Australians at War Film Archive

James Snowdon - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:43 **So we can start. Whereabouts were you born?**

I was born in Kew. My parents were both from England. My maternal grandfather originally came to Australia in the 1870s.

01:00 I think he was encouraged to migrate; he was from a well-to-do family and he married the daughter of an innkeeper. I would love to have the inn today, because it would be worth millions. They had two children in Queensland. Grandfather sired them and delivered. One born on the banks of a creek, one born in the bullock wagon. And another was still-born, that grandfather buried. Grandmother hated it. She was eighteen

01:30 months at a trading post out at Mareeba way, without seeing another white woman. And then they went back to England, and grandfather ran a butchery business, until they all came to Australia about 1910, with his three sons and six daughters. But they were lovely grandparents and we were fortunate, when I was a child, that we had a car and we visited our grandparents every Sunday afternoon. And we had a lovely time.

02:00 My father came from Newcastle on Tyne. He had only four years of formal education and yet he was probably one of the most cultured men I ever knew, because he never stopped learning. When Winston Churchill was resting between learning to be an army officer and training these polo ponies, my father was working from the age

02:30 of twelve, from six in the morning until five o' clock at night. And he told us about the children waiting in the snow in the morning with their feet wrapped in rags, and they were waiting for the crusts of the nightshift workers. And they cried out in unison, "Left bread!" And so my father couldn't bear the waste of food. That's the way he was. He

03:00 was a wonderful, wonderful father. He went to World War I. He was in the permanent army, he was a warrant officer. He had a Military Cross, which was an unusual decoration for a warrant officer. It can be given but I know of only two Victorians in World War I, and I know of one in World War II. He never told us why he got it. He said, "Maybe

03:30 it was for saving the jar of rum, or perhaps they had a spare." And it wasn't until after his death that we got his citation, signed by John Monash. He would tell us very little, but he had some great mates who told us about him. My father was basically a very gentle man, he hated hurting anything. He brought us up in the belief that we should be completely honest in word and deed,

04:00 and that meant fidelity, a duty in the community and all that, and to try and avoid causing unnecessary pain to any creature. But his mates told us that during World War I, they had had horses of course, they were artillery men. And sometimes a horse could be standing there on three legs screaming with pain. The only person who really had the authority to kill a horse was the vet.

04:31 But the gunners would rush to my father if a horse was injured and he would shoot the horse. And he said as long as he had a bullet, no horse would continue in pain, and if they didn't like it, 'let them charge me'. But he did have some funny tales of his own he told us. He had a great mate, a fellow by the name of Bill Butcher. He said they were up to their knees in mud one

05:00 time working on a gun; there was a few of them there. They all had boiler suits on. And a young English simpleton came up with one pip on his shoulder and he was asking for some directions somewhere. So they told him what the problem was, and where the unit was that he needed to go to. And before he left, he said, "You know, you Australians are pretty awful. You're supposed to salute an officer." And Bill Butcher said, "Well, we do on formal occasions but we're busy now. And besides, if anybody is going to salute anybody, you'll have to salute me. You've got

05:30 one pip on your shoulder, I've got three on mine, mate." So I suppose that was the background I had. I

suppose when the Second War broke out, we just felt it was our duty to go. Most of the young blokes, for various reasons, were joining. Some of the fellows were out of work. There were drunks that joined, because they didn't have a sack in their pocket, and they could get clothes on their back. Most of them didn't last I think. Because they

06:00 went out and got drunk again, and never did return. Maybe they joined up under another name. But that was really my background.

If we can go back over that. What were your first school experiences?

I was a child during the Depression, in a fairly nice area I suppose. It was a tradesman-like, working class

06:30 area in East Kew. My father, of course, was always working, but there were a great number of people unemployed. My mother used to send me to school with two lunches. They might only be jam sandwiches, but one was for me and one was for some child who didn't have a lunch. And some of them would come to school without ever eating anything. I remember few significant people from my school years,

07:00 probably because the significant years were after I was eighteen. From there I went on to Swinburne Tech [Technical School], and like most kids you left school at about fourteen in those days. Jobs were very, very hard to find. It was Depression time. I worked in various places. I wanted to be in a trade but I couldn't get an apprenticeship anywhere. Then I worked as a telegraph messenger boy and

07:30 stuff like that. And then, when the war started, I was working for Myer [department store]. I worked virtually as a boy storeman in Myer. Which is where I went back to after the war, and although I had put myself down for a carpenter's course, they sent me to their furniture factory. I worked in their factory; they subsidised my wages. I worked like fury

08:00 because I knew I was years behind, and I saved. At the end of the first year they said they were no longer substituting my wages, I could earn my own money, and I knew I was more efficient and faster than kids who were coming to the end of their apprenticeship, because I knew jolly well I had to work hard. Yeah, that was my start before the war, I suppose.

And where were you when war broke out?

08:31 Actually I can remember war breaking out. I was seventeen; it was in September, 1939. No, I beg your pardon, I was seventeen in October. So I just turned seventeen. And I was at my home, and I remember Robert Menzies saying, "And so we're at war with Germany." And I wondered if the war would last long enough for me to enlist. But it did.

09:00 **What else did you think at the time? Were you keen to join up?**

Yes. In those days there was no television; my family always listened to the radio. My parents were serious parents. I'd heard a lot about what was going on in the news. My father had discussed it. And I thought it was necessary. Even at that age, I thought it was necessary.

09:30 **What did your father have to say about the war?**

Well, he was horrified that war was taking place again. He'd seen the First World War. And I suppose the other thing: we read a lot. I mean by the time I was eight I was reading significant books, adventure books. And before the war I had read books like

10:02 All Quiet on the Western Front. I remember that significantly. I think I can even remember today the ending of it, and it was virtually about a German lad, I think he was nineteen, he was an infantryman, he was in the trenches, and it was right near the end of the war. He was in France and everything around him was devastation. It was mud; there wasn't a blade of grass, a tree. And

10:30 then he saw a butterfly in front of him. And it was one of the few things of beauty that he had actually seen. And he reached out to touch the butterfly, and his head came above and a sniper got him. And that's how the book finished. So I suppose the bad things of war had really got to me anyway. And I realised it was

11:00 no picnic. And I suppose when we looked at the First World War, there were some great generals in the First World War on the British side, but by today's standard they should have been tried as war criminals. They told fellows to get up and walk forward and it was just suicide. There was the other thing; there were some who decided enough was enough and this was stupidity they wouldn't tolerate, and they deserted. And they were shot as cowards and deserters, which was

11:30 ridiculous. That was my background.

Were you taught much about the First World War in school?

Yes, we were taught bits and pieces, but our school history in those days was very much sanitised and very patriotic. The nobles of England, they didn't do illicit things like hopping into bed with other people, or anything like that. Wee didn't hear about any of that. They were all perfect.

12:00 So most of what we heard about World War I was sanitised. It was only later on when we got individual write-ups that we learned about stupidity, just callousness. But we didn't hear about that at school. We only heard the good things. We were the good guys, and the Germans were horrible, yeah. 'The Hun', 'Bullshod Drummond' and all that stuff.

What role did Anzac Day play in the pre-Second World War years?

Yes, it was

12:30 important. And we heard about Gallipoli and the ANZACS [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps]. My father always marched. We walked alongside him. They were important things. As a boy, I remember going to the funeral of John Monash, who was knighted later: Sir John Monash. Because it wasn't until after my father's death that John Monash had signed his citation for bravery. I was lucky.

Do you recall those Anzac Day

13:00 **marches? What would it bring out in your father?**

Only very vaguely. I don't recall much of those Anzac Day marches of the time. And after the war, I didn't attend much. The war was gone, done; you tried to get on with life. It was only later that I – I march now. But for years I didn't march. The only reason I march now, I really march for the blokes who aren't here anymore. Yeah. Good blokes that are dead and gone.

13:30 **So how did you come to enlist?**

Well, as soon as I turned eighteen I wanted to enlist. At that stage of the game you couldn't enlist at eighteen, you had to be twenty. So I had to readjust my date of birth. But if I was a twenty year old at that stage, I should have been called up to do national service training. So I had the idea that recruiting sergeants were intellectual geniuses, and that if I

14:00 went in and said my date of birth was October 1922, they'd say, "Well, why aren't you in the nashos [national servicemen]?" So I joined up with a sort of militia group and went in with the national service training mob, and I was up at Seymour, and then I could come back and I'm already in the national service training mob, and I've got my little uniform on and I could go and enlist. I had to approach my father about it, so I approached him on leave,

14:30 and for some reason in the First World War they could enlist at eighteen. My father didn't realise, really, that I had to be twenty, and I didn't tell him. So I mentioned it to him and he said, "Oh mate, you're big enough and ugly enough to go, I suppose." And then I said, "How am I going to tell Mum?" And I was on leave of course, from the training camp. And he said, "You go back to camp, and I'll talk to your mother about it." So

15:00 he broke the news to my mother, and then somehow I enlisted and got him to sign the form without him seeing my altered date of birth. So he signed my form and that's how I went in. Then, we went into Campbell. And not everything is sweetness and light, of course, and not everybody is perfect, and one of the young men I enlisted with, one of the lads, he was

15:30 in the nasho camp with me, and we were at Campbell and it was absolutely terrible there. Waiting to get shifted to a unit. And my father was a captain [in] the permanent army at that time. And he said, "Why don't you get your father to use his influence to get out of here?" And I said, "I couldn't do that." It had never been drilled into me, but nepotism was just something that was not on. And I said, "I couldn't do that." And he said, "Well, I'll ask my father." And his father was a

16:00 lieutenant in the army, and we got shifted out of Campbell. And when I told my father, he was very disappointed in this fellow who had used his influence. To leap forward into time, some months and months later, when we were at a training camp, this same young man suddenly was taken, pulled out and sent to an officers' training school. And when I went home on leave, I said to my father he'd never make the grade. He

16:30 couldn't even understand basic electricity and magnetism. We were training to be signalmen. He didn't make the grade, but he didn't come back to us of course. They couldn't do that. He got dumped out of officers' training school. We went to the Middle East, he went to Malaya. He spent the rest of his war as a prisoner of the Japanese. And that's what nepotism did for him. I suppose the important thing for me, when I was talking to my father, he said that the life for an infantryman,

17:01 when he isn't at war, is appallingly dull. And he said, "Get into somewhere where you can use your brains: become a signalman." And what he said was absolutely right, but whether he was thinking that – he was also probably thinking he could save my life. And he undoubtably did. I spent my war behind the men behind the guns. And I was very fortunate. And if I was in the infantry, my chances of survival would have been

17:30 much less. So that was really my father's influence.

What was it about Campbell that was so unbearable?

Oh, we had nothing to do, we were just held there. I can even remember one poor fellow in the tent with me, and unless he had half a dozen beers, he had the shakes. His hands would shake all the time.

And he'd say, "Can you roll me a smoke, mate? I can't roll a smoke." Now how long he lasted, I don't know. It was interesting

18:00 at Campbell. I remember when the doctor examined me. Just as he finished he said, "Just a minute," and he ran his fingers up the side of my cheek, to see what whiskers I had, I guess, what bristle. And he said, "Oh well, you'll do." So even he had his doubt as to whether I was twenty. The other odd thing, going out to provide a urine sample. There was a bloke in the next booth and he said, "Will you pee in this for me, mate? I tried before and they knocked

18:30 me back." So I helped to get him in the army with my urine. But it was really just dull waiting there; mindless. And from there we went to Puckapunyal. And I suppose that that was when I met some of the blokes I was to spend the rest of the war with. A lot of them went to other units, of course, and we didn't see them. We had long huts there, with straw palliasses,

19:04 a corporal at each end of the hut. They were militia corporals. Before we went overseas, they were both given commissions and both given officers' numbers, which was about ten thousand less than they should have been had they enlisted as ordinary blokes. But we had to smile about that. There were a lot of interesting fellows there. I remember one bloke, and I've always thought I'd like to use this comment; I've never had the opportunity. He came in and his mate was

19:30 absolutely drunk, and a real mess, and he looked at him in absolute disgust. And the drunk said to him, "What are you looking at?" And he said, "I don't know, you've lost your ticket and I haven't got my animal book with me." I've remembered it, and I've always wanted to use that, but I've either never found the right bloke or never been game. One of the fellows who was

20:02 one of the nicest fellows I ever knew, and I'm in danger of breaking up now because in my own way, I still grieve for him. His name was Arthur Kelson, we called him Kel. And he was tall, good physique, good looking, handsome sort of a bloke, nonchalant, usually had his socks down;

20:30 Kel. There were all sorts of odd things. "Where's Kel?" He'd fallen asleep while sitting on the toilet or something like that. "Where's my watch?" "You've left it up at the showers"; Kel was always doing those things. But the lovely thing, I was eighteen, Kel was nineteen, his girlfriend was eighteen, and his girlfriend used to visit him up there. She was his fiancée. And he just had that basic, lovely, working class morality.

