore. And that was the only way they could get around, by air. Because the Brits still had command of the sea.

Was there any point, prior to the surrender, where you felt that what happened in both Greece and Crete was an inevitable failure for the Allies?

No, never. Never occurred to us. It was only worked out that way afterwards, of course. But,

06:30 we knew that we had to deny Greece and Crete to the German Air Force. We knew that.

So you didn't go in there feeling it was a time-wasting exercise?

Oh no. No.

You were fairly confident?

We knew what we were doing, yes. We knew what the long term effects would have been,

07:00 yes.

Now what was your own reaction to news of the surrender?

My own reaction. Well, probably relief, really, that we weren't fighting anymore.

And what did you expect would happen once you went into German captivity?

I never really knew, not at the time. Not

07:30 till after, until we realised what we were being—I suppose it really dawned on us when we were taken back to Greece. That was the end of it.

So while you were fighting the Germans, what was your opinion of the Germans as an enemy?

The Germans as fighters? Oh, I don't think they were anywhere near as good as the Australians.

08:00 They had to be told what to do all the time. Where the Australian soldier could make up his own mind what had to be done, if they got in a tight corner. The Australian soldier was a far better soldier than the German soldier.

How did you form that opinion?

Oh, just by my own observation of it.

08:30 **Were there any particular events that led to that observation?**

I don't think so. I just think that man for man the Australians were better than the Germans. Hand-to-hand fighting, they were better than the Germans.

Were there any opportunities to see the Germans in action, and to see how reliant they were on command?

No, not actually see

09:00 them being, not actually see them in actual fighting. A German plane was shot down. A German reconnaissance plane came and flew over. And it landed near

09:30 the factory, the olive oil factory. And we got the bloke. We got the German officer that was in it. He came up and came through my headquarters, and I spoke with him. And he looked around and saw all the trenches that we dug, all the weapon pits.

10:00 And he said to me, "Our Stukas never showed these up." So he didn't know. I think that's where we were better than them. I think the Australian soldier used his initiative, whereas the German soldier had to wait to be led. I think that's the difference between the two.

That's an interesting summing up.

Yeah.

10:31 **Now once the surrender had taken place, what happened then?**

Well, we were eventually all marched into Retimo, and then we stayed the night in a compound there, and then the next morning we set off and marched

11:00 to Maleme. Which was forty-five miles, or something, and that took us two days.

And what did you see when you reached Maleme?

We saw a lot of German planes crashed up on the airport. And then we were there for about, I suppose, a week. Then the officers were put in the planes and flown to Athens.

11:31 **And this included yourself of course? You were included amongst the officers flown to Athens?**

Yes.

So what do you recall of that air trip?

Oh, nothing very much. There might have been twenty of us in the plane, and three guards standing there with Tommy guns. You didn't want to take the plane over, you wouldn't have existed.

12:00 **And once you arrived at Athens—**

Once we arrived at Athens, we were put on a train and taken up to Salonika. And there was a collection camp at Salonika, for all prisoners of war.

Can you give us a description of that camp?

The camp was Greek army barrack

12:30 buildings, which had been surrounded by barbed wire, and they had turned it into a holding camp. Some of us camped in the buildings, and others camped out under the trees because the buildings were full of bed bugs. And they crawled all over you at night. You lay on the floor, they crawled all over you. I

13:00 put a balaclava over my face to stop them biting my face, and gloves on my hands to stop them biting. If they got too bad, you went and slept outside under the trees, but they were still within the compound. It was a pretty ropey old place. And you never got a bath. If you wanted to have a bath, if you felt you were dirty,

13:30 you had to tell the Germans you had lice, and then they took you away and deloused you. And that involved having a hot shower and being rubbed down with soap, lye, very sharp soap.

Oh, carbolic soap?

Yeah. Carbolic soap. But that's the way you got a shower. And we were there for maybe three weeks,

14:00 four weeks. And then we were all moved up to Germany. And we went to Germany by rail. Cattle trucks. When you got in a cattle truck, forty men or eight horses, that was printed on the side of the cattle truck. Well, we got in one that had had eight horses in it, and it was full of poop.

14:31 So we had to clean that out as best we could. And then you were—of course, the cattle trucks only had a little window like that on each end of the truck. So it was pretty ropey, that. We were in that for eight days and seven nights.

Were they feeding you at all?

They gave

15:00 us rations to start off with. Which was biscuits and salt fish. All the salt fish do was make you thirsty, so we chucked that away. And on the way we got two other feeds. One in Yugoslavia, and

15:30 one, another one up in Germany. Soup, two dishes of soup we got.

It sounds like they were barely keeping you alive at this point?

Well, we were hungry. Put it that way.

Now the people that you were travelling with, you had flown to Athens with a group of officers? Were you still with the same group of officers?

Yes. See, the Germans kept the officers away from the men. They kept them

16:00 separately. When we moved up to Germany in this train, it was all officers only, in the train. No other troops.

Why were the officers kept away from the men?

Well the Germans reckoned they'd only lead them into trouble. But that was the German Army mentality. The officers did everything—the officers told, and the troops obeyed. The Australian Army was the other way around. The

16:30 officers generally did what the troops wanted them to do.

Seriously? Is that—

Well, as I said, the Australians used their initiative more than the Germans. The German troops never had any initiative.

Now, so what happened to the other men? What happened to the other ranks?

Oh, the other ranks followed up.

17:01 They were in the camp in Salonika, but they were eventually taken up in to Germany as well. But they didn't go to the same camps. The officers were put in one camp, and the men in the other.

Now just to return to Salonika, were you locked up at night?

Well, we were in a compound.

17:30 They weren't locked up. But the compound was—had German guards patrolling in it. Some fellows tried to get away, climbed over the fence. The Germans just shot them, and left them there. I can remember one fellow climbed up the fence and got to the top of the fence and was shot and he fell back into the

18:00 wire, head down, legs up, and he was left there. And then the next day the whole camp was paraded to go and watch what happened to him. Another fellow was shot running across the parade ground, trying to get away from them. No, you didn't try. There was no point in trying.

So you would have seen these events?

Yes, I saw them.

Did you see the man being shot running?

No, I didn't see him shot. I heard the shooting,

18:30 but I saw the bodies the next day. The Germans paraded you around to see the bodies.

What was the attitude of the Germans when they did this?

Well, the Germans were the back-line troops. They weren't anything like the mountain troops or the Flieger force, the air force.

19:00 They were just animals.

Are you saying the guards were animals? The German guards?

Yes, the German guards. The back-line guards. The lines of communication. They were the soldiers in the lines of communication. They weren't soldiers at all, they were just bullies.

In what way were they bullies?

Well, they'd scream at you and shout at you, and threaten you, all that sort of thing.

19:30 **When this kind of thing happened, how did you conduct yourself? How would you respond?**

As near as possible you made a fuss, but you couldn't make too much of a fuss. Because they'd only turn on you. On the way up to—in the train going up to Salonika, we pulled up somewhere to

20:00 get water, for the train to get water. And a lot of the local Greek women came out with food, and started passing it into the trucks. And the Germans chased them away. And one woman wouldn't go, and a German rushed over and fired his pistol over her head, and pushed her arse over head, and all the fellows screamed and

20:30 yelled and abused the German, one thing or another. The Germans just closed up the cattle doors up and we stayed shut up until we got to Salonika. That sort of thing. The lines of communication troops, they were bullies.

So you said they shut the train doors up, had the doors been open until that time had they?

They had them open to let the air in.

21:01 But not fully open, just enough to—they pushed us into the trucks and there we stayed.

It must have been pretty stifling.

Well, it wasn't very nice. You wanted to have a leak, you had to do it into your mess tin and pour it out

the window.

What about other bodily functions?

Well, you did the same with the mess tin. Not

21:30 very nice.

No. You were still travelling with a group of officers at this time?

Yeah.

How could you best describe the feeling among the group at this point in time?

Oh, I think everybody was—everybody was disappointed. Downhearted. It

22:00 took a long while to get over that. There were some fellows you got on well with, and some you didn't. That's the way it went.

So from what you're saying morale at this point was fairly low?

Very low, and it remained low until we met up with the British officers

22:30 that had been taken prisoner at the evacuation, when the British force evacuated France. So that was a year before. So they'd been prisoners for a year, and they knew the ropes and they knew how to treat the Germans, and how to respond, and we quickly learnt from them how to respond. But up till we'd seen

23:00 that, we were, sort of cowered and beaten.

And at what point did you meet up with these British soldiers?

When we got to—well, we were taken to Lubeck. We went from Salonika to Lubeck, that's right across Europe, by train, that's what took seven days.

23:30 Then we were in Lubeck camp for about six months, then the Germans decided they were going to bring all the prisoners into one camp. And they moved us from Lubeck to a place called Marburg [Warburg], near Kassel. And there were five thousand officers in that camp. A thousand-odd

24:00 airmen, and the rest were Brits. And the people that were taken prisoner in Greece. That's when we met up with the British officers that had been taken prisoner when they evacuated France. Mostly all 51st Division blokes.

Now you said, up until that point you'd been

24:30 **cowered and beaten—**

Well, that's in inverted commas. But, you know, we weren't game to do anything, until we really met up with the Brits, and they'd been there for twelve months and worked out how to handle the Germans. We didn't know. And this was after we'd been prisoners of war, I suppose, for about six months.

25:02 **So, in what way did the British advise you to handle the Germans?**

Well, they didn't advise us, we just copied them. They worked out to handle the Germans. They handled them as if they were man to man. Officer to officer.