21:01 They'd have never two-timed on each other. He was a very handsome bloke, and girls would have targeted him. He'd have never thought of two-timing his girlfriend. And Kel went to the Middle East, with me, we were in the same section for a while. And then at El Alamein he was attached to the 2/28th Infantry Battalion. And in one action there, an Italian action, their tank support didn't catch up with them.

21:30 There was six hundred of them killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Kel was wounded and taken prisoner. His family didn't know, as far as they were concerned he was just missing in action. Kel went to Italy, he escaped, he was banged over the head with a rifle butt, apparently, finished the rest of the war in Germany, and then he came home to Australia. And Kel would go all right for a while, oh, he married this girl

22:00 who waited for him all this time. He had two kids, he built a house, he worked very hard. And he would collapse, and they would take him out to the Heidelberg Hospital and lie him down, and they classed it as war neurosis. And then, sometime later he was with some osteopath bloke I think, who, feeling the back of his neck, got him x-rayed, and he found that the final lumber on which your head pivots had been shattered. And he

22:30 carried his head around on the muscles of his neck, ever since he'd been belted over the back of the head. He eventually died of a brain tumour. Whether it had anything to do with that, I don't know. But he was only 34 when he died. He was one of the gems of mankind. He was a funny fellow; he was a villain at times. He could get drunk

23:02 but there was never anything mean about him or anything like that. He was just a delightful bloke. I'm jumping ahead. At El Alamein one time, Kel and I, we'd been together a long time, and the fellow who looked after the mail had us confused, and so he saw the parcel come for me. It was a cake in a tin, from Kew Council. And he thought I was with the 2/28th Infantry Battalion,

23:30 so he sent it out there. So as soon as Kel saw my name on it, he claimed it. So they ate the cake, and he sent the card back to me saying thanks very much and would I ask Kew Council to send them another one. But that would have been the last fruit cake Kel ate for probably six years. I accepted it with a sense of humour at the time, because he was a mate, but afterwards when I knew he had been taken prisoner, I was jolly glad he had had that cake.

24:04 **How did you find conditions at Puckapunyal?**

Oh, for young blokes it was pleasant enough. It was rough. We learned to peel potatoes and eat porridge and poorly cooked food. The training was good, and we were training as sigs [signallers]. We were trying to learn the Morse Code and things like that. From Puckapunyal we went to Balcombe and we did

24:30 more training there. And then from there we went to Bonegilla, which was a most beautiful camp. The surroundings were lovely. The people around Albury were very nice to us. We had huts, separated by bushland and trees. You might have half a dozen huts, and then a separation and then another area there. And that was a delight. The hut we were in was quarantined at

25:00 one time. I can't remember the name of the problem we had there, but we were quarantined. So we did absolutely no work. Our food was carted to within reaching distance from us and stuff like that. So we did nothing, but lay around in the sun and read, for a couple of weeks I think, until we went out of quarantine. And then from Bonegilla, yes, I

25:30 think we went back to Puckapunyal then. There was a fair bit of delay. We had quite a few months of training, and then we were put on a draft to go overseas. We had our final leave. So we went home to our parents and said goodbye, and I had really little understanding of the terrible stress it put our mothers and things like that under. We were very

26:01 'never weep', 'never show great emotion', Anglo-Saxon type of garbage those days. My father shook me firmly by the hand and said, "Good luck, son." That was the extent of the emotion that you were allowed to show, yet he was a wonderful, loving father. So we went back to the camp at Bacchus Marsh. And there was perhaps a company of us, which was maybe three hundred. We had a major in charge,

26:33 we had infantrymen, engineers and artillery men from those various groups to join us there. So it was all very pleasant. And that's the other place you'd meet a different type of fellow. There was a fellow there, he was older than us, spoke normal Australian 'ocker' English; he was rough, he drank quite

27:00 considerably. And we were wandering around Bacchus Marsh one day with this fellow, into one of the little ravines. His language changed from ocker Australian to cultured English, and he talked about the geology, and he knew all about the geology of the place. And he was obviously a very well educated Englishman, who had come to Australia. And it was fascinating. We were

27:30 all fascinated by this bloke with this cultured English accent. We didn't see him for very much longer after that. And not long after that; we'd had our final leave, and then we had the information that there had been some delay in the draft, so we wouldn't be going in the next few weeks, which we thought we'd be going. So we waited around, and it was boring again because we weren't training.

28:01 We waited around a little longer, then fellows thought if we weren't going, then why they hell can't we have leave? So odd blokes put leave passes in. This was where the public relations effort fell down. Those leave passes were ignored. So then the revolutionary spirit arose, and everyone thought, 'The hell with this, we'll all put leave passes in'. So everyone in the camp, that would be three hundred leave passes, all went in. And stupidly it was ignored again.

28:30 So once more they put them in, and it was ignored again. So then the day came when – it was morning reveille, which was about six o' clock, and the young officers that were with us came round, and everyone was lying in bed, and they said, "Righto, you blokes." And we said, "We're not getting up today, sir, we're all bloody well going home." And so panic struck then. By the time the normal parade took place, and I

29:00 can't remember what time it was, it might have been eight o' clock in the morning, we were all dressed in our full uniforms and boiler suits. And we were beautifully paraded, we had been working on this for some time. And the RSM [regimental sergeant major] knew all about it. And he even went to the extent of saying so many sergeants, so many corporals, so many other ranks 'on parade sir', to the commanding officer. And the major complimented us on

29:30 our organisation, then somebody put the situation to him. And he said he couldn't organise leave immediately, because of course, there were rations ordered for days ahead, but he gave his word as an officer and a gentleman, that he would arrange leave for us. So a lot of us, of course, we were well bought up boys, we thought, 'Oh well, we'll accept this and behave ourselves'. Others said, "Bugger this," and turned around and walked off.

30:00 So there were I don't know how many, maybe a hundred blokes or more decided they'd walk to Melbourne; they'd take off. And they had MPs [military police] checking trucks all the way down to Melbourne and fellows marching across countryside. And some made it, some made it all the way home; others didn't. And I think it was probably a couple of days later, suddenly at six o' clock in the morning, there were trucks there, and all the sigs were assembled, we all had to go into trucks and were taken back to Puckapunyal. The draft

30:30 was too dangerous, they broke it all up. And we were all returned to our original units. So we're back in Puckapunyal and it's night-time and we're all griping away, and we were standing around and Kel had gone to bed. And we said, "To hell with this, we're going to shoot through." And Kel said, "Geez, I wish you blokes would make up your bloody minds. I've got to pack up my bed now." So Kel carefully folded his blankets up, and we walked from Puckapunyal into

31:00 Seymour. And Kel's father was a steam train driver, so we went into the yards and talked to steam train drivers and found a train that was going to Melbourne. So we hopped in an open metal truck, going to Melbourne, and it took us five hours to get to Melbourne, because it shunted and went backwards and forwards. And it rained. And by the time I got to Melbourne I had laryngitis. I could hardly speak. I

31:30 couldn't go home because my father was in the permanent army. I couldn't do that. So we booked into a pub there. You could book into a pub for five bob a night. So we booked into a pub and we were AWOL [absent without leave] for about a week I suppose, wandering around town. Then we just took ourselves back to Seymour, whereupon we were charged with being AWOL and so forth, and then I can't really remember how the next draft was formed for us

32:01 to go overseas. But we eventually went on a Dutch boat, the Manarx Van Der Elsen, it was about nineteen thousand tons. We got on at Melbourne, we headed south, probably to try and avoid submarines and so. And it was freezing and we ran into a massive storm, somewhere across the Bite, where the storm crashed over the

32:30 deck, and the companionways (the step ladders that led up to the bridge area) were torn off and thrown overboard. She was a mighty storm. And I suppose that's the other thing: people that weren't necessarily good for the job they were doing – some of us weren't necessarily good for the job of being soldiers. And there were a lot of blokes who weren't necessarily good for the job of being officers either. We had trouble on this boat. The food was appalling.

33:01 In fact I was mess orderly one time for my little bob, and there was rabbit in this thing, and it stank. It was all rotten. So the blokes said, "We're not eating that muck, you've got to take it back." So I went back to the mess hall, which had been a beautiful dining hall on this Dutch ship, and there were fellows around everywhere screaming about the poor food, and the orderly officer stood up on a thing and tasted a piece of rabbit and said, "It's perfectly all right."

33:30 Whereupon he got pelted with rotten rabbit from everywhere. And it was thrown all around this mess hall. So that was another minor revolution there. But we're on the deck with a young officer of ours, who had previously been a corporal for about a year I suppose, in the militia, a training corporal, and he looked at the officers' menu. And it was a seven course menu, beautiful food. And he mentioned it

34:00 to him, as a point and he said, "Of course, officers are used to better class food than other ranks." And the fellows surged towards him, and I think all of a sudden he could see himself being thrown overboard. His face turned white and he turned on his heel and went like mad for an aisle to escape. But I don't think that poor fellow ever really learnt. But we enjoyed the trip, it was a good trip. It was a small boat, and overall it was good fun.

34:30 It was an adventure, yeah. I mean none us would have been able to afford to make a trip like that on a boat, as boys. When we got to, I can't even remember the town, south of Egypt I suppose, we were transferred to a train, and eventually finished up in a training camp in Palestine: Nuserat. There was another interesting

35:00 fellow there. We had a fellow with us, he was a lovely bloke. He was older than us, but – if you like I can continue that in the next little session.

We have about four or five minutes. I'd like to ask how long did that boat trip last, and did you dock anywhere on the way.

Yes, we did, and it was a lovely place. It would be terrible to miss those people. We docked at Colombo. I was one of the

35:30 lucky ones; the British civil service was very much in evidence there, and we were picked up at the dock by a lady in a car, about three or four of us in the car, and she took us home and took us to dinner and took us on a tour around Salome; really had a delightful time there. That was – isn't that terrible? I needed stimulation. And that was lovely there. We stopped before that

36:00 at Fremantle, which I suppose we should mention for Kel as well. We had leave at Fremantle, and wandered around the town, and a lot of us at that stage had had our heads shaven completely. That seemed to be the done thing at the time. And then we were all waiting on the ship and the ship wasn't moving; we were waiting to get a convoy to go to the Middle East, and Kel got himself an MP armband from somewhere, and then he

36:30 marched about six blokes off the ship, out on the dock, and it took the MPs quite a long time to catch them and bring them all back in. So from then we just joined a convoy and traveled to the Middle East. I suppose the interesting thing about this older bloke; I noticed in the shower, he had burns along the side of his body, scar marks, and he had the top off one ear, and he'd been in World War I.

37:00 And he'd been a lieutenant at 19, and there was a mark across his skull, and the top of his ear had been chopped off with a German bayonet, when the bloke had swung the rifle at him and missed him. And the burns on his side were mustard gas where he'd lain on the ground. So we were lined up on our first time at Nuserat, with the officer in charge there (he was a major) and he went down the rows, and he talked to various

37:30 blokes and then he spoke to this fellow and asked him his name, and then when we were dismissed, I can't remember what his name was, but the sergeant major who was dismissing us called out 'Sig. so and so to stand fast, the balance dismiss', and then he beckoned him. And we went back to our tent, and it was ages before he came back, and he said the CO [commanding officer] had brought him into his tent, and he said, "Righto" – he wanted to know what the score was –

38:00 “You’re an older bloke than the rest of these,” and by the time he finished he’d got all the details, that he’d been to World War I, what he’d been. He came back to our tent and he had to leave immediately, because the fellow said he was needed as a training sergeant, he was not going to send him into action. He had to put his stripes on and he had to get his ribbons of service from World War I. And he made a terrific training sergeant. He was wonderful at the job he did. And it was a

38:30 very good and perceptive officer that could pick him out and see him there, yeah. The other thing that happened at the camp I suppose was, there was various flora that our gut in Australia had never been used to. And I woke up one night thinking, “My God, I’ve got to get to a toilet fast.” And I rushed down – it was thirty holer – and I struck my match, and there were thirty heads sitting there, and there were thirty bums on thirty holes.