25:32 The Germans respected you as an officer, because that was their—their leaders were all officers.

So it was basically you were following the British by example, really. You would see how they—

Well, yes. They worked out to handle them, and we just copied them.

26:00 We just did what they did.

Were there any specific types of occasions you're talking about here?

What do you mean, types?

Well, are we talking about ordinary day-to-day conversation?

Well, yes.

So it was the way in which the British spoke to the Germans, and expected, obviously, the Germans to speak back to them.

The Germans expected you to act as an officer. And you expected the Germans to act as

26:30 an officer. And if there was any mishandling by the troops, the senior British officer could always go and complain to the senior German officer in the camp.

Now you described the German guards in Salonika as animals. Did the quality of German improve as you headed into Germany itself?

Well the ones that were there,

27:00 as I said, were the lines of communication troops. They weren't fighting troops. In fact, they were bullies.

What sort of thing were they bullying the Australians about?

Well, they'd shout and scream at you, and tell you to do this, that and the other thing. And wouldn't listen to what you had to say, or anything like that. They were just the big boy with a

27:31 big stick in his hand beating the little boy without any stick.

Were there ever any beatings?

Not that I know of. Well, see, they had the guns. You didn't argue with them. If they started waving their guns at you, you did what they said, otherwise they'd shoot you.

But obviously as you got into Germany there must have been more give and take from the Germans, because if

28:00 **the other Germans had been used to bullying you, why was it suddenly they were no longer being bullies?**

Well, I think you put this down to the fact that the British and the Germans had signed a convention for the treatment of prisoners of war. The Swiss government—first of all the American government, and

28:30 then when the Americans came into the war, or the Swiss government, used to come and inspect you in the camps. And if there were any things that a British officer reckoned was not being in accordance with the Geneva Convention, he reported it to the Swiss, and the Swiss took it up with the Germans. So that was the way it was supposed to work. But, of course,

29:00 Russia hadn't signed the Geneva Convention. So all the Russian troops, they got nothing. And all the German troops that the Russians took got nothing as well. The British, Italians, French and the Australians all signed the Geneva Convention, and more or less,

29:30 when you got back into the camps that, more of less, became the rules under which you worked. If you did something that the Germans said was outside the Convention, well they punished you.

And what would that punishment take the form of?

They'd put you in jail. If you tried to escape—I tried to escape once, and got ten days solitary confinement for it.

30:00 **How did you try and escape?**

Out of a tunnel.

I think we'll come to that story in a little while, actually. When we go to look at the tunnel. Now you must have had thoughts of your wife at this time?

I suppose I did.

Did you wonder where she was and what she was doing?

No, I didn't wonder. She was all right.

30:30 **You knew that she'd be safe?**

Well, what would she have done? She was stuck down in Egypt with a lot of randy old officers—she was open go.

Open go? What do you mean by that?

Well, anyone that—she, she was there, she was a British subject with a lot of officers around, took her out to dinner, take her out, all that sort of business.

31:03 You had to accept that.

When you say randy officers, are you implying that you thought that she might have something more–

I'm not saying that.

You're not saying that?

No.

It's just you twigged me with the word "randy", and I thought, well—

Well, they were all randy, they didn't, I mean well, that's the way it goes.

31:33 I'm not saying that this happened with Jean.

No.

But just imagine, what happens. If you've got a hundred blokes there and three women. They're all interested in talking to women.

Well, the women are at least popular, one would imagine, for social occasions at the very least.

Yes, that's right.

32:03 Well, I had to put two and two together and you've got to accept that. I was there four years, so—

Four years away from your wife, you mean?

Well, five years.

By the time the war ended. Now at what point did you become official POWs?

When we got to Lubeck,

32:30 we were officially given a POW number. My number was XC4015, and that was my number. And then I was reported to the Swiss, or Americans I think it was in those days, as a prisoner of war. Officially I

33:00 was just listed as missing in action.

Now when you got to Lubeck, what were your first impressions of that camp?

That was a camp that was formally a German battalion barracks, and they put a fence around it. It was barrack buildings, and

33:31 a fence around it. And the Germans officers' mess was outside the fence. And the German officers' quarters were outside the fence.

So what were the conditions like there?

Well, Lubeck's the north of Germany, and it was—we got there, I suppose—

34:00 we weren't there in the winter time so it wasn't too bad. Except it was in bombing range of London. They used to bomb the city.

You mean the British, the RAF [Royal Air Force] were bombing the city?

The RAF bombed Lubeck. It's a port, of course. One day a bomb dropped in the camp, and it blew up the German officers' mess. So they put all the orderlies on to cleaning up the German

34:30 officers' mess and the orderlies found the German officers' grog, in the basement. They got stuck into it.

These were German orderlies or POW orderlies?

No, these were POW orderlies.

A great time was had by all.

Then we used to be taken for a bath once a week. You got a hot bath, a hot shower. And as we

35:00 went past the hot shower, into the shower room, there were a pile of briquettes there. Coal briquettes. We used to try and pinch one of those to take it back to the room to cook with. Well, I pinched one one day, and a German took a pot shot at me. It went through the front of my coat here. I dropped the briquette pretty quick, rushed

35:30 inside and got under the shower before he could grab me. I didn't pinch any more briquettes after that.

I can imagine. That was a pretty radical move. By the sounds of it he was trying to kill you.

He was, but he had glasses. And the reason why he missed me was that he had glasses. Obviously he wasn't a class one

36:00 soldier, he might have been three or something.

Which is the one of the reasons he was at the camp no doubt. And what about day-to-day living conditions there. Apart from the showers, what was the food like for instance?

Oh the food was pretty crook.

What did it consist of?

We used to see the German rations, part of the German rations was, what do you call it? you put it on

36:30 the bread?

Dripping?

No.

Treacle?

Yeah, beef, that sort of stuff. But we used to see the German cook walking down the town with it under his arm, and the next day we'd get fat, instead of margarine. That went on.

Oh, in other words you were supposed to have margarine on the bread?

Yes. So that went on.

So you suspected there was a bit of a black market

37:00 **going on there?**

Oh, obviously. He was taking it down town and flogging it off down there, and we were getting—instead of getting the margarine, we got the fat that he should have been using for cooking.

So apart from bread and fat, or bread and occasionally margarine, what else was on the diet?

Well, soup was what you got. You got a bowl of soup a day. And five

37:30 slices of bread. And a bit of margarine to put on it. It was German black bread. And that was the ration for the day.

Were people losing weight over this?

Yeah. My weight went down eventually. I was thirteen and a half stone when I was taken prisoner, when I was released I was down to nine, just under nine.

38:00 You thinned out a bit.

And did such a meagre diet predispose people to illnesses?

Well, that's right. That's where I got ill, the first time I got jaundice. With jaundice, I don't know whether you've ever had it, but you can't, well they couldn't, and

38:30 people who have jaundice can't eat fat, of any kind. Anyway, quite a number of us got jaundice. And you go yellow, there's no doubt about that.

And how had you been there before you got jaundice?

Well, I got jaundice towards the end of the time we were there, about—and when I was moved, and we were moved to the other camp, at

39:00 Marburg, well I had jaundice then, and I was moved as a fellow who was sick, with other people. And when we got to the new camp at Marburg [Warburg] we were put straight into a hospital there. And I suppose that was when we joined up with the Brits for the first time.

Tape 6

00:34 **Now what were your day-to-day activities at Lubeck?**

Day to day activities were keeping out of trouble. Eat what meals you had to, and walk around the camp. That was at Lubeck, but we weren't there for very long.

For how long were you at Lubeck?

About six months, I'd say.

And what months are we looking at

01:00 **for that duration of time?**

Well, Greece was—Retimo was April, so I'd say we moved out of Lubeck before the winter.

Just as well if it was beside the Baltic Sea.

I think Lubeck was a lot warmer than Marburg. Marburg was in the middle of the country in open ground.

01:31 **Were you expected to do any work at all?**

Officers didn't have to work. That was part of the Convention, the Geneva Convention. The officers didn't have to work, the other ranks had to work.

Was boredom a factor here?

Pardon.

It must have been a fairly boring existence?

Boredom's a self-inflicted wound I reckon.

02:00 You've got to do something to stop yourself being bored.

Personally, I'm inclined to agree with you there. But among your fellow prisoners was boredom ever a factor?

I suppose everybody said they were bored, but they all found something to do. It wasn't—there was always altruistic work to do in the camp. Run the storehouse,

02:30 run everything, collect the washing, or do all those sort of jobs.

Did you get involved in those sorts of activities?

No. I didn't have to worry.

So at Lubeck was it a mixture of officers and other ranks?

No, just officers.

Just officers, and how many of you were there at this point?

About six hundred, I'd say. If I remember rightly.

Now you mentioned that morale,

03:00 **after the surrender, was fairly low. Was morale starting to improve at this point?**

No, I don't think morale started to improve until we met up with the Brits, then it did. Because they showed us something we hadn't yet worked out for ourselves.

So if you talked among yourselves at Salonika and Lubeck, what kind of issues would you discuss?

03:30 Women.

When you say you discussed women, what—

No, we organised lectures, and people in the camp, particularly the Australians were from all walks of life, and they all had lectures about what they did.

04:01 We had a fellow who was an architect. He gave talks on architecture, and all that sort of thing. And history teachers, and people talked about what they did in their civil life. Most of—I'd say a large proportion of the officers weren't regular army. They

04:30 were like me, militia.

So how often were these lectures being held?

Oh, we'd only have two or three a week. This was in Lubeck.

I imagine that would have helped.

Oh yes, to pass the time. To give you something to do. Otherwise, you just went barmy with

05:00 boredom. People got out and did.

Can you remember any of your fellow officers who were despondent and needing some bucking up from pep talks or anything like that?

I don't think so. Not then.

Not then? What about later?

Not in Lubeck. Later.

05:32 No, I don't think there were, what we called "wire happy."

What did "wire happy" mean?

"Wire happy" meant you wanted to kill yourself. Got sick and tired of being a prisoner of war and tried to get away from it.

You've mentioned the couple of escape attempts

06:00 **at Salonika? Would the escape attempts there have been due to this wire happiness?**

Oh, it was different there, because these fellows weren't officers in Salonika, they were other ranks. And they tried to get away. They'd get away and mix with the local population, and the

06:30 local population being anti-German would look after them and try to get them back to Turkey, and that way back to Egypt.

So while you were at Salonika, were there any successful attempts?

Not that I can remember now. The troops, the other ranks, were taking work, worked in

07:00 the town. They were taken down to work in the town. The officers didn't have to work.

And you've used the term "wire happy." To what extent did you—

"Wire happy" was what—you become down and out, finished.

Having used this expression, did you encounter anyone who was "wire happy" in the camps?

07:33 Yes, a couple. But, they'd be worked on. And if they got too bad they'd get moved somewhere else.

Can you tell us a bit more about these couple of people?

No I can't tell you much. They were just fed-up with being bored.

08:00 That you didn't want to live anymore. That's what the term "wire happy" means.

And what did they want to do to end it?

Oh, jump the fence, or take the risk. They hadn't—continued to be—to come to grips with being a prisoner of war.

What were the symptoms of someone that was "wire happy"?

08:30 They just do silly things. Like try and escape in open air, that sort of thing.

These couple of men you referred to as being "wire happy," were they caught in the act of trying to escape?

I don't know. It's just a term "wire happy." If you were "wire happy", you were

09:00 fed-up with being inside a wire fence.

Now you said that these people would be worked on, in what way would they be worked on?

I said what?

You said that, obviously the other officers would talk to these men who were "wire happy," what would they say to them? How would they try to bring them back from being in the state of "wire happy?"

Just talk to them. Get them occupied in something else.

09:34 You're giving it a lot more importance than I give it, the term.

It may seem that way. I'm just trying to clarify what went on. I suppose we're looking at the complete prisoner experience.

They just get fed-up with doing what they're doing and try to do something else.

You said they would be moved. Where else could they be moved?

10:00 Moved somewhere else in the camp, or moved to another camp.

And clearly this would need to be done in liaison with the Germans.

Or they were taken to a hospital first, they didn't necessarily come back. And those that escaped and got caught generally didn't come back to the camp they escaped from. They were taken to another camp. For the simple reason that the Germans

10:30 didn't want them to broadcast what they'd found out when they were outside the camp. They didn't want that put around the camp itself.

Now, just to go back to the subject of women. In what kind of terms were women discussed?

Oh, Rebecca will you leave the room? No.

11:02 Oh, I just think that you just talk about women. If you don't talk to them, you talk about them.

Even in just very general terms, how would you talk about women? In what kinds of ways?

Let me ask you something. How would you talk about a woman? And that's the answer.

It depends

11:30 **on my memories of that particular woman, or women. And what the context was. I could be talking about them socially, or I could be talking about them sexually. It could be the full spectrum.**

Well, I would say both. But that's only something. That wasn't the only thing you talked about.

So were you as a prisoner able to get letters in and out

12:00 **of the prison? Were letters possible?**

You got one letter a month. You were able to write on the prescribed form. And I think two postcards a month, you were allowed to write on a prescribed form. And that was handed over to the Germans then, for censoring.

12:31 And the Germans would censor them if they thought there was anything in them. Then they would hand them over to the protecting power, and eventually got home.

So that was one letter a month that you could receive.

One letter a month that you could send.

One that you could send. What about receiving mail?

Well, you could receive as much as you like.

13:01 Whatever was sent to you. You generally got that. But coming from Australia, it was a fair way away. By the time you got it, it was four months old.

Were you receiving any letters from Jean at this point?

Some. But it was more difficult to come from Egypt than it was to come from Australia.

And what did she tell you of her news at that time?

Oh golly.

13:31 Inane things. What the family did, what this did, and who's up with who. That sort of stuff.

Were you receiving any letters from Australia?

I'd get a letter from my mother. My mother used to write to me. That would be about all.

So what had the family been told of your going into captivity?

Well, they hadn't been told anything.

14:00 I was, first of all, listed as missing in action. And it wasn't until six months later, that we were officially reported prisoners of war, and then that eventually got back to them. So I would say it was nine months before they were told, officially, that I was a prisoner of war.

That must have been a very stressful time for the people at home?

It must have been for them, yeah.

And when did Jean discover it?

14:30 **Did she discover it about the same time as the people back home?**

She knew more about it than most. A) Because Jiker was there, and B) her father was there. So she knew more about it.

So she would have had better lines of communication through your brother and through her father?

Yeah.

Right.

15:03 **Now, I think we've described the camp at Lubeck. This was the camp that had been the former barracks?**

Yes.

Yes. We did discuss that with the wire around the outside. Now, how were the men actually

organised at the camp, at Lubeck?

You were just organised in a room. The room

15:30 probably held ten, twelve. Double decker bunks, one above the other. Generally you were in there with your friends. Sometimes they'd be from your own unit, and sometimes they'd be from other units. But that was just a room where you slept.

I've gathered that

16:00 **you were organised into groups of one hundred as well. Is that correct? Just going from what comes through from the research material.**

Oh yeah, they were. When we got to Marburg, there were five thousand-odd prisoners. They were organised on a battalion basis. On the basis of

16:30 buildings. And the number of buildings there were, they became companies of them. You had a senior officer in each room, and a senior officer for the building. That was just for purposes of communication, really. More than anything

17:00 else.

So did the POWs have their own administration?

Yeah. How do you mean administration?

In terms of record keeping of who was where, and who might have been on what work party, etc. I've heard that the prisoners under Japanese hands were allowed to administer themselves in terms of keeping records.

Yeah, I suppose that happened. But, there was never any need for it.

17:31 Never any need for it. Except for, perhaps, when you went to have a shower. Or if there were two sessions of meal breaks, you had one session, then the other session. That was all done by—yeah, within the camp itself.

That was done by a rostering basis, was it?

No.

18:02 The senior officers in the camps were the ones that were still senior, and you did what was decided. The senior British officer in the camp, he was the man who ultimately decided everything.

So are there any other

18:30 **things about Lubeck that spring out that we haven't covered so far in the interview?**

When I got to—when I had the jaundice, when I got the Marburg, we were put into the hospital in Marburg, in the Marburg camp. It was a big camp. A German officer used to come into the hospital every day, and walk in. "Heil Hitler."

19:00 Put his bag on the table like this. "Heil Hitler." And go around and see everybody. And this was when I had the jaundice, he was trying to find out what caused that. Obviously. So one day he came in, and he had his bag in one hand and a box in the other. And he said "This is the last time I am coming to see you." We said "Good

19:30 luck to you." "Heil Hitler." He said "I am going to take some blood samples." So he opened his box, and he gets this syringe and pulls it out, walks over, and I think he's coming to pick me. But he didn't, he picked the bloke next door. And he draws the, fills the syringe up with blood. Goes back, opens up the box,

20:00 pulls out a guinea pig, sticks the blood straight into the guinea pig, the guinea pig squeals, he puts it back in the box, puts his things away, "Heil Hitler." And that's the last we ever saw of him. We don't know what happened to the guinea pig. We don't know what happened to him. We think he must have ended up on the Russian front. He was a scar face. He was a real German. He had a dueling scar across his face. And we used to call him Doctor Scarface.

20:31 **That's fantastic. That sounds like Eric Von Strohiem in any number of post-war melodramas. That's incredible. How basic. Talk about basic medicine.**

Well they didn't have much medicine. Of course, we had doctors as well. And when we got to Eichstatt, the German doctors never came near us as well. We'd get

21:00 some medicine from them, and there we were. The Swiss protecting powers would also have doctors that came, too.

So when had you first developed the jaundice?

When I got to Lubeck.

And did this, on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis, was this setting you back very much?

I think it did. I

21:30 wasn't—have you ever had jaundice?

No I haven't.

It's not very nice.

What were the symptoms?

You go yellow. And your urine goes yellow. And you go yellow. And you can't eat anything that's fat. That's the symptoms that I had. Everybody had that.

Everybody had that?

The ones that were sick with it,

22:00 that got it. The ones that got it, not everybody got it. But the ones that got it in Lubeck, where we first got it, where I first got it, we were all moved in mass to Marburg and put into hospital there.

Was that the reason for you being moved to Marburg?

No, the whole camp at Lubeck was closed. The Germans had so many prisoners of war, it was cheaper for them

22:30 to bring them all into one holding spot. We were the first big camp they had. For officers.

Was there such a thing as going into remission with jaundice?

I don't think so. You just got over it. I don't remember how I got over it. I think it just passed out.

Basically passed out of your system.

23:00 Yeah.

So arriving at Marburg, how did you actually travel there?

By train. By train, and then we got off at Kassel, which was two or three miles away from the Marburg prison. Marburg prison was a German barracks that had been built, and they put a fence around it.

23:30 **So it was similar to Lubeck in that regard, was it?**

Yeah.

Yet another barracks?

Except that it was very damn cold. Bloody cold.

Whereabouts in Germany was it located?