39:00 There were three of them, and I rushed into them. There were ninety bums sitting on ninety holes. And I rushed around the back to kick a hole in the sand, and there were fellows crouched down everywhere, in agony, all kicking holes in sand. And that was my first experience of the trots in the Middle East. Our bowels did become used to it. We became used to the various flora that could infect us, and we didn’t really sort of have that problem very often. But the first time was appalling.

Tape 2

00:33 **Could you tell us something about the vaccines you did have before you went away?**

We had them against typhoid. We had a vaccine against smallpox. Some fellows had their arms puff up really badly, but I had been vaccinated against smallpox as a child apparently. So it didn’t have much effect on me. Yeah, we went through the usual mill of those things. Look, I can’t remember all the various things we were vaccinated for.

01:00 But obviously a lot of things that you would be vaccinated for today, they didn’t have vaccines for in those days.

And what was the condition of the needle?

They were large, and they could be unscrewed off the end of the syringe, then ducked in methylated spirits or something, and then whacked back on again. But they certainly were nothing like today’s needle. You can push a needle in today and hardly feel it go in

01:30 at all. You sure felt these. I can remember getting one in the chest, and I looked straight ahead. And the doctor said, “Hang on, wait a minute.” And what had happened, he had shoved the needle in and given me an injection, but when he pulled the syringe out, I was going out with the metal head of the needle sticking in my chest, so he had to retrieve it before I left, yeah.

I’d like to know more about what you thought of Salome as well?

Well again, memories have faded. I loved it.

02:00 It was interesting, the people were interesting, but there’s little left of that. I suppose the other thing, when we think about how little we knew and the stupidity of the training at times, too, when we were in Australia doing our training – I think this might have been with the nashos, I’m not sure – we’d be marching along and then we’d have instructions given, “Aircraft left.” And we’d have a little biplane flying down towards us, and we’d have to point

02:30 our rifles at it as if we were going to shoot the plane down. But when we really got to war and we found out what planes were like with machine guns, we knew how stupid that was. It’s a common saying, that we learn little of history but history, but we often don’t learn the lessons of history. And I think at that stage that was all they’d learned at that time too, yeah.

And would I be right in guessing that most the men had never left their state, let alone their country?

03:00 Yeah, That’s right. Most of us had done very little travel. We were all very young. I suppose even in the section I was eventually in, and spent most of the war in, most would have been under 25; 20, 21 and 25. A few old blokes: 28. And one or two really old blokes: 32. And we had one considerably aged fellow, and he was nearly 40. But

03:30 most of them were quite young, and most of them hadn’t traveled far. And really, a lot of the time we were in Palestine we were tourists and stuff like that.

What was the mood like on the ship on the way over?

Oh, just happy young blokes on an adventure. And that was the other thing, of course, the army did us a great service then, they gave us all cigarettes, and we all became grown up, and we all became addicted.

04:00 And most of us finished up with emphysema, and damaged lungs, like I've got now.

Were you a drinker before your army life?

No, I don't think I'd ever had a drink. And yeah, sometimes we drank to excess. Yeah, we enjoyed drinking to excess. But I was never a good drinker. I could drink half a dozen beers and get extremely – so I wasn't a very good drinker anyway.

Was it a dry ship

04:30 **on the way over?**

Oh no, that's another thing, yes. We were given a ration of, I don't know, a bottle of beer a week or something like that. And somebody had leaned against the storeroom door full of beer. Yale locks, sometimes, the latch doesn't quite go in, and you lean against it and it falls open. Fellows weren't really happy about the food and the

05:00 construction and things on the ship like that, and they had to get square anyway. So all this beer got knocked off one night, and the news spread right throughout the ship. Crate after crate of beer was knocked off. And there were drunks everywhere, and there were bottles lying everywhere, and bottle tops lying everywhere. And next morning we really had to make every effort to throw all the bottles and bottletops overboard before the inspection came. And then there was a massive inspection to try and find out who

05:30 had stolen the beer and who had drunk it. And actually there wasn't a soul on the ship who had actually stolen or drunk the beer as far as they could find out. So that was one of the pleasant little things that happened on the ship. We had a wind-up gramophone in our little section, and we had a record; Aka Bilk was the bloke's name, and if my memory

06:00 was – I'll remember this in half an hour's time of course. And we played that record until it was quite worn out. The old vinyl, at 78, and on it went. Lovely.

What were the sleeping quarters like on that ship?

Some fellows had bunks, but most of us had hammocks slung up above mess tables, and you slept in your hammock and you packed it up during the day-time. Yeah, that was it.

And how did seasickness affect the men?

06:30 Yeah, I got seasick. I could eat sardines and dry biscuits. A lot of blokes were very sea sick indeed. I would say some blokes would have lost a stone in weight by the time they got to the Middle East. And they were quite seriously ill. But they recovered as soon as they got on dry land. But if you had kept them, I believe, on shipboard

07:00 like that, they could well have died on a ship. You've heard about losses on sailing ships of yesteryear; I wouldn't be surprised if that was the case of some of those fellows, too. They virtually died. But a good trip.

Do you remember the approach into the Middle East? The arrival?

No, not really. I don't even remember getting off board. I only remember, I suppose; on the train the significant

07:30 thing was that one fellow had fallen asleep with a cigarette in his mouth, and he was still asleep when the entire front of his shirt had burned out. But that's about the only thing I really remember, of the trip up there.

And what were the living conditions like of that first posting?

Oh, they were quite pleasant. We lived in tents, the food was okay. But I suppose that was another surprise to me, I mean I was brought up on a very proper basis, and I was on guard duty, and it

08:00 was with this fellow who became sergeant there and he was very good. And there was a guard tent there, with rolls of barbed wire around it, and a very handsome bloke in there, waiting to be moved somewhere else. Probably waiting to be sent back to Australia, waiting to be moved to prison; he deserted. He also had this

08:30 severe social disease. And he was handsome and charming and all that stuff. He was running a brothel, in one of the Arab towns. He was an Australian soldier, enlisted in the AIF [Australian Imperial Force], deserted and was running a brothel there. And got himself a dose of venereal disease into the bargain. For syphilis, it took eighteen months to cure in those days. So he'd be behind

09:00 the barbed wire for eighteen months, and then he'd have what was called a 'snarler discharge'; 'Services No Longer Required'. He might have had to serve a prison term, too, because they would whack blokes in prison for four years for a crime like that, and as far as I was concerned, right and proper, too. But he had everything going for him. He was handsome, tall, good looking, but he was just a piece of vermin. You wonder what blokes like that ever enlisted for. Yeah.

09:32 **Was VD [venereal disease] much of a problem over in the Middle East?**

I think most blokes were frightened. I had a gorgeous grandfather and his copperplate letters were beautiful, everybody wanted to look at them. And grandfather wrote to me that when you're on leave in the Middle East, you should keep your trousers always buttoned up, he said, "because you could catch the gypo [Egyptian Arab] heebees and it could ruin your life." Now I presume that my grandfather decided

10:00 the gypo heebees were some sort of venereal disease. But blokes were terrified, because it really was eighteen months, if they got syphilis anyway. Gonorrhoea was another kettle of fish I suppose. But out of all the fellows I knew, I knew of only one who got a venereal disease, he got gonorrhoea. And people think we're all drunken and whoring,

10:30 but – most of us did our fair share of drinking, but there were fellows rough and tough as guts, who went all the way from England, where they were pursuing the English girls and stuff, and a lot of them were most unsuccessful (some of them were very successful), and they came home and they were virgins when they still married. Blokes marrying as virgins in those days were not uncommon. I know it's extremely uncommon today.

11:00 But it was true. But of course, you get a dose of a disease like that, and it's a real problem.

What did you get from the army in terms of education about those diseases?

Education? Well, for me, I was fortunate I suppose. As a signalman, and I'm leaping ahead here, but we did various trainings. Morse code was like another language,

11:30 and later on when I was in the Lebanon, in Tripoli, I went to an advanced wireless training school there. And we were at school virtually all day long, and by the time we had finished, we were group one operators, and I'd say halfway through the war I would have qualified as a top line ship's radio operator, very easily. So we had our education in basic electricity and magnetism, which today would be quite primitive

12:00 compared to yesteryear, and Morse code and stuff like that. But there was always something to learn, if you wanted to learn, yeah. And blokes like good books. There were always good books being swapped around the place. We didn't have the advantages of radio, and sometimes when I look at the children, the advantage and sometimes disadvantage of television too, in what it can do to lives, but we had communication.

12:30 One of the problems, particularly when we got to the Lebanon, was at that stage the war in the Pacific was on. And I would say that most of our news came from aged copies of the Women's Weekly and things like that. And it was a worry about our families and brothers and sisters and mums, home in Australia. We didn't know what was going on. We didn't know if Australia was going to be invaded. A lot of us felt that we were going to be like the Free French, you know; our country invaded and they're

13:00 just a foreign army wandering around, fighting other peoples' wars, for the rest of our days that we could see. But I suppose the other thing that we didn't think about at the time, but I thought about it afterwards, we didn't worry about anything. We didn't have to worry about our health, we didn't have to worry about doctors, about dentists, about where our food came, about what we were going to do tomorrow, about where our money came from.

13:30 We never had to think about those things. It was provided. An odd environment.

And how soon were you able to get leave in the Middle East?

Oh, quite soon. It was very good, even while were in the training camp. We had leave. And we visited the Arab villages and things like that. I suppose that's the thing that I find difficult to cope with today, I do understand Israel and the Jewish homeland, but at that time

14:00 it was Palestine. It was Arab country with a minority population of Jewish people. And the Arabs and the Jews and Christians all lived together in more or less harmony. It's sad to see what's happened there now. And I know that people can look at Muslims and think of them as all terrorists, but they weren't all terrorists. I mean there were plenty of them who would have liked to have killed us at the time, too, and steal from us. But I can remember

14:32 some bloke, chatting with him, and when I left he said, "Peace be with you." And he meant it, and he was a Muslim. I had those things going in my mind. And the Arabs have another beautiful thing; 'Jahabibi', it is 'the pain in my heart'. Literally it's 'the thorn in my

15:00 heart'. And you can look at the child, and they've got that 'thorn in my heart'; the child is the pain in my heart. And I can remember, the first time I felt that when I looked at my first daughter when she was about eighteen months old, and I suddenly felt the pain in my heart. It's the pain in your heart when you see your child and you know you could die for the child. And they had that. And I think Arabic humour, too, was closer to the Anglo-Saxon type humour than a lot of other cultures, too. So

15:30 that was interesting. I met some nice Arabs. We'd go on leave, too, into villages, and we were not supposed to be armed of course, ever, we didn't carry arms. But a lot of us carried a bayonet down the

inside of our pants, because all the blokes had knives, and a lot of the kids they learnt obscenities to scream to us, to try and provoke us. So you had to ignore those, wandering around the Arab villages.

16:01 But we did carry bayonets, inside our pants. It was illegal, of course. So, in some villages they didn't like us. We were occupying troops anyway. And their economy was shot, too; no export of fruit to Europe and all that sort of stuff. So they had a good reason not to like the war.

How did you find the experience of markets and buying food and things like that?

16:31 Well, as most of our food was provided, we didn't buy much of that. We used to go on leave and buy something called 'Olde Sweet', which came in a bottle. And it was very sweet. I don't know if it was more than a fortnight old, but we used to drink a fair bit of that sort of stuff. Look, I can't remember eating much food over there out of cafes and restaurants. I guess we ate bits and pieces but not much.

Did people

17:00 **buy keepsakes and souvenirs and things like that?**

Yes. It was later on, in Cairo, talking about buying keepsakes. We were on leave, and so I went to some gift shop there, and this fellow had letters from all sorts of fellows from England, and all sorts of places, thanking him for his honesty in sending their parcels and stuff home. And I bought a mass of stuff there.

17:30 And some of it was beautiful filigree work, and I sent it all home. And I had letters from people telling me they had received this, that and the other. And it wasn't until I got home that I found all the stuff that I got was second-rate junk. And it was a worth a fraction of what I paid for it. Of course, if we could have got back to the Middle East we would have destroyed his shop, but it was too late, we were all home then. But, I mean blokes were – and I would have been quite happy to be one of them, to demolish his entire

18:00 shop, if we could have got to him. But we couldn't get to the rotten sod. Yeah, that was what we did.

Can you tell me more about the training camp?