The Kassel? It's in the middle of Germany. A wide open plain, and cold.

What month did you arrive there?

24:01 We arrived about November. November, December.

Which is really moving into—

It was so cold there, I tell you. These barracks had no electricity. So all the lamps you had were carbide lamps. You had—

24:30 the windows were single windows, so ice this thick built up inside the window. Condensation and the cold outside. And that wasn't very pleasant. And you got one blanket, which wasn't wool, to put over you.

25:03 The Brits that had been there for twelve months had all these things sent out to them from England, you see. Now England to Germany was only a couple of hundred miles. A lot of stuff came out quickly. But from Australia to Germany, took a lot longer to come.

So civilians back home were quite entitled to send the prisoners some clothes?

Yeah.

I hadn't heard about that.

25:32 Particularly—you were supposed to get one parcel a week from the Red Cross. Now that had to come—you either got it from England or Australia or from America or from Canada. That was sent in under the

terms of the Geneva Convention.

And what was in that parcel?

Tucker.

26:00 Food. Bully beef, spam, soap, coffee, tea, biscuits. Actually a parcel, in theory, was one meal a day, for a week. That was a week's parcel.

You say in theory. Did that always work out in practise?

That was what was

26:30 there. If you ate it all in one day, then you had nothing for the rest of the week. That's what I mean.

Fair enough.

You got one meal a day out of it. The contents of the parcel provided you with seven meals.

So did that regular supply of parcels ever dry up?

Oh, of course.

It did. So

27:00 **how often would you not receive it?**

Well we didn't receive any while we were at Lubeck, we didn't get any. When we got to Marburg, the Brits had been there, they all had parcels, so that's when we started to get them. Towards the end of the war, they were cut down again, because of the difficulty of getting

27:30 the parcels in. The Germans didn't bust themselves to move food around Germany for the sake of a few prisoners of war.

So when you arrived at Marburg, it seemed, particularly in this very cold winter, that the Brits were a bit better provided for?

Oh yes. And they shared it all with us.

They did. And did that include a supply of blankets and other ways of keeping warm?

Well, eventually I got

28:00 from England, a sleeping bag sent to me. And I think other people did the same, too.

And until then what did you sleep under?

You slept on a pallia full of straw. And went to bed with more clothes on than you wore during the day. To keep warm.

Were people developing conditions like

28:30 **pneumonia through this?**

I don't think so.

That's remarkable.

Each room had its own stove. Which you got coal to put in. Of course you didn't get enough coal anyway. Or briquettes to burn. So around the

29:00 stove the temperature would be five to ten degrees above freezing point. At the far end of the room it would be below freezing point. You learnt to live with that.

So once you got to Marburg, and met up with the British officers, morale started to improve I gather?

Yeah.

How long did morale

29:30 **take to restore itself?**

We were there for, I think, eighteen months in Marburg. And things started to get better all the time then.

And what sort activities, apart from seeing the positive example of the British interaction with the Germans, what sort of activities were—

In the camp?

Yes.

30:00 Well, a lot of sport went on. A lot of walking, of course. You walked, maybe, around the camp thirty times a day. Fifteen after the morning count, and fifteen after the evening count. And that sort of thing. Sport. Plenty of sport.

What sort of sport?

Football. Cricket. There was the story this fellow said to me one time,

30:30 playing cricket, he said "Did you see what that man did?" I was thinking 'No. What did he do?' I'd been watching the match and I couldn't see anything wrong with it. "Oh," he said. "He actually opened the batting in a kilt!" That was a sort of story that went around.

31:00 **Was he serious?**

Of course he was serious. He actually opened the batting in a kilt. He was one of the 51st Division blokes that were, a lot of them were there. After the French withdrawal. They were mainly 51st Division officers.

And the man in the kilt was one of the—?

He was one of the Scottish regiment.

How much of this could you do in the extremely cold conditions?

Well,

31:32 in the cold conditions we had skating. You could skate. So that was one way to keep warm. That's about all.

Skating. Did you make any attempt to play football or cricket in the snow?

No, not in the snow. We didn't play that in—

What about concerts and other forms of entertainment?

Oh, you had

32:00 that. You had concert parties. You suddenly bring five thousand people together, and they're not all idiots. They're officers, so there's some degree of innovation around the place, and that's all busting to come out. All the things that happen, these things

32:30 just go on. You have a play, for example. Act in a play. Some of the actors were actual actors in real life. And then others were, of course, writers. Oh yes, plenty

33:00 of activities going on. And then there was all the activity of running the camp, like there was quite a lot of that, that has to be done. In fact, in Marburg, we had British cooks in the army. They still had to have the rations handed in. But the actual day to day running of the camp,

33:30 there was a fair bit of work in that.

What sort of work was involved in running the camp?

Well, for example, we were talking about posting. Someone has to come and collect all the letters. Someone has to hand all the letters out. Someone has to make sure things happen at various times. If it's a football match, you've got to arrange the football match. If you're playing bridge, you've got to

34:00 arrange bridge. You've got to do all that sort of stuff. There were always plenty of things going on. And of course, you say, well was anyone involved in escaping, then if you were digging a tunnel you had to be amongst the diggers, or you had to watch for the German—

34:30 scout out for when the Germans are coming in. Let the mob down below know what was going on. There was always plenty of work to do.

Presumably there would be more lectures. That would be happening as well? We were talking about other activities apart from plays and concerts, there'd be lectures. Would there be such things as debates?

Oh yes, debates. Horse racing.

35:00 Horse racing was a good thing. You'd set up a—like you did on a ship, you know a wheel, you have bookmakers, you bet. It was a full-time job.

When you say on a ship, what kind of horse racing are we describing here?

Haven't you been on a ship where they've had races? Where you wind the handle and the horses—

35:30 **Are we talking about tin or toy horses?**

Yes. Haven't you ever seen that?

Yes. In fact my local RSL [Returned and Services League] club has one of those still in operation.

Well, that's all. We had a big race meeting in Marburg. You get plenty of people who want to be bookies,

36:00 and bookies mates, and pencillers. Then you have a clerk of the course, and a clerk of the races, and the starter and the judge. There was all sorts of things.

A very busy camp by the sounds of it.

Oh yes, because it had to be. You had keep people occupied.

And from what you've said there wasn't this degree of occupation at Lubeck?

Well no, we hadn't got going at Lubeck, you see.

36:30 We hadn't got going. At Lubeck we were really only six hundred officers, and suddenly all passed in there, with nothing. We weren't even really officially prisoners of war when we got to Lubeck. We were still missing in action.

But as you've said before, it was while at Lubeck that you did become officially prisoners of war.

Yeah.

Just looking a little further at Marburg,

37:00 **you said that it was a former barracks surrounded by barbed wire. Can you be a little more specific in your description of the place?**

The fence? The barbed wire fence was six feet wide, two high fences, ten feet high, with barbed wire entanglements in the middle. And inside the—on the camp side of the wire,

37:30 was a trip wire. That was six feet from the fence, so if you went over the trip wire you were, in fact, trying to escape. So you didn't go over the trip wire. That was to stop people climbing over the wire. At Marburg, they had an escape attempt where they'd organised bridges, then they did a

38:00 run up, push over the six foot wire of the fence, the mob climbing up this side, run across the fence, jumped down the other side and off into the bush. That was one attempt to escape there.

When you say an attempt, it obviously wasn't successful.

Oh it was.

It was successful.

Well for every hundred that got out of the camp, there might have been three that got back to England. Or got away.

38:30 **Sorry, can you just describe that escape for me again? What actually happened?**

They built a bridge, just out of materials scrounged around the place. Well, it went from this fence to this fence. Here, they built a ladder, so they went and practised all this, out of sight of every—

39:00 At the given time, they fused all the lights in the camp. This mob ran up, put the ladder up, put the bridge over, climbed the ladder, ran over the bridge, jumped down, and off into the bush. Well, I think they got sixty out that way.

That's fantastic. Did you see that happen?

No, it happened at night.

How could the Germans not be aware that this

39:30 **structure was being built?**

Like anything else, it was clandestine. We had stooges out to watch the Germans. Every time a German walked into the camp, no matter who he was or where he was, he was tagged. And everybody that was engaged in clandestine operations, were tailed or warned or something, so they could put it away. If they were making maps, then that would be turned into a lecture room, or somebody giving a lecture on something or other.

Tape 7

00:32 **Now Bill, I believe you were able to study while you were a POW? How did this come about?**

Well, after I had an attempt to escape I got very bad pneumonia that turned into asthma. And I used to

01:00 get very bad attacks of asthma. You have to give up any sort of physical activity. And the, of course, I'd always been interested in economics, because I graduated in economics at Sydney University. And then Oxford come up at

01:30 this degree thing. Somebody organised it and I said I'd go in for it, and there it was. Then I took it on from there.

How could it be organised if you were basically behind enemy lines?

Well they did it all through the Geneva Convention, and all through the Swiss authorities.

02:00 And the Germans didn't mind because anything you were doing that wasn't trying to escape was, they didn't have to worry about you. You were being occupied. What they worried about was somebody who was always trying to escape, and all that business. They let you alone, and they encouraged you to do all the—but I think there were six of us that sat that exam.

02:30 **Six of you did the same exam, did you?**

Yeah.

So it was a correspondence course, I presume?

No. They just set the exam on the same principle that they set it at the university, in the subjects. They had to find out, I found out. They did the twenty questions, and you had to pick the answers.