Oh well, I suppose, after Nuserat, I got sent to Nine Dep [Depot] Six, I was assigned to Nine Dep Six then. When we got to Middle East, they were still in Tobruk, and so they came out then. And when we were sent to

18:30 them we were classified as bloody 'reos'; that was reinforcements, you see. Inferior beings. You had to learn then to ask, "Would you like me to have been born earlier, or something?" You had to learn to give it back to them. But we had mates. We had quite a few reos that joined us there. But that was a great education. There were a lot of things, like the ingenuity the fellows had. The cooks' ovens; the cooks in

19:00 that camp, they cooked magnificent meals, and their ovens were forty four gallon drums laid on their side, and all around them was mud brick propped up so there was a fire underneath. And they did a great job. There were special incidents, I suppose, and I won't mention the fellow's name of course, but it was Christmas time. It was cold and freezing and we had various parcels came. And this bloke, he was an older fellow. He was probably

19:30 an old bloke. In fact, I know how old he was. He was 32. And film-star good looks, tall, handsome, pencil mustache, suave, cultured, amongst us crude fellows. And his parcel arrived and it was a wooden box from a young lady in England. And I looked at his beautifully made box, and I thought of all the sacrifice this girl had had to make to provide the box. And in it was a letter, obviously a love letter, and he took it out and read it and ripped it up, and took

20:00 the stuff. And I was talking to this bloke about five years afterwards. And I said, "I was a well brought up nineteen year old boy, a nineteen year old virgin, and I looked at you, and I thought, 'This fellow, he seduced this girl in England, and he just treats her like this, and what an absolute cad'." And he said, "Yes, perhaps I was, but I never gave them anything they didn't want." But to his

20:30 credit, I remember – I've known him for years and years – he really was a lovely man; he married, and I remember his wife was this little old lady, and nobody could have been kinder and gentler. He was the carer and the nurse and everything else. So whatever he did in England, it probably provided him good training, and probably the knowledge he had made his wife very happy anyway. But we had to laugh at blokes like that.

21:02 And the older ones who – a couple of fellows at a recent reunion were complaining that they were young fellows that were chasing the young girls successfully round England, and a couple of these old blokes, these suave fellows, they had the English girls chasing them, very successfully, too. They said it was quite unfair. Yeah. I should talk about Tom Maloney. We had a lovely fellow in our section: Tom Maloney. Tom was a bit older, too. In fact, Tom died

21:30 just recently; I did his eulogy. Tom, I suppose, would say he had high-low mood swings. He could be very bright, he was a magnificent raconteur. He was in Tobruk and they'd tell me about Tobruk. Night-time blokes used to visit different holes and talk there, and you could have Polish soldiers visiting. So Tom would convince them the entire trouble of the

22:00 world was the bloody Poms; they caused all the problems. And by the time Tom had finished talking they would all be nodding their heads, and agreeing with him. He said the next night he could be convincing the world it was the Jews and they would all be nodding their heads again. So on one particular night there, I was in the same tent as Tom, and I heard this fellow Keith Walters – Keith's still alive and he's 93, and a lovely bloke – and Keith came into the tent and said, "Are you coming down to the canteen, Tom?" And Tom said,

22:30 "Oh God no, Keith. I'm so crook." Tom had a dose of the 'flu or something. So Keith came back a little later with a water bottle full of rum. He said, "Here Tom, this will fix you up." So Tom's sipping on his rum. So I was in the canteen later that night, and I saw Tom; Tom had a beautiful voice. And Tom has got out of bed, and he's got his great coat on with absolutely nothing underneath. He's got his boots on and no socks. It's freezing cold, and he's standing on

23:00 a table in the canteen, with his frozen assets fully visible, and he'd just sung Jerusalem quite beautifully. Then he's crying out about "The blood of Irish kings flows in my veins," with tears flowing down his cheeks. And we all knew that those Irish kings were long since dead, and by golly, Tom wished he was with them the next day. What, with his illness and his rum and his beer,

23:30 he sure was sick. He really should have been hospitalised, but he just had to stay in the tent. But that was Palestine; we loved Palestine. I'm wandering all over the place. This fellow wasn't with us at the time, we had another lovely bloke there and his name was Tiny Oates. Tiny, as you can imagine, was about six foot four and had size twelve feet, which he complained about,

24:00 but we used to whinge about what we had to carry about on route marches, and just look at those feet. And this actually happened much later, but I don't suppose anybody knows what the secret says. Tiny was walking through along Haifa, with another fellow from the section, Titch Hardy, who wasn't all that small anyway, and Titch was quite good with his knuckles. But they were walking past a café, and there were six Polish soldiers and they were beating up two Australians

24:30 there. And Titch described the situation; he said Tiny rushed in and with two massive hands he seized these fellows by the shirt collars and flung them backwards, and the next fellow turned towards him and he puts his two hands on the bloke's chest and pushed and the fellow hurtled across the room. And all saw this very large and very angry man, and they all fled. So we're back in camp and all talking, and somebody said, "Why didn't you knuckle someone, Tiny?" He said, "Oh well, I've always been big. Even

25:00 when I was a small child I was bigger than children two or three years older than me. Nobody ever wanted to hurt me; I never wanted to hurt anybody. I've never punched anybody in my life and I don't know how, too." And that was Tiny. Probably still out of sequence but continuing with Tiny. Tiny, a year or so later when we're back in Australia, a camp on the tablelands,

25:30 Tiny was on guard duty, and an officer came in drunk. And Tiny just stared at him and he demanded a salute. And Tiny said he wasn't going to salute a drunken soldier disgracing the King's uniform. So the next day – I suppose the officer was cunning enough to know that he didn't make his complaint until he wasn't so drunk – Tiny was put on a charge. And when Tiny was brought before the CO to be charged, he demanded

26:00 a court martial, and they went to water so quick it just didn't matter. They never did charge Tiny at all. But he was a lovely, gentle man. I'll finish with Tiny. We were on Lacuna Island, in Borneo, and he had a delightful sense of humour and we were waiting to come home.

26:30 And there was a new young officer there who hadn't seen any service. It wasn't his fault, poor fellow, and he's lined up and he's dismissing the group and he said, "There will be a lecture in the YMCA hut at nineteen thirty hours," or something like that, "on finding a job on return to civilian life." And Tiny said, "Excuse me, sir? Is that for officers or other ranks." And that was Tiny. Tiny, I suppose, he knew how to take the piss.

27:00 And Tiny, of course, had a motor manufacturing business in Melbourne. He was a very successful businessman. He apparently made the vow, when he came back to Australia, that this was the greatest country he had ever seen and he would never leave it again. And although he became a very wealthy man, he never did. He was a delightful fellow. He would come to reunions, always had to leave early. His wife in her later life, had very bad

27:30 arthritic hands. He had someone caring for her when he was out. A minder, he said, "I've got a friend and minder." He came home to massage her hands and everything before she went to bed. So he was a giant, and a gentle giant. A gem. One of those lovely blokes I feel so fortunate in having known.

What was your experience with officers in Palestine?

Oh, it varied.

28:00 We had some – I remember very few there, I suppose, in those training camps. We weren't that long in the Palestine training camp before we went to the Lebanon. The Seventh Division came home, then we went to Lebanon to take over from them. They had fought the French in the Lebanon. A very short battle, but quite costly, and very successful. The Lebanese people were good.

28:30 I was very fortunate in that I was stationed most of the time in Tripoli, and it was like five months of

delightful tourist type holidays. And that's where I suppose the first significant [incident occurred], with a bloke we referred to as 'Horrible Horrie', who was Horrie Woodford, a major. He was officer in charge of number one company.

29:00 He was a very strong character, and I supposed I should deal with him right the way through. I remember Kel coming home drunk one night. The orderly officer, and I don't even remember him, he was a clot. He should have ignored these blokes and let them go to bed. But he made an issue of it. And I think Kel

29:30 used an uncomplimentary remark, to put it quietly, and there was a minor sort of disturbance going on. And I remember Horrie Woodford came across, who could have put any of the blokes that were rude to him in the boob [military prison] for twenty-eight days, he got rid of this orderly officer and he took control of things. And Kel was put on charge, and Kel had to front up to him the next day, and he told him he had behaved like a damn fool, but he was a good soldier, and he better not do it in the future or he could finish up in the boob.

30:00 And that was him. That was Horrie. The only other thing I can say about one officer there was, I had a – we had very good friends in town, in Tripoli. I was taken into a family there and they were just lovely with me. They were lovely people. They were Lebanese people, but Emita was from Libya, there on a visit. And Memita, she was a little mother and I used call her Memita and she

30:30 really was lovely. And she was a gorgeous looking lady, and she had a daughter, about nineteen, who I was quite besotted with. But we did nothing more than hold hands. But later on in our time in Tripoli, we were in a French barracks high above the town, and Maxy Thorpe, who was about six foot two, he would have been in his thirties, he was a warrant officer. And Maxy Thorpe was also a friend in the family.

31:00 And we were walking back from that visit there, going to get a taxi, and there were a couple of young officers, that had obviously been in the officers' club, and one was very drunk, and he wanted to fight me. He said, "Come on, you bastard, you're bigger than me." I thought, "God, am I going to fight an officer?" And the other officer's there, the other young lieut's trying to stop him, and I thought, "I don't how the hell I'm going to get out of this."

31:30 I mean, he'd of been in trouble, but I would have been in trouble as well. I didn't want to go to boob. Maxy Thorpe moved quietly around the other side of him, he lifted his great big fist and he went crunch, right behind this bloke's ear. And this fellow fell quietly to his knees and Thorpy said, "That was bad luck, wasn't it sir?" And the other officer said, "Yes it was sergeant major and thank you very much. I'll look after him from now on." So we left. But I don't [know] what would have happened with a fellow like that. He was quite unsuited to be in the job he was in. And maybe

32:00 he'd have challenged some young fellow later on, when he was on his own, and had a good belting and finished up being cashiered and sent back to Australia. But, you know, they were like ordinary troops. You had the odd bloke like that. We were an amateur army and people were in positions they shouldn't have been in. But while we're on Thorpy, we'd go back, we'd get into a taxi to [go] back up to the barracks that we were in. And occasionally these taxis would stop, they'd have an accident, they'd break

32:30 down. And when these blokes got out, there would be half a dozen Lebanese there that would beat them up and take their wallets off them, and their books and everything else. All their material, which would be very handy to them. So we'd get into the taxi, and Thorpy was very large. And he had a very big torch. And he would say to the taxi driver, "Now, you see this torch, George?" And the bloke would say, "Yeah." He said, "Now if the taxi happens to stop on the way up the hill? The first

33:00 person I'm going to hit is you. And I'm going to hit very hard." We never ever had a taxi stop. We'd get into a taxi on another night and the taxi driver would say, "It's all right, I know you. I know your big torch. This taxi is very good. It will never stop." So, that was Thorpy, yeah.

Can you tell me more about Tripoli? What was the running operation there?

Oh Tripoli. Tripoli was beautiful, a lovely town. I've got quite a few photos of

33:30 Tripoli. Early in the piece there, we were in an attack above virtually what was a monastery, where the monks lived. And it was a very humid climate. It was quite pleasant, living in the attic. We had stretchers up there, and we'd live up there. We were wireless operators, so we could be on duty. And you'd be on duty, and you get up in the morning and go and have a shower and get your gear on and go around town. We were perfectly free. We

34:00 didn't need leave passes or anything. It was lovely. And come back at night, and hot again, have a shower before you went to bed, or have a shower before you went on duty. And some Poms came and joined us, later in the piece. And a lot of the English in those days, they didn't really have bathrooms, they didn't bathe very often. So a bloke came in next to me and set himself up and he took his boots and socks off, and I said, "Jesus Christ!" And I picked my stretcher up and went down the other end of

34:30 the attic. They were terrible. And a bloke said, "You fellows are going to have to learn to bathe." And they were stunned. They used to see fellows, Australians, going down and having a shower a couple of times a day, and they'd think that we were going to wash the plug hole, I think. But, that was a nice atmosphere there. Tom Maloney was there with me, and

35:00 we used to go to a little place called the Refuge, which was an underground dive where we would drink to excess again, and I remember this night. There was George Henry, he's dead, Ray Steel, he's dead, Tom Maloney, he's dead, and myself. I'm the only one still alive out of that mob. And we're down in the Refuge, and Ray Steel was the sort of fellow that when he drank his eyes needed a message before they moved. Because if he wanted to move further over there, his eyes slowly crept across

35:30 his face to move. Ray was an hysterical fellow to look at when he was on the booze. One night, Tom had drank to excess, and we're going back to our billet there, up above the monks, and Tom decided he wasn't going to walk home. There were flagstone pavements, very good. And steel heels on his boots, and steel nails in his boots, Tom put himself at an angle of about forty five

36:00 degrees and we skated him home. And then we dragged him backwards up the steps to the attic. I don't think the monks at prayer were very impressed with us at all, somehow. But Tom was a good Catholic, too. It was lovely living there. And from there I went down – we had a block of flats officered in a place Rue El Mina, it was a lovely block of flats. Absolutely nothing in them of course,

36:30 just our pallias to put on the floor. It was opposite a little Catholic girls' school there, and there was some open land next door it, and they set up a school there. And that's where I did my schooling to become a group one operator. And there was interesting fellows there. Sitting next to me was a fellow, Eric Shaw, and Eric was older than me and Eric had a degree in art, I think. But Eric could

37:00 not grasp the basics of electricity and magnetism. And the actual thought of an electron flying across space from a coil to a positive plate was completely beyond Eric, although he was much more intelligent than me and much better educated. And Eric had to sit beside me at the exam to cheat so he could become a group one operator, which I always thought was good. I suppose the other fellow I think I should remember there,

37:32 his name was Jimmy Trinder. And Jimmy Trinder could drink to excess, and I was on guard duty there one night and Jimmy Trinder stopped and chatted with me, then he said, "I think I better go to bed now." And all he could [do] was march on the spot. He lifted his feet up and down on the spot. So I had to get behind him and give him a little push. And once I gave him a push he could go in the general direction. And in another barracks I could remember seeing Jimmy coming home, and he had fallen

38:00 asleep, drunk, in an orchard somewhere, and there were snail trails all over his great coat and his hat and everything else. He was much more cultured and better educated than us. Not much older than me, I suppose. But I suppose the other thing about Jimmy was, at El Alamein he was attached to an infantry battalion and he was in a Bren gun carrier, in a battle, with his commanding officer and the driver there, and

38:30 the commanding officer from his Bren gun was virtually directing the battle. And the commanding officer was killed and Jimmy Trinder continued with his radio, giving back the information that he thought he should be giving back. He was awarded a military medal. So he might have been a funny man at times, Jimmy Trinder, but he did a splendid job and did his duty very well, indeed.

Just in Tripoli, in

39:00 **terms of the work you had to do, what was your running day there?**

Yeah, I can't remember exactly what time we got up and how much time we had. We all seemed to have plenty of spare time. There were boys outside that polished our boots for us when we went out. We had time to go to the films, and do all sorts of things. That was in our training camp, and then some of us of course were on

39:30 duty as wireless operators running the set, and if you were on duty, there was probably four people to a set, so you divided your twenty-four hours up into four. But there was a great deal of freedom there. I had five delightful months there. The other training thing we did was, we went into an exercise in the desert at Homs, in Syria, and that was where my mate

40:00 George Henry was particularly useful. George was a great scrounger. He was also great with food. He was a jolly good cook. And on the exercise you were issued with your bully beef and your packets of biscuits and stuff like that, but as we'd go through little villages, George would demand a few bob, then he would swap the bully beef and the money and so forth, and when we stopped for lunch, the officers would be eating bully beef and biscuits, and we would have

40:36 beautiful salad vegetables. George would have made up a beautiful salad for us. We'd be eating this beautiful salad, while the others were eating rough stuff. But that was George, he was good like that. He was an interesting fellow. He would have been, I would say without the slightest doubt, a classical violinist in a symphony orchestra, or

41:00 maybe a concert violinist. He trained with Yehudi Menuhin. He was a beautiful violinist. But to go away at 19 and come back when you're 25; he played violin all his life, and with great pleasure, but of course he never became a great professional. And he should have become a great professional. But he had a lovely sense of humour, too.

I'll just have to stop you there, Jim.

Tape 3

00:32 **Just like to say what we were saying in the break. In Tripoli it was quiet?**

It was quiet, and they were lovely people there. And my mate George Henry, I'll continue on with him. George was great with the kids. And George spoke in a very nice manner, and it was very interesting to hear little Arab kids speak in beautiful [English] and tell you never to back a mare in the spring, or that so many furlongs in such and such a time was a

01:00 winning gallop. So he taught all the kids all these odd sorts of things. And George had a wry sense of humour. In our days we knew a lot about history. We knew all about William Caxton being the fellow who started printing and all that sort of stuff. I know a lot of people of today wouldn't have a clue on that. But that was our English history background. And I booked into a pub after

01:30 George in Haifa, and he'd signed himself in as 'William Caxton, printer'. And it was his own humour. It was for nobody else but himself, but that was him. And he was a terrific bloke, but the other thing that happened to him in Tripoli that he didn't like, he got chicken pox, which was a child's disease. But that was the one time a young man in the army was allowed to grow a beard, which he did do, yeah.

02:00 But he was just one of the many splendid people that I knew.

You mentioned before in the break, about getting paid at Tripoli. What was the pay like compared to civilian life?

Oh well, it was peanuts of course. But it was enough to get by on. You got fed and you got your doctor and your dentist and your housing. An average army pay was five bob a day. It might have gone to six bob at some stage. As group one operators we went to six and probably

02:30 seven bob a day. So we were a couple of bob better off than they were. I think two bob a day of my money went home, to an account that my mother kept for me, so there was something when I came home after the war. You could live quite comfortably on it. And when we were in Tripoli, we spent everything that we had, because it was a good life there. But when you were in action, you didn't spend anything

03:00 at all. There was nothing to spend it on, virtually.

What did you spend your money on in Tripoli?

Booze, I suppose, mostly. Yeah, we did dine occasionally out there. But I suppose booze as much as anything else. We drank. Now, I'll be lucky if I have two drinks. When I was a young man, came home, get some beer for Christmas time and six month later there's bottles there with the tops going rusty because

03:30 I was too poor to even continue to drink. But a lot of fellows are like that. Young blokes think that – but behaviour was pretty good. Life was good there, yeah.

Where were you taken to from Tripoli?

Actually, in Tripoli we had a lovely place billeted in town, then we went out of Tripoli itself. Above Tripoli itself was a French Foreign Legion barracks;

04:00 a huge barracks, with great stone walls around. Escape was difficult. The barracks were made of stone-work. Huge long rooms with verandahs front and back, with white mosquito nets hanging down from the ceilings there. And you needed them, too, in that area. That is where I became Catholic up there. I was raised as an Anglican, but I didn't like

04:30 the Anglican padre, so I fell out with the Jews, atheists and agnostics. Now you weren't supposed to be penalised for being a Jew, atheist or an agnostic, but you found yourself cleaning out grease traps and stuff like that. Now I could have made a fuss about it, but I don't think it would have done me any good. But my mates used to go down to – Catholics used to go down to a nice little church in Tripoli, and with an

05:00 Australian padre there. I was going crook one day about it to Kel and he said, "Why don't you come down to church with us?" So I said I wouldn't go down unless I spoke to the priest. So he took me down and introduced me to the priest. I said I didn't want a conversion. I asked him if he minded if I come to the mass with them. So every Sunday I went down to them. And mass was still in Latin in those days. Naturally I didn't partake of mass, I just sat in the body of the church, but I

05:30 used to sling off at my mates, then. I said, "You blokes grew up with this Latin mass, you don't have a bloody clue why you genuflect have you? I'm one of the blokes that read all the stuff and I know why." But it was a lovely time, and he was a lovely man, that priest. He was terrific, understanding. But most of the time we hadn't a clue whether a bloke was Catholic, Protestant or Jew. And diverting far afield, I was in

06:00 the cemetery at Alamein early days there, and I was with a bloke by the name or Robbie Carruthers. And Robbie and I were just watching, and there was a truckload of bodies being brought in. They'd bring up the truckload. They'd bring three truckloads of bodies in. And blokes would put a body on a blood-stained stretcher, with a blanket over it, and hold the blanket one side and they'd carry it over, and tip it into the grave. Which was a hole in

06:30 the sand two foot six deep. And there was an officer there to record; he'd have a look at the dead meat tickets on the bloke and cut one off. He'd record the dead. And there were three people there. One was a Protestant padre, one was a Catholic padre and one was a rabbi.

07:03 They would find out what the religion of the deceased person was, and those three stood shoulder to shoulder at the end of the grave, and if he was a Jew, the rabbi stood in the middle and he conducted the service. If he was Catholic, the Catholic stood in the middle. And there was a hell of a lot of bigotry around in, not in the army, but in this country

07:30 in those days. And I remember Robbie saying to me, "Mate, that's what religion's all about isn't it? Or should be all about." It's like the old saying, most of the killing and most of the wars and stuff is fought in the name of religion, and has been for many, many years. But that was one place where you saw the absolute best of religion and of religious beliefs. But I've diverted months ahead, and a lot of dead people ahead, yeah.

08:01 But anyway, it was a pleasant time in the barracks. It was more training, more exercises. We went to leave camps, and I was at a leave camp, and it would have been early June, '42, I suppose, and all of a sudden the word came we were all back to our units. And we didn't have a clue why. So we rushed back to the unit.

08:31 And then it was all day and every day, driving down from the Lebanon down to Egypt. And I drove the wireless truck. That was one of the difficulties with my mate George Henry, who sat alongside me. You couldn't stop, you drove on and on and on. If you wanted a leak, the standard thing for George, I'd be driving then I'd say,

09:00 "I want a leak," and he's got an empty coffee and milk tin there, with the lid open. And he'd hold that under my member, and I'd be driving with one hand, the other hand holding my member. And he'd say, "Righto, clamp off." So I'd clamp that lot off and he'd empty that lot outside, until I'd emptied my bladder. But with George, he couldn't have a pee while [he] was travelling. In our trucks, we had hatches at the top, to look for aircraft. George would stand

09:30 up, with his member above the coffee and milk tin, and he still couldn't do anything. He'd get out the side of the truck and stand on the metal step of the side, with the truck travelling along, and his member exposed, trying to empty his bladder. He'd be in absolute excruciating agony. And he could not, under any circumstances, do it on the run. And when we'd eventually stop, he'd get

10:00 out the side and lean against the truck and there'd be a long groaning exit of the bladder being emptied. It was extraordinarily hot travelling there. And some of the Don-Rs, the despatch riders who had to ride motorbikes, they couldn't even carry the water bottles on their bodies because the sun on the water would be stinging hot. So the blokes in the back of the truck would hold the other bloke's water bottle, and when he wanted to drink he'd ride up as close as he could and they'd hand him the water bottle. We just didn't have time to stop. We just went

10:30 on and on and on, day after day. Stopped at night and morning to eat, stuff like that. Well, stopped in the middle of the day, for sure. But we still didn't know why we were going. Some fellows thought we were heading to go home. And I remember we had one fellow in our truck, and once we got over the canal, and he knew we were heading up to the desert,

11:00 he got into a bad state. And he'd been to Tobruk this fellow. He was a loner; we very rarely saw him. Didn't see him with mates at all. He would be busy writing there, then he'd ask how to spell 'recommend'. And he'd be writing about being recommended C-Class. He was writing to someone to try and get out of going back to the war. And I think people should understand this. Some

11:30 people can cope and some people can't. And you're born that way. And to put the label of cowardice or something on people, it's very well for people who, to put it quite bluntly, haven't been shit scared. But, you know, it's a stupid label. Anyway, I'll continue on with him because when we were at Alamein later on, he used to dig an enormous deep hole in the

12:00 ground to sleep in. Which I couldn't do, I'd be terrified. Because if a shell or a bomb lands alongside you in the sand, the whole side can go in and you'd be buried alive in there. You shouldn't have a hole more than eighteen inches deep to sleep in. But he had this deep hole, and it would have been ten o' clock one morning and the mail came in, and our sergeant was asking where this fellow was, and then they realised that nobody had seen him. Then we looked in his hole, and his eyes were open, he's got sand in his eyes, he's in convulsions and stuff like that.