03:00 And you had to pick the answers. And you had to pick the answers that you reckon the authorities decided that you knew about anything. So you just didn't pick four questions on the same field, you had to spread them out. Which is the way that it happens at Oxford, in exams you do

03:30 there. And they just run the exams on the same principle. They set out the papers, somebody in the camp was organised to collect them and do them. And we did just did the exams. I think they were four hour, three hour exams, I think they were. And then the

04:00 papers were handed in, or handed in to the Red Cross, and sent in to be marked.

So how did you study and prepare for the exam?

Oh, you get plenty of books. There were more books there than you knew what to do with. And I had a lot of books sent out to me from England. Because somebody—Dad's officer was in England. If I wanted something

04:31 I'd write to them and ask them to send it out. I didn't have to pay for it, they charged Dad.

So whatever books you wanted, would by sent by your father's office to the POW camp?

I've got some of them here now, I'll show them to you afterward. Yes.

05:00 **What was the subject?**

Economics. Economics history. Statistics and some other philosophy. Yeah. philosophy.

And how long was your period of study leading up to the exam?

Oh about two years. See, when I got sick after,

05:31 when I arrived at Eichstatt, which is after Lubeck, I got all this bronchitis. I was in hospital for, I suppose, for three months, before I got back into the general running of the camp. And then

06:00 we got mixed up in that chaining business. Did you hear about that?

I certainly didn't. What was that?

When the Canadians landed at the camp, they took prisoners, and they didn't have enough people to guard the prisoners, so they tied their hands up and told them to walk down the beach and get taken off the beach.

06:31 Well, Hitler and the German authorities complained about this, and they rounded up all the Canadian officers, it was near a camp, there were about a hundred of them. And one day, he took them out of the camp and up to Kassel, up on the hill, and tied them up with their hands up. There was a reprisal. So then

07:00 Churchill said, "Right, we'll double the number." So Churchill took the German troops to Europe and did the same thing with them. So then Hitler said "Right, we'll double the number." And that's where I get sucked in. Because the Germans just walked around the camp and said "You, you, you, you and you.

Up.” Well Churchill said “We’ll double the number plus one.”

07:30 And there the bidding stopped. Of course, they used to tie your hands up with leg rope. Well of course, every time you had your hands tied up like that, they had a guard in the room to make sure you didn’t take your hands out. Well, of course, you said to the guard “I want to go to the lavatory.” So he’d

08:00 take your things off and you’d go out to the lavatory and come back and he’d put the things on. Then the next bloke would say the same thing. And all day long they were tying up and untying, one guard in each room, tying up and untying hands. So, the Germans had an idea that instead of tying you up with rope, they’d get handcuffs on you.

08:30 So the next thing, they came in with handcuffs, and they put handcuffs on you. Well, that was easy because you went like that on the table, and busted open the handcuffs. And every time a German came into the room, you’d put them back on. And then they had a German

09:02 fellow who had been a German official in England, so he could speak English. So he was sent out to the camp as a liaison officer, and he arranged that instead of having handcuffs, we’d have handcuffs with a bit of chain in between like this. So that went on. Now that went on for two years, or eighteen months. But of course

09:30 you could pick the handcuff with a bit of wire. Instead of the German being in there to undo you, he kept guard outside and he’d run in and say “Officer coming, officer coming.” So we’d all sit down and put our hands up, and the officer would walk in and see everybody with their chains on, and as soon as he’d go out we’d take them off again. And that went on for a couple of years.

10:01 **Were you—**

Eighteen months or so. Haven’t you ever heard of that?

I hadn’t heard of that at all.

Oh well, that’s what happened.

So you were chosen as one of the prisoners, supposedly as they thought you were a Canadian, or you were—

No, no. The second lot they picked up, when he doubled the number, were just picked at random. And I just happened to be one of those that was picked.

So did you spend two years in handcuffs?

10:30 Eighteen months.

Eighteen months in handcuffs, continuously.

Yeah, but all they did was they put you in, they moved you into a barracks on your own. There were I think there was a couple of hundred of us in this barracks. When we went out to pray, be counted, we put the chains on, the rest of the time we carried them around.

And what impact did that have on you?

11:00 The senior British officer was a naval officer. And the German fellow that had been in the corps in England was named Von Fetta. And Herb Von Fetta came in and said to the commander “How do you like the new chains, commander?” And the commander said “I refuse to discuss degrees of brutality with any German.”

11:31 Walked off. Then I think, I can’t remember why it happened in the end. Oh I think I might have got moved out, in the end. They used to change us over.

So what did that do to everybody’s state of mind to spend—

I don’t think it did anything to anybody’s state of mind. You just called them a lot of bastards, and that was that.

12:00 But the same was happening to German prisoners in Canada, all went through the same thing. It was all done with Hitler saying “You mustn’t tie up hands. You mustn’t tie up the German soldiers’ hands. They’re not meant to be tied up.” It all started from that.

It sounds a bit childish,

12:30 **tit for tat, on an international basis. So how could you possibly carry out your day-to-day activities manacled up like that?**

That’s why I say you undid them. You undid them yourself.

So you successfully undid them yourself for most of that time.

The guard on the door who is supposed to have the key to undo

13:00 them, used to rush in and say “Officer coming, officer coming!” So we’d all grab our things and put them on when the officer came in the room, we’d have the chains on. He was satisfied then, that everyone was chained up. He made an inspection, we were all chained up, that was all to it.

So the guard clearly knew you weren’t chained up all the time?

Oh yeah.

So just moving

13:30 **back to attempts to escape. Now we haven’t really dealt with this, apart from in passing a couple of times. I believe you were part of a tunnel digging plan, an escape plan?**

Yes, I was in the tunnelling part of Marburg. Well, that—we did our work there. We got

14:03 the tunnel. We were all ready to blow it.

Can we just move it back to the beginning of the story. How did you actually get involved in this?

Well there was an escape committee in the camp. And you went along and registered if you wanted to escape. You registered. And they allocated you to a job, which in Marburg—

14:30 a lot of tunnels were dug because it was very easy country to dig in. It was plain, flat plain, no rocks, no anything. So you got involved in that. That involved three things. It involved the actual digging in the tunnel, it involved working in the—

15:00 not digging at the face but working back at the entrance of the tunnel, and stooging. Because you had to stooge, so if there any Germans walking around the camp, you weren’t making any noise digging underground when they walked past. So that was what. Then you had to get rid of the dirt, because the dirt that you dug out from six feet below the ground was a different colour from the

15:30 dirt on the grounds. So you had to get rid of that. So that was a job too, part of the job.

Just to put in a couple of questions here. What do you mean by the term “stooging”?

Stooging means that—be a stooge. Watch the Germans and see when they come in, and signal then. You might have six stooges around the camp. If a German comes in the camp here, on fellow sees him here and signals to another

16:00 fellow there, and it’s all around the camp, before the Germans walked ten steps. And if he’s coming, there was different signals that you’d do to say how close they were.

Now if you’ve got these soils of a different colour, how would you overcome that difference?

Buried it. All the gardens around the camp, the

16:30 vegetable gardens that you had growing all rose about two feet, or eighteen inches. Because you dug a hole and buried it under the garden. So it wasn’t visible. Or you stuck it up in the ceiling. But the difficulty was sticking it up in the ceiling, you put so much up there the ceiling fell in.

That actually happened on one occasion, did it?

Oh yeah. It did.

17:01 **That must have been quite a job.**

That’s when they started burying it.

Now you’ve referred to the Germans as being on the perimeter. Were the German guards not present inside the prison at all times?

The Germans used to send sentries round inside the camp, in pairs. Looking for illegal

17:30 activity in the camp, which meant anti-tunneling activities. Of course you had to make all sorts of things. For example, if you were thinking about escaping, you had to have two things. You had to take tucker to take with you, and you had to have a water bottle to take with you.

18:00 To take water. So you made a water bottle out of tins. You got two fish tins, you know the shape like that? We soldered them together, made a water bottle out of them. That sort of thing. And that was the activities the Germans were supposed to look for. But being idiots, or

18:30 being soldiers, they never knew what to look for anyway. They just roamed around the camp, supposedly looking for all this stuff.

So apart from those German guards doing the rounds and looking for suspicious signs, how often would you see the Germans within the camp itself?

How often? Well they’d come in for the count. You’d be counted twice a day.

19:01 And then anyone to do with organising say, the kitchen, or the running of the camp, had to come in. But they were all—you recognised them. And apart from the guards, the rest of them were outside.

Outside the wire. So basically they left the, very much, the running of the camp to the prisoners themselves.

Yeah.

19:30 That's right. They didn't want to be—they didn't care what they did, as long as they didn't escape and as long as they turned up on parade when they had to be counted. To be counted, you lined up in groups of five, one behind the other. So you might have a hundred. The Germans would walk along the front.

20:00 The officer would walk along the front of them counting, and another German would walk along the back counting. To make sure that nobody ducked down and ran along and popped up here. That's the way they counted them. If the count agreed with what he was seeing, it was all right, if it didn't agree, then they had to count again.

20:30 Sometimes the counts went on for a long while, sometimes they were over, it depended on the officer.

Now you mentioned the escape committee. What was the escape committee and what were its activities?

Well, the escape committee, you see you just couldn't—you had to be organised in your attempt to escape, otherwise your mob attempting

21:00 to escape could get mixed up with my mob attempting to escape. And the whole thing had to be organised so one thing didn't clash with the other. And that's what the escape committee's job was. To decide which people should have which rights to do what.

21:30 Of course not only were you escaping, you see, but you had all the other activities as well. For example, you had to make clothes to escape in. You had to make maps to know where you were going. You had to make compasses. And all these sort of things that went on. The people who were escaped weren't just the ones who got out through the holes in the ground, or over the wire.