12:30 And I guess his mental state got to his body. He was dragged out and cleaned up and taken away and we never saw him again. But then we continued on into Egypt until Alexandria Racecourse. And we camped there overnight. And of course it was absolute pitch-darkness. And we're sitting

13:00 around in the dark of the night, and there was a fellow in the same unit, must have been his mate from another place had come along. Blokes were chatting, and this was my first time to weep as a young man during the war. And this fellow was an infantryman and he was asking people if they wanted to know why he didn't believe in God. And he went through

13:30 being in Tobruk and being on a patrol and going out and being cut off, and being pinned down. I can't remember the full length of time, but they were pinned down a long time. And he went through, he lived again, all what happened in that little depression. They were in that depression there, under machine-gun fire. And he went through such things as fellows wounded and in delirium, getting up on his knees

14:00 to pray, and as soon as his head came up above, he was shot down. And he said their lieut was a terrific fellow, and he mentioned him crawling across to give someone who was crying out for water, a wounded bloke crying out for water, and he said as his back – I'm sorry but I live through his pain again -

14:30 as his back came above the ridge, he saw his back torn out with machine-gun fire, and things like that. I don't know who he was, I never saw him. It was pitch dark and it was all discussed during the night. But it was a fellow living through his grief again, of course, and saying about the loss of splendid fellows, and some fellows who were less than splendid, who

15:00 weren't lost. But that's life, of course. But that was my first weep. Anyway, I suppose the other thing we should say, we continued on from then up to Alamein. Now the British Army was in full retreat, and our arrogance and rudeness and criticism was beyond belief.

15:30 I mean, we didn't know what we were talking about and we were absolutely appalling. And the blokes that were being sent back were being sent back under instruction, and they could have been base troops, I don't know who they were. But we were going up to the war, and they were coming back. And blokes were yelling up [at] them. It really was a bad show. I don't know what troops were left up at Alamein. Rommel was only sixty miles from Alexandria. Probably as much reason he got there as anything was his lines

16:00 of communication were too long, and supply lines. The New Zealand troops were still up there, and we got up across the road at El Alamein. Once again, I was behind the blokes behind the guns, but in the first seventeen days there, holding that road, the infantry had enormous losses. There were about two and a

16:30 half thousand casualties out of about fifteen, eighteen thousand men, which was enormous causalities. And in fact, years later Field Marshal Montgomery said that he knew of no other division that could have held that road against the onslaught of Rommel. Against counter-attack after counter-attack, so the Ninth Australian Division

17:00 had a lot to be proud of. But for us, it was – we parked our trucks there and we were feverishly threading camouflage nets and from over a ridge came a Messerschmitt, down on our trucks, machine-gunning. And

17:30 I had gone overseas in the Walter Mitter thing, heroic and fearless and that sort of thing, and I suddenly found out what it was like to be terrified. So I dived for the back wheel of the truck, which was a really good place. And this bloke came machine-gunning down, and then I heard the noise behind me and I looked behind me, and a bloke by the name of Ron Gillies, who had been in Tobruk, he'd been in England as well I might add, right from the start, and Ron Gillies was standing there, typical

18:00 of him, with his back toward the oncoming plane, with his fists on his hip, and sand kicking up all around, and he's yelling at some bloke at his feet, "Get out of my bloody hole!" He'd dug himself a hole, and somebody else had – so that was Gillies. I thought, 'This bloke will never survive the war'. But he did, he survived for many years. And it was not that many years ago that he died. Ron Gillies; a terrific bloke, also. And

18:30 righteous indignation was greater than fear for Gillies. But that was my first time that I had seen anything fired in anger. But I was really very fortunate. Most of my time at El Alamein was on salt flats, where the sand hills there, you could dig into the sand hills for dugouts and stuff. And we were close to the sea, so we could swim, virtually every day.

19:01 Our Don-Rs, our dispatch riders, of course they're quick and mobile, they've got their motorbikes or jeeps there. And as soon as a plane came down anywhere in the desert, those blokes would go out like a rocket, with their spanners and stuff, and they'd strip the planes off before the right authorities could get to the planes to try and impound them. In those sand hills, they had machine guns everywhere, and you could only fire an aircraft gun for a very short time because

19:30 it's designed to be on an aircraft, where the air is rushing past and cooling it. So a Don-R might have three or four machine guns so he could leap from one to the other when they got warm. Any planes that came over, they fired at everything. But also, I remember one bloke; a Don-R machine-gun had followed this plane down, it came right in the entrance of his dug-out and right through his mess tins as well. So they could be

20:00 a bit risky. I suppose, another memory there: one time a German bomber came over, incredibly low, in

fact if you had a long stick you felt you could whack him. And you could see the holes getting shot through into the body of this plane everywhere, and he even put his wheels down, whether he thought he was going to kid us. Because if you landed in the desert, they crashlanded, they didn't put wheels down because there were holes everywhere. They'd try to belly-

20:30 land, and some planes landed very successfully that way. But he drifted over us, and you could see all these holes going in it. And he drifted a bit out to sea so he could come back in over German territory. And I think all of us thought that pilot should be able to get back to Germany and have grandchildren and be able to tell them about that. Because it was just incredible that plane was still flying, when it left.

That time the Messerschmitt came over and attacked you all, were there

21:00 **casualties that day?**

No, no. And often that was the case. You could have – it was quite incredible really. And when you think – well, I suppose the other thing, too, that was incredible, I never really thought of it; I'll go onto this Tom Maloney again. At night-time there would be thousands of troops there, and there's not a light anywhere. In fact if there was a light, there was a scream:

21:30 "Put that light out!" But you'd have a German plane quietly cruising overhead and there would be not a light, not a sound, not a gun firing anywhere. And then he'd drop a flare, and it was a parachute flare. A huge flare of light, and as soon as he dropped the flare, every machine-gun in the area would open up to cut the parachute to ribbons so the flare would plummet to Earth. And it lit up the whole

22:00 area then, of course, for the plane to drop bombs or shoot anybody it could. And what we never ever thought, you've got thousands of rounds going up in the air, they've all got to come back down again, and you think what if you get hit with them, so it was just a big desert, and a lot of space, and you missed out. But this Tom Maloney, on this particular night, too, a flare landed near us. And the standard thing, as soon as a flare lands, you've got to put it out fast because it's lighting up the whole area. And I see Tom in the light of the flare,

22:30 sprinting across with a shovel in hand to put the flare out, and as he's going past, in the light of the flare, there's a bloke on his knees, fully upright with his hands above him. He's praying, he's lost it, you see. And as Tom goes past he belted this bloke and knocked him down, then he rushed over and put this flare out. Then we could hear Tom coming back, and he said, "Now listen, mate, I pray as much as anyone in this bloody desert," he said, "but the thing is, the first thing you do is you put the bloody flare, then you pray to God

23:00 and thank him that you're still alive." But he was another poor fellow, who really should have been taken out of the place. He'd just had too much and he just cracked up.

Was there anything in the way of help provided for those men?

Don't think so. Maybe you could help them. I think that a lot of them, once they got over that, they didn't want anybody to know about it

23:30 anyway. But no, there was no psychological help. We had a lovely fellow in our section, Jack Riek, and Jack would have been about – he was good looking, square faced, Germanic, about five foot ten tall, muscular, good physique, nice nature, and he went on leave to Cairo. And we reckoned he had something there that gave him brain damage. He was never any good as a wireless operator, thereafter. And Don Kelly, who was later our captain,

24:00 tried and tried to get them to do something with Jack, but nothing happened. Jack should have been boarded out. He should have been mentally assessed and boarded out. He was brain-damaged. God knows what they fed him, but they did him damage, yeah. But he was still with us in Borneo, which was years later, yeah.

If people were starting to have doubts and fears, would they talk to each other? Who would they talk to?

Oh, everybody was scared.

24:30 I mean, only a complete idiot wasn't scared at some stage. But people just did their job. And I think that was where ordinary blokes, other ranks, were better off than blokes who were young officers. Because a young officer might have to be in a hole by himself and okay, he's scared the same as everybody else, but a couple of blokes in a hole together and something lands alongside; one bloke can say "Jesus, that was close,

25:00 mate!" You could share it, then get on with the job. And indignation or anger often overwhelmed things. I can remember being in a hole and we had a nice bloke by the name of George Amery, and there was shell-fire, and we were looking out of the hole and George threw himself to the ground, and then you see George get up and he reaches into his pocket. And what had happened,

25:30 he had broken the stem of his pipe. To get another pipe was virtually impossible. And George was standing there, swearing away, while shells were falling around him. His anger at breaking his pipe was worse than the shell-fire. I suppose that's another little incident, too, of people. I only knew ever of one

punch-up in our section. And I

26:00 can name the blokes. George Amery was one; Jack Manuel was another. They didn't like each other and eventually they had to have a little punch-up. And it was a moonlight night, and that was the other thing about a dumb lieut that was associated with us for a while, and these two blokes having a punch-up. And Jack Manuel was a lot bigger than George anyway. And the upshot of the fight was, the shorts we had, we had little straps on that went through little buckles. And

26:30 Jack Manuel's shorts fell down and while he was reaching for his shorts, George got in half a dozen good blows, and that just about squared it up so the blokes jumped on them and stopped the fight. They thought that that was fair then. But while they were having this little punch-up, this lieut [lieutenant] came along, and it looked as if we were breaking it up, and there was a fellow who was another special fellow by the name of Fred Reeves. Fred Reeves was a corporal at the time, and Fred

27:00 Reeves nudged him sideways with his bum and said, "Piss off. It's time little boys were in bed." And off he went. He was the same lieut that – a fellow we had by the name of Fred Davis is passing this truck, and this lieut is sitting up there and he's censoring letters, and he's got somebody's letter in his hand and he's laughing. And Fred, in indignation, leapt to the truck and snatched it out of his hand and said, "You rude bastard!" And he stormed

27:30 over to the captain, who was our officer in command of our unit, and said, "This fellow is laughing at people's letters he's censoring. And I want your guarantee he will never censor another letter of mine." I don't think the bloke ever really learned. I'm afraid he was somebody who kept putting his foot in his mouth. But going back to Fred Reeves, who was the fellow who interceded there. Fred would have been 32,

28:01 he was from Western Australia. I was chatting with Fred one day, in the desert, and he had two children. And I said, "Fred, with two children, why are you here?" He said, "Mate, I've got more reason to be here than you have. I'm here because I have got two children and that's what's worth fighting for." And Fred, he had natural leadership qualities. He was a corporal; he would have made a splendid officer, but he didn't want it.

28:31 And quick-witted and quick-minded. We had a big truck there. It had been a sig. [signals] truck, and it was dug in; it was a great long truck with benches on each side, and we'd often go in there of a night for a brew. And someone, I don't know how they'd done it, but the primus stove would be right near the doorway, and that's where

29:00 the water would be cooked onto, to cook a brew. And someone had filled the billy with petrol, and put it on top of the primus stove. Now Fred, not only obviously quick-witted, he was also a jolly good footballer, which was very handy; he spotted this and realised that as soon as it had gone on it had virtually come to the boil. It was bubbling. He instantly knew what it was. And he ran straight down and kicked the whole lot (he must have just got under the top of the primus) –

29:30 primus, billy can, and everything – right out the back door. We could have all burned to death in that truck, if he hadn't kicked it out. As soon as it hit the ground, of course, a couple of pints of petrol immediately caught fire, and we had someone screaming, "Put that light out!" But that was Fred, he was quick-witted. Very clever. I don't know who made the terrible mistake; but for Fred we could have burnt. And the other thing in that truck:

30:00 my mate George Henry again. George, I don't know how he ever got pasta or spaghetti or stuff like that, [but] George could make a splendid spaghetti Bolognese in the middle of the desert. He managed to get onions from somewhere, and bully beef and stuff like that, and he'd cook up a meat sauce. So of a night time, the blokes who weren't on duty, we'd be in a hut there and there'd be tinned peaches and stuff like that. And we had a

30:30 a lieut., who at the time I think was 2IC [second in command], he was a good fellow. And he was a tough cookie, very efficient. Anyway, he came into the hut, the blokes invited him in, and he joined in this splendid feed of ours, and as he left he said, "Well thanks very much, chaps." And George Henry said, "That's all right, we'd do the same for an Afghan." And the lieut said, "That's a memorable sig. Henry."

31:02 But he was one of the good fellows anyway.

Can you tell us more about recreation time. Did you have time for sport or things like that?

Oh yes, even in Palestine, the blokes played footy and played soccer and stuff like that. Us southerners who couldn't really play soccer, we kicked the northerners in the ankles and things like that. And that tended to equalise things. Yeah, there was

31:30 always sort of recreations. And then of course there was always humour. Because we were a sig. unit and we had people with some expertise in things, we had a sound system in a camp in Palestine, and we used to be woken up at six o' clock in the morning: somebody would put a record on. It was Flat Foot Floogie, and we were woken up to that every morning.

32:00 Someone with a sense of humour got up at three o' clock in the morning and ducked in there and turned the volume up full bore, then put the record on and then fled. So we were all woken up one morning, at about three o'clock in the morning, with Flat Foot Floogie and the Floui Floui. Bits and pieces of

humour, I suppose; in the desert, as wireless operators we were busy, and the other thing that happened with your section, too,

32:30 people were attached to other units. There'd be people sent out and attached to the brigade headquarters, and arty people, things like that, so there were some people out of your own section that you never saw for the entire time you were there. And the other thing, we were talking about prisoners before, the other interesting thing: early one morning there was a German prisoner brought in, and somebody said to us, "Look after this

33:00 bloke, will you?" And he had been picked up the night before and they were bringing him back for interrogation, and he was cold and he was hungry, so the blokes got him our standard breakfast which was porridge and then baked beans, which we had three hundred and sixty five days a year, and fed him and got him a mug of tea and gave him a smoke. And there was a fellow from the 51st Highland Division there, attached to us, and he could speak German and he was chatting away to him in German. And we were making this

33:30 German comfortable and happy and looking after him and being kind to him. And when they came to interview him, they were very angry with us because apparently the standard interview technique was that they had a tent where they [had] a fellow with the polished brass and Sam Brown belt on and people rushing in and saluting him, making him look like God Almighty, so for people from very well-disciplined armies, he was a splendid fellow with great authority. He could get

34:00 more answers out of people like that than most people. But we'd convinced this little German bloke that we were all charming and gentle anyway, and nobody would be nasty or rude to him and they didn't really like it. But he was just another fellow from the other side, just like us.

What were your thoughts about the German troops?

Well, we were very fortunate. In fact, the command on both

34:30 sides were concerned, because we had enormous respect for Rommel's Afrika Korps, and Rommel's Afrika Korps had enormous respect for the British Eighth Army. And from what we heard later of behaviour, reading about one of these desert units; some units would go into the desert with two or three Jeeps and attack other forces, then escape again. And

35:00 some of them did this at Tobruk, and they couldn't get out and they had to surrender, and when they surrendered, Italians kept shooting at them, mowing them down. And the Germans were very angry. Once people surrendered, that was it. So whatever happened – and the terrible things that happened in Germany, there were obviously a lot of vermin there – the Afrika Korps, they were magnificent. And from what we heard, too, of prisoners of war,

35:30 they were very well treated under Rommel's Afrika Korps, and looked after. So we had nothing but admiration for them, I suppose. To finish up on that, a friend of mine, Reg Ballard, who I hope you will be able to tape, recently went to the 60th anniversary at El Alamein, and he met a German coming down [from] the German memorial there. And Reg said they looked at each other and the German said to him, "Australian?" And he said, "Afrika Korps?" And the German

36:00 nodded and said, "Yes." And they shook hands, hugged and wept, and that was it. They were the enemy and they had to try and kill each other, so – I have another little story about a fellow who was taken prisoner with [the] 2/28th, but he was telling us one time in Tobruk that he was on a motorbike and Germans Messerschmitt'd and machine-gunned him and he leapt behind a boulder,

36:30 and hid behind that. And the plane came back the other way machine-gunning again, and went on. The fellow must have eventually run out of ammunition, and he said eventually the plane flew over, tipped on its side and the pilot waved to him and he waved back. They had a job to try and kill each other; they didn't have to [hate] each other. And I think that's fortunate if you can be like that, yeah.

We personally talked to Reg, I think it was last

37:00 **week.**

Oh, did you?

Did you serve with him?

Yeah, I knew him for years. Look Reg, what happened with us, too, I'm secretary of our association, so I received a letter from the DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs], asking for people to be nominated to go to El Alamein, And so I had to fill in the forms, and then Reg had to fill in his form.

37:32 And it was an A4 form with about four or five lines on it, and it had a question something to the effect, "What was your activity at El Alamein?" And Reg put down, "Carried out communications as instructed." You can imagine the bull that went into some of them. And then there was another one a bit further on, "What were your activities in the other theatres of war?" And Reg put, "See above."

38:00 So I wrote a letter, and I didn't know Paul Stevens was a major general – he was the bloke in it – so I wrote a cover note to Paul Stevens and I said that you could see by the form that Reg Ballard was a very modest man. But I had served with him, and that Reg was a splendid soldier in every meaning of the

word. And he would share his last smoke, his last scrap of food and his last drop of water with you, and he would risk his life without hesitation. Now whether that had any influence or not, but

38:30 Reg got a gurnsey, and we were very pleased. He was a lovely fellow, Reg, yeah.

I think he had a great time, too.

Oh yes he did. And he had that charming personality, so he could get on with anybody. Including Montgomery's son. Yeah, lovely.

We're just at the end of this tape, so we'll just take a break.

Tape 4

00:30 **I'd just like to get you to explain the camouflage nets, what you were doing?**

They were just thick string-type mesh, I suppose. Probably a couple of inches apart, and you threaded strips of hessian through them of various colours, and that broke up the outlines of the vehicles. And I suppose there was other things they wanted to see, we had very little equipment there, and early on they were making up mock-up tanks and

01:00 things, made out of wood, look as if they're dug in and part camouflaged, to try and convince the Germans we had a lot more equipment than we did have. Because we really had very little equipment indeed. But with our camouflage stuff we eventually dug our trucks into embankments and things like that. If you were unlucky you got trucks hit, but we didn't see much damage of that sort.

Did you have a lot of digging to do?

01:30 Oh, it was easy enough digging because you dug into sand hills. And where I spent quite a bit of time on the salt flats, you couldn't dig into the flats. You dig down a foot and there would be saltwater there. But it was lovely [to] walk on, it was easy to walk on and nice and flat and crunchy. If you were in that area, you could wander around in shorts without any boots on, which was very nice. Further inland, of course, it wasn't really all that good; in the sand

02:00 hills, dusty areas, and when dust storms were on, you could go in the set and be working there for six or eight hours, and come back to the hole that you lived in, and find that your blanket and your rifle and everything else was under about three inches of sand, where the sand had blown in. So that could be irritating and frustrating. But we were lucky in other things, even being able to swim. But even that

02:30 had a little background. I can remember one time we were swimming and we could see something bobbing in the water a bit further out. And eventually we swam out and dragged it in, and it was a dead Canadian airman, and he had a slash across his head where obviously, I guess, as he bailed out maybe the tail plane hit him. But when you think that, if you're in the water, and you're two hundred yards from the beach, you might just as well be miles out to sea. You wouldn't have a clue which way to swim. So that poor fellow could have come quite close down to the shore

03:00 and never knew, and he just died in the water. There were little sad things like that. I can remember one sadness was seeing a couple of Spitfires coming back, and one is coming back very slow, and weaving from side to side, and his mate is over above him, circling him, and obviously trying to talk him home. And you see him come

03:30 slowly closer and closer to the earth, until he hit the earth and burst into flames. And you think for the fellow in that other plane, it was probably like losing a brother, to see that happen. Although for most things you went through, there were little things that were so personal, they could get to you. But for months, we just ground on and kept in communication and did our jobs. I was lucky, too. I acquired a

04:00 German BMW captured motorbike and sidecar. I have no recollection of how I acquired it, but I had it for quite a long time and I rode that round a lot. In fact, I've got photos there you might look at afterwards. And I had Robbie Caruthers with me, and we were roaring up the road on this motorbike, and Robbie said, "I think we passed the last sign, mate. I think we should go back."

04:30 And we passed the sign that told us, you go another two hundred yards and you're under enemy fire, or something like that. I can't remember what it was now. So we turned around and came back very quickly. I didn't wish to be under any enemy fire if I could avoid it.

What was that bike like?

Oh, it was a beautiful motorbike, they were so far ahead of us. That was a shaft drive, horizontally-opposed cylinders. They were about thirty years ahead of everybody else in the motorbike

05:00 business, I'd say. They were terrific. I enjoyed it. The other incredible thing, I suppose, with that bike: I went a couple of years ago to Queensland to a dedication ceremony for a plaque of ours at Rocky Creek, commemorating the battles, and I went up there as secretary of the association. And while I was up

there I was talking to a fellow who had a Norton motorbike, a British motorbike, and I had a photograph of the motorbike I had, and showed it to him. I was taking it up there to

05:30 my granddaughter, and he told me that motorbike was brought back to Australia. It was in South Australia. And although ordinary other ranks in Australian Army had ability to pinch things, I think upper echelon had the ability to pinch things, too, because he suggested to me that there were about fourteen Norton motorbikes pinched from the British Army depots during the war and loaded on ships and brought back to Australia. And he had one of them. So, yeah.

Did the

06:00 **Don-Rs try to get that motorbike off you?**

No, they were quite happy with their own bikes. No, that was my motorbike. I kept that until after the last battle of El Alamein, when the Eighth Army followed Rommel up the coast, and the Ninth Division was coming back to Australia, because we had a government with enough strength to tell Winston Churchill to go forth, or words to that effect; that they were bringing the Ninth Division back to

06:30 Australia. I was in the rear guard at El Alamein at that stage, and I rode my motorbike around quite a bit. And when I'd finished and we were coming out, I had to drive a truck out, I took my motorbike to the local MPs, the probos, and said, "Can you blokes use this?" And they said, "Yeah, we'll have that." So that was the last I saw of it. I gave it to them, yeah.

Did you have trouble getting petrol for that bike?

Oh, no,

07:00 plenty of petrol about. It was no trouble at all.

I was just wondering how those sandstorms you mentioned affected the sets you were working on?

Well, we tried to keep those well covered. Sometimes with little two-men tents, or really, a lot of us were in wireless vans that were dug in. So we were covered. We were okay. It was just you had to sleep in rough conditions. But you looked after the sets, yeah. And we were

07:30 fortunate there, I suppose. Say when we were in the Lebanon, and before that, we had a set which was called the 109 set, which you tuned into the frequency, and you weren't game to move it, because to lose your frequency and to lose your communication was disastrous. So you couldn't move it. But in the desert, we had sets that, once you got your frequency, you could lock it on. And then you could swing around to other things, so

08:00 we had the advantages. We could listen to somebody singing Lili Marlene, or the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] news service. We could tune into a German communications and tell them they were achtung Schweinhünder, and things like that. We could do rude things like that. So that was an advantage, having a set where you could actually communicate with the rest of the world. And I think that was where,

08:33 golly, I tuned into some of the various musics of this world, and thought, 'Gee, later on I hope I can see this show'. Or whatever like that. I heard the music of Porgie and Bess there for the first time. I vowed if ever Porgie and Bess came out I would see it. And I did. And loved it, yeah. So, I was lucky.

09:00 **What were some of the songs of that period?**

There were some extraordinary vulgar songs where fellows in the army tended to change the words a bit, you see. And there was And Bless Them All, of course, didn't finish up 'bless Them all' at [all] you know, about blessing all the sergeant majors. Well they weren't blessing them and their bastard

09:30 sons, as they were referred to, so the army did change the script a little. I can't bring them to mind. There were lovely popular songs. I suppose songs of those eras, they were gentle love songs. And everybody loved Vera Lynn. And Lili Marlene, and all that sort of stuff.

10:00 When we were in the Lebanon, we heard French stuff that didn't get back to Australia for many years. Chet Aumbrey [?UNCLEAR], was one. But the other thing, I suppose, when we were in the Lebanon they brought out – it's terrible my aging memory when I lose the names of things – which had Clark Gable in;

10:30 the great American classic of the plantation era, and stuff like that.

Gone With the Wind?

Gone With the Wind. They booked a theatre out for Gone With the Wind, and the army just flooded in. That was one we saw. I suppose I'm leaping ahead, but I'll forget it anyway; on Morotai, I think, many, many years later I saw a most wonderful film

11:00 - and it's just now that we've had the death of Gregory Peck, and it was a Gregory Peck film – and it was Keys of the Kingdom. I suppose I'm leaping ahead years now. Your normal padres were attached to a unit, and it didn't matter whether your padre was Protestant or Catholic, or what he was; he was

supposed to administer

11:30 the service, and most of them did and most of them were great blokes. And we had one come to us in Morotai, and he was telling us; well, he wasn't telling us, he was telling the Catholics in the tent about this wonderful film, Keys of the Kingdom. And he didn't talk to other blokes, and we thought, 'Gee, this fellow's peculiar'. And when we saw Keys of the Kingdom – Keys of the Kingdom was about

12:00 a priest who wouldn't have cared what you were, he would have administered his Christian spirit to you. And it was a beautiful, beautiful film we thought. We used to away and we'd think, "How can this priest talk about the wonder of Keys of the Kingdom and he's never learnt the bloody lesson?" Anyway, later on in New Guinea I was in a dressing station.