22:01 The rest of them were all people in the camp with various abilities to use for escaping.

So there was this massive infrastructure?

Oh yeah. And it was all carried out by the escaping committee, and the escaping committee had the right to say "Yes, go." Or "No do this," or "Do that," or do the other thing.

22:30 **How many forms of escape were there?**

Well, there were tunnelling, to start off with. And then there were the people who dressed up as German guards and marched up to the gate, and pretended to be a guard. There were two gates at the camp. Pretended to come in this gate and pretend to go out that gate, dressed up as German soldiers.

23:00 They'd always—uniforms made in the camp. Rifles made in the camp. Wooden rifles carved, and all that sort of stuff. That was another way to go. Then, crawling under—you could crawl under the wire, which was a pretty hairy sort of way to go, because the—

23:30 You've seen the camps how they had the towers, with the machine-guns in them? Well the guards that were in this tower and that tower, had to have their attention distracted while the fellow crawled under the wire and got away. There were all sorts of plans like that going on. And they all had to be put up to the escape committee and approved, so one didn't clash with the other.

24:00 **So, with all this organisation and infrastructure, how was it that the Germans rarely, if ever, twigged to what was going on?**

Well, I think they twigged but they could never find it. You see, they realised that it was every officers' duty to escape. So they were there to stop every officer escaping. That was their duty.

So they twigged, but they couldn't find it. How was it that

24:30 **they couldn't find it?**

Well, they weren't smart enough. The people who were escaping were smarter than the Germans were. For example, I watched two fellows crawl under the wire, in broad daylight, three o' clock in the afternoon, get up and walk away from the camp.

25:00 at right angles, then over the hill and both of them got back to England. But, in order to do that, they had to organise two diversions under these guards' towers. One of these diversions they had was Wing Commander Barnard, who fell over, arse over head and pretended to be having trouble with his legs. And took his pants off and took his legs off, and took his

25:30 legs to pieces while the guard was propped by. And the other one they had a football match that turned

into a fight, so that fellow was watching that, while these fellows crawled under the wire and got away.

Now obviously these men would need to have somebody outside to help them?

No, Most of them, the fellows who done that,

26:00 would be, talk good—German speaking people, so they just go out and be dressed as civilians and have passes made for them and all that sort of thing. All made in the camp. Then they'd get back to England that way.

So now you mentioned transporting the dirt from the tunnel to the flower bed. How was the dirt conveyed

26:30 **between those two places?**

You cut your trousers down from long pants to short pants, and you sewed the bottom, and put a bit of cord through the top and you made a bag. Now when you put your great coat on, you'd have two of these bags around your neck, underneath your great coat, and just walked out. If you were just scattering it on the ground,

27:00 you undid the cord and settled out on the ground there, and you fiddled around with your feet. And that was that. That's the way that you did it. And another time, they had these German carts, hand carts, like wheelbarrows, with four wheels, and I was pulling a cart load of these pants, with all the filler, round the bend,

27:30 in between the two huts came two German soldiers, so I thought 'Oh Jeez, I've had it.' But one of the soldiers pegged my hat. I had my hat on with the Australian badge on it, so he was asking me about that. And I took it off, gave it to him, and he walked off and I walked the other way and got away with it.

A very subtle evasion. Now you mentioned

28:00 **Wing Commander Barnard. What can you tell us about him?**

We were in the same camp for eighteen months. He tried to escape, several times. And of course it was difficult. He was a senior wing commander so he was a senior officer. He tried to escape once as an orderly. And they paraded all the orderlies

28:30 and told them to roll up their pants, and they said they wouldn't do it. So then the Germans went around with a stick, and hitting people on the legs until they found him.

I know the Wing Commander Barnard story, but for those that don't know, can you explain the significance of tapping them on the legs.

Because he had a wooden leg, that was all.

Didn't he have two tin legs?

He had two tin

29:00 legs, yeah. They'd make a difference sound to if they belt your leg with a stick.

Can you describe Barnard's personality for us?

Not very well. I didn't have much to do with him. But he was hale fellow, well met bloke. I think he got on well with the—I think the Germans respected him. Because when he was shot down,

29:31 he—to get out of his cockpit, he had to take his legs off. He jumped down without any legs. Well he arrived on the ground without any legs. Then the Germans agreed to allow a British plane to fly over at a certain time at a certain place, and drop legs for him. Have you heard that story?

No. I think it's part of

30:00 **the Reach For The Sky story, isn't it?**

Oh, it probably is.

Which is the story of Barnard. You mentioned that amongst all these officers in this particular camp, there were lots of interesting actors, artists, writers. We've mentioned Barnard, are there any other key personalities that spring to mind?

Oh, there was the Queen's cousin was there. Howard,

30:36 The Earl of Linlithgow was there. His father was—the Earl of Hopeton was there, his father was the Marcus Linlithgow, he was the governor general of Australia. He was there. And twenty- nine thousand, two hundred and thirty-three others.

31:00 **Any important actors that you remember? You mentioned there were some.**

I don't think they were important. There were a couple there that were actors, but I can't remember

their names.

Fascinating mixture. So to get back to the attempts to escape. Can you provide us with more of a chronology of your actual involvement in these escape attempts?

31:30 Well, the attempt went on for about four months. From the time we dig the tunnel and everything.

Can you describe for us where this particular tunnel you worked on was?

Well, this tunnel. This hut that we were in was an ordinary wooden hut. No water on, no electricity on. But at the door

32:00 was a tub of water. One of those half barrels full of water. So when our tunnel was dug, we moved the barrel, put the shaft down, put the barrel back over the top, and that's the

32:30 way it started. Then it went straight out under the wire. We got out, what thirty feet, forty feet out.

How was the earth carried out of the tunnel?

From the face. You had a train. Had a trolley. And the bloke working at the digging, pushed the dirt behind him. The fellow

33:00 behind him put it in a bag, put it on the trolley, and the cove down in the shaft pulled the trolley back and stored it in the shaft. So you finished up with half a dozen bags or more, stored in the shaft, and come that night, you'd opened up the shaft, take them out, and get them around the camp.

33:30 **And what digging implements were being used?**

I forgot what I used. About this long, a spadey thing, in the shape of a spade. A bit of metal. And you scrapped it, you scrapped it out. The trouble with digging was, you had to keep

34:00 straight. You had to otherwise you'd veer left, right of centre. So we had special blokes trained to go down into the tunnel once a day to make sure it was going in the right direction. That's the way that was worked.

Were there any miners amongst you?

I don't think so. Engineers there were. Engineers, whether they were miners I don't know.

34:31 **And what about lighting?**

Well, we had first of all, air. You had to get air up to the face, otherwise the bloke wouldn't have existed So we had clin tins, you know what tin clins are? We made a

35:00 long pipe.

It was a long pipe that consisted of tins.

Tins, soldered together. And stuck into one another. The bloke that was in the shaft, had to work the pump. He had a pump. Worked like this. And that pumped the air up to the face, and then of course it moved back. The air, by the time it reached the face, wasn't all that hot.

35:31 You know, it wasn't all that strong. So you were puffing like mad up there. And you had the carbide lamp, which didn't burn well in a lack of air. Because carbide only burns when there's plenty of air around. So the lamp used to burn with a black smoke. So you

36:00 just had to put up with it. By anyway, by the time you were there and done half an hour digging, you'd be puff puff. Like me, you were sucking in all that black smoke. And that's what caused me to get sick afterwards. When it came the time to break the tunnel, we—

36:31 I had changed my uniform, which is khaki, with a fellow who had been in the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force], so he had a blue uniform on. Because my plan was to get out and hide up in the daytime, and walk at night. So when we were all in the tunnel, waiting to get out, the Germans—

37:00 somebody must have—the German NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] came round inspecting the guard, and the guard said "There's a lot of rabbits out there tonight." By this time we'd blown the tunnel open. And this NCO walked out, and he walked straight into the hole and found us.

37:30 So there we were, all stuck. So when they rounded us all up, they found out that I didn't have…I should have had khaki on, I should have had blue on. They said "You're in disguise. Take all that off." So this is eleven o' clock at night, and here's me standing for the rest of the night in my shirt,

38:01 in the freezing cold, and that's when I got the bronchitis. But because I had been sucking in all this black smoke off the carbide lamp, that's why I got the—it went to my chest. And that's why I got the asthma.

And could you

38:30 **explain what you meant by wearing the blue?**

Well the RAAF uniform was blue, and if you were out at night, it wouldn't show up so much as wearing this sort of thing.

So you actually obtained an RAAF uniform?

I swapped mine with a fellow from the RAAF.

And your plan was to wear this, so that when you escaped from the tunnel it was less likely you would be seen?

39:00 Yeah. Well, it lessened the chances of being seen, if you're sleeping, for example, in the daytime, if you were moving at night that was the end of it. You had less chance you understand.

Tape 8

00:37 **I just wanted to clarify the range of your activities in the tunnel digging operation.**

Well, you did everything. You did your time at stooging, you did your time at working at the face, you did your time working at behind him, and you did your time working in the shaft.

01:02 You took it turns. Everybody had to do the same amount of work.

So how many members on this particular tunnel digging team?

There were thirty-odd. Thirty-two of us, I think.

And to what extent were you were working on shifts?

Well you had to go down, after we were counted in the daytime, and

01:30 be back in time for the count in the afternoon. So that's how you worked it.

But were the thirty of you all working at the same time?

Yes.

You were. So it wasn't a twenty-four hour rotational shift operation?

No. You see, you had to be there when the count was on, you had to be there.

02:01 So you came up for the count, then you went down and stayed down after the count. You went down and stayed until the afternoon count. And that was that. The tunnel took about, I suppose, four months to dig. All together. From the time we started.

And I imagine an exercise like this would

02:30 **have a very positive effect on morale?**

The which?

The actual digging of the tunnel would have had a very positive effect on morale?

In Marburg, there were a lot of tunnels being dug. There were four sides to the fence, and there was something going on from each side. There were various stages of dig. The length—

03:01 **The place sounds like a complete honeycomb or rabbit warren?**

I don't know about that.

But how many tunnels at any one time?

How many tunnels? There'd at least be two or three, at various times. I think one of the biggest tunnels was dug by the air force. They dug

03:30 a shaft that went down, then they dug a tunnel that way. Then they dug another shaft under the shaft, and the tunnel went out that way. That's the one that got out. The one that went this way, they let the Germans find. Then the Germans filled it and went "Ha ha, where did you think you were going?" But there was still another tunnel down below. That was–

04:00 I didn't have anything to do with that.

So what attempt if any were the Germans making to discover the location of tunnels?

Well, they used to have big long prongs of, steel prongs. And they'd go around, poking it down in the ground, trying to find them that way. Also looking for dirt, of course.

04:34 Sometimes they were successful, but most times they weren't successful. Then of course there were people who tried to dig it out on the weekend, just a quick tunnel, down and out and up. They didn't work very much either.

Why would they be trying to dig on the weekend?

Because the Germans, the guards would get the day off.

05:01 **Oh, I see. There were few guards on the weekend?**

I think so. Well, they didn't come around so much. And this being a quick job, they'd start ten feet from there, and only have to dig twenty feet and they were up and out. Those sort of things were tried, but I don't think they were ever successful.

So what penalties

05:30 **would there be if the Germans discovered a tunnel? What sort of punishment?**

Well, I got ten days CB [Confined to Barracks], trying to escape.

So you were confined to barracks for ten days?

Confined to cells. Solitary, ten days solitary.

Were these cells part of the camp itself?

No, that didn't take place. I suppose they had to get through all the ones they had. They got

06:00 my name on the list and when it came to the top I did my ten days.

Were all thirty members of the escape party captured?

Oh yes. Of ours? Yes.

Are you saying that everybody had to take in turns to go into the cells?

What I'm saying is that the number of people that the Germans confined

06:30 to cells, got up to more than the number of cells there were. So they just had to take their time, and you take your turn at going into the cells. So that's why, it must have been a long list and eventually got my name up to the top.

And what was your experience of being in those cells?

Well, it was just like being in a prison, that's all. You got out for

07:00 half an hour twice a day for a walk, for exercise, and that was that. But it didn't worry me very much. I took in a load of books and read.

Well that's good. I was going to say how did you while the time away? So it was a fairly, comparatively, civilised term of incarceration.

Oh yes, it was all right being in the camp jail. I think there were six or eight cells there. And we were all

07:30 doing solitary confinement. It still didn't mean we couldn't talk to one another or anything like that.

To what extent was it the duty of the officer to escape?

The what?

Was it the duty of an officer to escape anyway?

It was the duty of everyone to escape. Now, you've got to interpret that in a very wide way. Because to

08:00 escape doesn't just mean to get outside the camp. There was all the other activities that had to go. For example, if a fellow is a tailor, it was his duty to make civilian clothes for people to escape in. That sort of thing. Another fellow had to make maps, that sort of thing. That's all part of the escaping.

And the fact that you were all officers

08:30 **obviously upped the anti here?**

Well, I suppose so. Yeah.

Now, taking the sequence of events on from your capture, and your incarceration, after you'd been in the cells for that period of time, what happened?

Well, I was eventually repatriated. Because

09:00 all that trouble, the bronchitis I got, and the asthma I got, my health went down quite strongly. And then

there was, between the German and the British, there was an exchange of prisoners. So you had to be assessed by

09:37 a Swiss doctor, A German doctor, and another German. And you went before this board and you were assessed whether you were fit to stay on at the camp or—you see, they didn't want to keep prisoners who were sick, all the time. They didn't want to be bothered.

10:00 So they were exchanged, with German prisoners held in Britain. They say, "We've got five hundred prisoners to exchange," and the Germans had five hundred prisoners. And as the war got to the end, there were more German prisoners in British hands than there were British prisoners in German hands. Because we started to collect them all, the prisoners of war. So the exchanges went on. Well, I went

10:30 before the board, the first time, and you had to show progressive deterioration. So I didn't get it that time, but six months later I went again, and they had all the records of the first one, and they reckoned I had deteriorated in six months. So they passed me to go. And I was repatriated and got to England,

11:00 about the time the German war with England finished. There was still the Japanese war was going on. But I got to London. A week or so after I got to London, the war in Germany was over.

Just to put a date, or dates, on this sequence of events, approximately when, if you

11:30 **know the date, was the attempted escape foiled?**

Mine?

Yes.

While we were in Marburg, I suppose after two years I'd been a prisoner of war. Eighteen months to two years.

And just before we continue the sequence of events, there was one question that

12:00 **had occurred to me. You said, "We blew the tunnel." How was the tunnel actually blown?**

How was it blown? Well, you dig the tunnel up. Dig a hole below, pull the earth out of the top, it falls into the hole, and then the hole's opened.

It's as simple as that. I thought you were referring to some kind of explosion, but clearly not.

No.

12:30 Blown means blown open.

Yeah. Alright, just to resume the sequence of events—the first medical inspection, how long was that after your time in the cells? Months, weeks?

No I can't recall that.

13:00 **Was it very long after your time in the cells that you started to get really sick?**

No, the cells had nothing to do with it.

But in terms of when your health began to decline.

My health began to deteriorate after we'd moved from Marburg into Eichstatt, when I got the asthma. I got the asthma

13:30 in the spring, I used to get it very badly.

Now I don't know that we've dealt with Eichstatt at all, what was Eichstatt?

Eichstatt was the camp after we moved…They closed the camp at Marburg, and they moved me up, because they were getting too many airmen. They moved the airmen in our camp

14:00 to the air camp. And moved our camp to Eichstatt, which is in Bavaria, which is an old police barracks, in Bavaria. So that was just the splitting up of the camp, I suppose, because I suppose German—

14:31 made it easier for them to—they just had more prisoners, and they had less camps.

So how many prisoners were in this particular camp?

About three thousand.

So that was down from the five thousand that had been at Marburg.

Yes. The ones that had been in—there were two thousand-odd flying officers in the

15:00 camp and they were moved to a flying officers camp.

So compared to Marburg, how were the conditions in Eichstatt.

Oh, a lot better. A lot better. We were in proper barracks. We were in brick buildings, with double windows. It was really quite a—it could be winter there and you wouldn't know it.

15:32 **It could be winter and you wouldn't know it? In other words it was properly insulated?**

Properly insulated, yes. You see, in there you've got to have a double window. Otherwise frost builds up inside the window. Well if you have a double window you don't have that.

One thing I haven't mentioned was sleeping conditions. What sort of sleeping conditions

16:00 **did you have at Marburg?**

We had the beds, one above the other.

Oh, it was a series of bunks. And did food improve?

I don't think so. By that time, this was going on for four years. Well, three years, two and a half years. You see you got a food parcel sent to you, as well as a

16:30 Red Cross parcel, so if you didn't want to eat that food parcel straight away, you put it in store. Which meant, every tin that the Germans gave you they opened. So if you didn't want to open your tin, or eat it right away, you put it in store, and it stayed there till you wanted to eat it and draw it out of store, and they'd open it and you'd have it for dinner that night or whatever.

Why were the Germans opening the tins?

Because

17:01 you could use the tin for escaping. The food in the tin for escaping. All the tins were opened.

So this last camp, for how long were you there.

About eighteen months.

Right. And can you give us a bit more of a description of what the camp consisted of?

It consisted of four great big barrack buildings. On the bank of

17:30 a river. The river was down there, the playing fields were down there. The camp fields were down there. And it had a fence around it the same as any other camp. Oh, and they had a few other temporary buildings which they built down there to take more prisoners.

Did the morale

18:00 **remain on an equal level?**

I think so.

It did? So there was no decline in morale when you moved?

No.

Now just moving back to your trip to England, what are your memories of travelling from Germany to England?

Well, when we were repatriated, we were taken from Stettin, up to

18:30 Berlin. Or just outside Berlin. Because we were going to be repatriated through Sweden. But…we were going from Stettin to Sweden. But I think a week before we were supposed to leave, to go to Stettin, the Russians moved into Stettin, so we then had to

19:00 be retaken back, right back through Germany and handed over to the Swiss in Switzerland. And from Switzerland we went down to France, to the American occupied France, at the Marseilles, and then on a hospital ship. And the hospital ship went from there to Liverpool. London.

So as you were travelling across

19:30 **Europe, were you travelling by train?**

Train, yeah.

What could you see of what must have been a fairly war-torn Europe?

I don't think—we didn't see much of that, really. Mainly all travelling through agricultural country. Because once you got out of a city—there was a city and then agricultural fields. We didn't see much.

It must have been a huge

20:00 **relief for you to be finally out of that prison camp environment?**

The relief came when we were out of Germany and into Switzerland. That was when the relief came. A funny story about that. The Germans had a ticket on you, saying who you were. And we went into Switzerland

20:30 and they had a ticket on you, saying who you were. Then we went into America, and they had a ticket on you. So when we got to Marseilles, we had all these tickets hanging off us. One of 2/1st Battalion blokes, another officer who was being repatriated—

21:00 and of course, when we went from Switzerland into American territory, in the middle of the night. A whole lot of Americans came along, woke up, and said "Write out your ticket." And, of course, this bloke, the bloody ticket fell off him. So when he gets to Marseilles, he found that the ticket of the bloke

21:30 above him, was a fellow who was being repatriated because he'd gone ga-ga. So this ticket falls down onto this bloke. When he gets onto the boat, he's got a ticket on him that says he's ga-gag, not the fact that's broken his leg or got dysentery. So he gets stuck behind, on the boat he gets put into a prison for ga-gas, or a fenced off part of

22:00 the boat. And he calls me and he says "Look, there's nothing the matter with me. I'm not ga-ga, I should be outside." In the meantime the fellow that was ga-ga had been walking around the boat with one sand shoe and one military boot on. So you could quite obviously see—but it took us ten days, on the trip, to get him cleared. Out of the ga-gas, and get the

22:30 other bloke put back in again.

That must have been quite a process.

Oh, I tell you. Those were the sort of funny things that happened. When we got to Liverpool we were met by the Australian Red Cross, and taken down to London. Down to Bournemouth, actually, where the Red Cross had a camp. And we were quartered down there. Until the time come to go home.

23:02 **I asked you about war-torn Europe. Were you able to see much of war-torn England?**

No.

So you didn't see bomb damage in London?

Well, yes. I was in London for VE [Victory in Europe] Day.

You were in London on VE Day, were you?

Yeah.

Victory in Europe Day. What are your main memories of that event?

Oh, just a big mob outside the palace, and

23:30 everybody cheering and shouting and screaming. Quite an interesting observation.

You were part of that crowd were you?

Yeah.

And the feeling of the crowd must have been very positive.

Subsequently we got invited to the palace, to meet the Queen. With every other bloody Tom, Dick

24:00 and Harry that had been a prisoner of war. We were all taken there and introduced to the Queen.

When was this?

After the war. After we got back to London.

You mentioned you went to see the Queen. Who was actually there at Buckingham Palace when you

24:30 **visited?**

A whole lot of people. They had a garden party.

You say the Queen?

Well, King George. I forget him.

So this was a general garden party. For what purpose was the garden party held?

Well, I think the garden party

25:00 was for people who had been prisoners of war. It was after the war in Europe had finished. We got back to England, just before the war finished. So it was after that.

Did you talk to any members of the royal family?

No. Just drank

25:30 the grog and went.

Sounds all right to me. So, how long did it take you to start to recover your state of health?

Years, years. I came back to Australia. A very good friend of mine who was a doctor,

26:00 he put me on go-fast pills and I used to have—I went to work and I used to have an hour's sleep at lunchtime every day, but it went on for three years.

And through those three years, I presume, it was a process of very gradual recovery, from what you're saying?

Yes.

26:32 I had a lot of trouble with the asthma, getting rid of that. But eventually it—touch wood, I haven't had it for years. But apart from that, it was a very slow recovery. I played a lot of football before the war, and played during the war. But

27:00 not—

Right, so you were in England after the war. Was there a long delay in returning to Australia after that?

Yes. I got leave in England to go and work with Lever Brothers. I got work with Lever Brothers in their

27:31 research department. And I did that for three months. Then I came back Australia, worked with Lever Brothers, but they didn't have a research department. So then I left Lever Brothers and went to work in the research department of Consolidated Press. And I went from there, and stayed in

28:00 Consolidated Press for the rest of my working life.

And in the meantime, you'd come back to Australia via India I believe?

Yes. Well, that's where my wife was. Her father was the Australian high commissioner in India. And she left the Middle East and went to India, and acted as his secretary. That's why I went back that way.

And how long were you able to spend

28:30 **with her in India?**

Oh, about six weeks. Then I flew back to Australia. Back to Western Australia.

And staying with the issue of your wife. I know this is a difficult, or potentially difficult subject, but I believe that it was after the war

29:00 **that your marriage dissolved.**

That's right. Yeah. Well, we'd been separated for about six years. It just didn't work out.

Did you feel there were problems already when you had the reunion with her in India?

29:30 I don't think so. It wasn't until after we got back to Australia that we split up. And then after I was divorced, I was married again. And that was my third wife. She died

30:02 thirty years ago now. And we had four children. Actually we had five children.

And so when did your second marriage take place?

Shortly after I was divorced.

So there were no children from the first marriage?

No.

So when you came back

30:30 **to Australia, how connected did you feel to Australia itself?**

I was glad to be home, I think. It was just back to living, and that was that. We built a home at Pymble, and that's where all our kids were born and grew

31:00 up, then she got a cancer and she died.

How long had you been married when your second wife died?

We'd been married about twenty years.

Just moving back to Jean for a moment, to what extent do you think your having been a POW

31:30 **contributed to the end of your marriage?**

Well, I don't think it had anything—we were just separated. When you're separated for five or six years, it's not the same. I didn't meet my second wife until after we were divorced.

So, I mean it must have been

32:00 **so difficult being reunited with your second wife, and there must have been a situation where you had just grown apart? Having been separated for so long, here was somebody that you had known at the outbreak at war, and you thought you had known her, would you say by the end of the**

32:30 **war you and she were different people?**

Well, I think we must have been, otherwise I don't think we would have split up.

And how do you think the war had changed you?

I don't think it changed me at all. I mean she left me, I didn't leave her.

33:01 **How do you think the war had changed your wife?**

You ought to ask Rebecca that question, I don't know.

Were there any aspects of your war career that you feel shaped your

33:30 **post-war life and you outlook on life?**

I don't think so. I don't think so. I think going to work in newspapers was a job in itself, you didn't have much time to yourself.

34:01 We had a family. We built a house. My job took me into work on Saturday nights, because it was the production of a Sunday paper. I used to go into work at about eight o' clock on Saturday night, and get home about three in the morning, on Sunday morning, so Sunday wasn't much. And then I had to run the house, and look after the garden and all that sort of business,

34:30 and bring up the kids. And that was that.

Are you talking about after the departure of Jean?

Oh yeah.

So you retained custody of the children.

No, there was no children. I'm talking about my second wife, Kathleen.

Sorry, I'm confusing the situation. So Kathleen being the second wife, you were talking about virtually

35:00 **running the household by yourself?**

No. See Kathleen was my second wife. She was the mother of my children. We had five children. One of them was killed in a motor car accident. So we brought up four children. She got a cancer, and died. And ten years later, Betty

35:30 and I were married. My other children, with the exception of one, had all been married by the time their mother had died. That was the way that worked.

Just returning to your job with Australian Consolidated Press, what was the nature of that work?

Well, I started off in the research department, then was moved from the research

36:00 department to distribution, then was made general manager of production and distribution, of Consolidated Press, which was virtually The Daily and Sunday Telegraph. Not quite so much of the distribution of The Women's Weekly.

And was that covering production and distribution of—

36:30 **you covered all of Sydney I presume.**

Oh yes, the whole of Australia.

You covered the whole of Australia.

Anywhere we sold those papers. That was a full-time job.

I can imagine. How many staff did you have working for you?

Well, there was the office staff, then there was the whole of the production staff. Which was a machinist, publishers,

37:00 it would be over a hundred. Day and night. See, The Daily Telegraph was produced at night. If something went wrong at night, they'd ring me up. The Women's Weekly was produced in a different factory and I was really only concerned with the distribution of that, I wasn't concerned with

37:30 the production of it.

Now we were talking off camera before about Frank Packer, and you gave us some memories of Packer. For the sake of the record, could you give us a bit of an overall impression of what sort of a person Frank Packer was, in your experience.

He appointed you to do the job, he expected you to do the job. If you did the job he didn't interfere with you. It was only those that didn't do the job, that

38:00 he interfered with. You did your job, finish. We had a close relationship, obviously, because we used to see each other probably every afternoon. That was only a get-together, where you kept up with—it had nothing to do with the running of the place, unless you had a problem.

38:30 If you had a problem, you went to him and said "I've got this problem. What do I do? Do I do this or do I do that?" He'd say "Do this and or do that." If you didn't have a problem with the problems that came in, you just did them. You carried them out. You just got over them. And that was what you were expected to do. I don't know if there is anybody today who is running a business that

39:01 doesn't have subordinates who do just that.

So in overall terms you found Frank Packer to be a fair individual?

Oh yes. You did your job, he didn't interfere with you. If your job involved talking with him, well, that was that.

So after the war did you become a member of any veteran's associations?

No, I didn't have the time.

39:31 Family and work.

Did you take part in any RSL or Anzac Day activities?

No.

What about Anzac Day, has that been important?

Well, even Anzac Day I used to have to go to work. I didn't. No, I didn't get involved in any of that. Maybe for the first five years because I was feeling, I felt a bit down. But

40:00 after that, no. I just wasn't in the habit of doing that.

So, I suppose we're coming to the end of the interview now. And it's been quite a fascinating journey, actually.

It's nice of you to say that.

It has been. And I was wondering if there was anything that we haven't covered that you wanted to mention before we finished.

I can't

40:30 think of anything. I mean, as far as—I've had a pretty active life. I've enjoyed it. I've had ups and downs but apart from that, I wouldn't have thought there were any worries at all about my life. I've got some good kids. One's a stockbroker, one's a solicitor. The two girls are married. One's married to Andrew Cavil, who's the sports master at Shore, and the other one is married to Mesley, whose father was Admiral Mesley. They've all got families.

We've reached the end, so thank you very much.

Thank you.