12:30 With my own stupidity, I'd fallen down the face of a coconut palm and I also went down with quite bad dysentery. And I was in this advanced dressing station, and it was as rough as guts. Thatch on the roof, and I was lying there, feeling rotten, and a batch of fellows were brought in on the other side, and they were laying there waiting for operations. The doctors worked terribly hard in these places. They had an operating tent where a generator used to go and they'd be operating until one o' clock in the morning.

13:00 You'd see them unshaven, unbathed, because they didn't even have time; they'd fall asleep, and get up and get to work again. Some fellows that were brought in had been hit by shell-fire, and some of them had bits off their feet and stuff like that. Anyway, I can remember one fellow talking to the doctor and he was saying, "After I'm done, can I wait here until my mate's done, then we could go down on the same barge and we could finish up in the same hospital together?" "Oh, yeah." The doctors were

13:30 terrific like that. And then a little while later this priest arrived, and apparently at this stage he was attached to their unit. And he had a good Irish accent. He'd get maybe a dozen fellows lying there, and he went to one fellow, "Can I do anything for you, son? Do you want me to write to your mother?" Then he'd go and ask questions, and he'd miss a fellow, and he'd go ask somebody else, and he came to a fellow at the end and he said, "Can I

14:00 do anything for you, son?" He said, "Yes, Father," – sorry, I'm terribly emotional about this – "you can go back to my Jewish and Protestant mates; you can see what you can do for them." And then he said, "I never want to see you again as long as I live."

14:34 But he was a rarity. And of course we were so sick. Here I am as an old bloke and I can weep, but even at that age, all the sick young blokes, we all finished up in tears then, anyway. It was absolutely astounding, you know? Anyway, I was glad to get that out; that's a story that's

15:00 way ahead. I was glad to get out of that dressing station, because there were some blokes who were 'slap happy' and they were sitting in holes with their tin hats on, and I thought, "God, if I don't get out of here I'm going to be as balmy as these blokes are." But I recovered from my dysentery and I made my way back to my unit, but I'm years ahead. I'll have to go back to the Middle East with you.

Okay. In the Middle East was there anybody who was 'slap happy' or 'bomb happy'?

Only those blokes that I mentioned.

15:30 Thankfully, I don't know of any others. Some fellows had incredible courage, not that I really knew of them, but you can read about fellows like Derek, who just cradled a machine-gun in his arms when they were almost overrun by a tank and burned his arms and

16:00 fired the slits of the tank so other blokes could rush out and put grenades in the tracks so they could move. And things like that. I read of another story, which very [much] impressed me, of a fellow who was a gunner, and there were Italian tanks advancing on them; I think there were six. They only had one actual gun working in the unit.

16:30 A lot of fellows were badly injured; they were nearly out of ammunition. Calistan his name was, Sergeant Calistan. A lieut rushed to the other anti-tank guns in a jeep and loaded shells into the jeep and rushed back. The jeep was hit on his way back and was on fire. He unloaded shells. The colonel who was acting as offsider, he was wounded in the head, and Calistan waited until the tanks were within two hundred yards of them, then wiped them out one by one.

17:00 And apparently, his comments afterwards about the Italian tanks was he said, "Poor bastards, they didn't have a chance." But his coolness and courage under fire, well all of those fellows, some fellows were like that. Just splendid fellows, yeah.

What do you think the most courageous thing you saw was?

I think

17:30 just plain existing. I mean, being back behind the blokes behind the guns, towards the end, where the last battle of Alamein took place; holes were dug by sappers in the ground, at night, because they were under enemy observation. And then we moved up at night, and put our sets in the holes, and dug

18:00 ourselves little trenches to lie in, to sleep in. Then we had to stay below the ground all day, because we couldn't be observed. And that was the first time we really knew what was going on I suppose. We were

prepared for the big barrage. We stayed in our holes all day long, and I always remember, I got a sheet of iron from

18:30 somewhere, I don' t know what, and I put that over the sleeping trench that I was in, which was about eighteen inches deep and just wide enough for me to lie in. I could never turn around and lie with my head down the end under the iron, I had to lie at the open end. I couldn't do that. So I'd go to sleep with my tin hat over my face, in case stuff dropped on to me from above. And we just stared there till the big barrage started, at ten o' clock at night.

19:02 And I suppose that was exciting, it was thrilling, you could sit in the hole and whistle, and the whistle would come out in vibrations because the whole of the earth vibrated. There was almost a thousand guns all went off in the same instance, and then they pounded away all night. But I think for a lot of us, you thought of the young blokes on the other end. And how terrified you would be, with all that going over. And later

19:30 on you had other things like – about every twenty minutes you'd see eighteen Boston bombers fly over and bomb an area, and they just went on all day, day after day. El Alamein was supposed to last only a few days. But it lasted a couple of weeks. They were incredible how they hung on. But during that time, there were enormous losses in infantry, particularly where,

20:00 you know, a whole company of three hundred men could finish up being reduced to a dozen with killed and wounded. But I was lucky. We got occasional shell-fire back again. The set I was on was attached to command artillery units for counter battery fire. And we had a line to

20:30 an officer who was supposed to talk to them. Now he wasn't trained in operating radio sets, and normally our operation was with Morse code, but he had a little microphone with a press button it, but of course, unless he let go of the press button it was still transmitting, you couldn't stop it transmitting. So we used to have to pull plugs out on the set. And eventually one of the blokes, George Amery again, this fellow I talked about who had the little punch-up,

21:00 he rushed over there to sit in the hole with him. And you were on the earphones, and you could hear George saying, "Let go of the bloody press button!" Yelling at this officer to let go. But that was our job, really, to communicate with people in counter battery fire. And we just worked our sets there. And that's where Horrie Barwick, I don't think I mentioned him: Horrie Barwick was our section sergeant, he was a bit older than us. He was really a splendid fellow and a wonderful sergeant.

21:30 And Horrie would come up to us every night, at the various holes, wherever we are, to visit everyone, to see that everyone was okay. Horrie eventually was commissioned in the field, but he really was a great soldier and he would have made a great officer, too, yeah. Yeah, he was a great bloke.

Can you give me an example of some of the messages and communications you were sending?

Well, most of it, of course being wireless operators, was in code. And

22:00 our messages were in five figure code. They weren't letters. People like Reg Ballard, who you interviewed, even if he was sending in code, on line, it would have been figure code. And a lot of his stuff would have been plain language. We used mostly five figure groups, so you didn't really know what you were sending anyway. But that was the other, I suppose, about wireless operators that people wouldn't appreciate.

22:33 We had more work to do, I might add, in the islands, then we did in other places. But you could be sending away or you could be receiving a message, and all of a sudden it would stop and the fellow would be going, 'dit dit dit, dit dit dit', and you knew exactly what had happened. You could became so used to it, it was like a language, and you would look down at your message pad and in your mind you might put a couple of five figure

23:00 groups, and then you'd be gazing into space and still sending it, and not really know what you were sending, but your brain was doing that, and then you would look down and you were frantically looking to find out where you were on the message form. And even though you sending those figures it still didn't mean a thing. And that's when you reach the stage and went 'dit dit dit, dit dit dit'. But if you remind me later about New Guinea, I should tell you another tale about that.

23:31 So we didn't really know what we were sending. We knew whether the messages were important, or they weren't important. But in action, it had to be like that.

What was that barrage like in terms of sound and – ?

Oh, it was beyond belief, the sound. Actually, it wouldn't be since the First World War; that would have been the biggest barrage since the First World War. And it just went on all night long. And the whole sky lit up. In fact,

24:02 there was a lady who went to the El Alamein celebration with Reg, and she was sixty miles away, and I guess thereabouts, in a tent hospital – I can't remember, but she did mention it: hundreds of beds, waiting for the wounded. And she saw the whole sky light up. And that was miles and miles away.

24:31 The sound was quite incredible. And it varied behind us, with heavy guns, which boomed very heavy, yeah, it was wonderful and terrible at the same time I would say.

Was there a particular smell to a lot of gun action?

No, no. I suppose the cordite smell was in the air. Yeah,

25:00 I didn't really notice that at all. We were just mainly concerned there weren't too many coming down around us. But we didn't have many around us. I was just lucky with that.

And how long did it go for?

Well, that went unceasing virtually all night long, and then from then on, it just boomed away. A lot of fellows were absolutely worn down, because they couldn't get any sleep.

25:32 And we had a bit come back near us, and there were a few casualties of ours, but other than that it was mostly those blokes in the forward area. And then, of course, they had to move forward and that's when they had very big casualties. But it was a couple of weeks. It just went on and on.

When you were in that action, how did you get

26:00 **information of what was actually going on?**

It would be the officers in the various areas that would be communicating back as to what they required, I guess, in the way of ammunition and all that sort of stuff. And it depended on what communications were in. Communication to the different artillery batteries, that would be coming through with us. And some of the stuff that did come back to us, at that time of

26:30 course, was in plain language, where somebody would be questioning counter battery work. And you could have the staff captain, who was the bloke asking for it, talking in plain language to them. So there was a bit of plain language went on, just in the height of battle like that. The other thing we would tune in to was, and this wasn't necessarily at that time, if we weren't very busy on the set you could tune in and pick up stuff with tank battles.

27:02 Whether it carried. I'm sure I don't know. But the British upper crust stuff was peculiar to us. And I think they probably had more, because the officers could be of a particular social status, and automatically became officers when they shouldn't have been, maybe there was a bit of a problem with some of them, too. But we had other silly things like, there'd be a bloke who, I mean he would be incredibly

27:30 courageous because he was on a tank; he could be saying, "One of my children is on fire." Which meant there was a bloody tank burning and blokes were probably burning to death there. And we used to hear this proper upper crust language and think, "This really is stupid." But there were terrible things you heard of fellows seeing a tank on fire – I never seen it – and thinking, "Oh

28:00 God!" And then seeing a bloke coming out of a tank, with his arms on the top and coming out, but then when he came out he didn't have any legs, and he was dead minutes later. He dragged himself out and both his legs were gone. Apparently some of the shells hit the armour plate on the turrets on the tank, and they might hit, but the concussion would take a big piece of steel with sharp edges off the sides of your hand, on the inside, and it

28:30 then traveled around the inside of the tank with the same trajectory as the shell that had hit the outside. And then, of course, did terrible damage. I think that must have been an awful job, in tanks, where maybe if you had a fear of claustrophobia or something, as well as a fear of getting blown to bits, it would have been awful.

How would you find out those stories? Were they [circulated] at the time or have they been found out since?

Oh, when you talked to various fellows who saw that, or were in action

29:00 in those areas and saw those things happen, yeah. Yeah, it was mainly word of mouth. I mean we could see tank battles from a distance; fortunately we weren't close enough to be injured by them, but that's what we saw. And then you see odd planes come down and things like that. And we traveled around, when we could, you couldn't do it much in the end, you travel around the desert and see different things when you could. People had pet chameleons. Little

29:30 chameleons that would sit on their shoulders while they were sending their sets. You would pick up all sorts of material from around the desert. And the desert was interesting. It had the salt bush and the sand hills and the sunsets were gorgeous. And if you were by the sea it was handy, too, yeah.

It was there you were able to go swimming occasionally?

Yeah, we went swimming regularly.

Was that dangerous out on the beach?

No, not really. I mean there was always a chance of someone coming down and strafing. But it wasn't

really dangerous.

30:00 And later on when we were further inland, well, we couldn't do any swimming then. Towards the end of Alamein I was far from the sea, yeah. But the Ninth Division held the coast road, so a fair bit of the Ninth Division could get to the sea. Other people further into the Qatar depression never ever saw it, and their life must have been much more difficult.

And did you have anything to do with German prisoners? Immediately after, or during?

No.

30:30 Only on the two occasions where I was much ashamed of the behaviour of people. Oh, there was an occasional one that came back. I remember one fellow, he was determined to get back to his lines, and blokes had to hold him down in the end. Because as soon as he could he would get up and start running. And he didn't care. Nobody was going to shoot him. So blokes would yell out, "Jump on that bloke!" And there would be three or four blokes jump on him and

31:00 bring him back again. But he just wanted to get back, poor fellow. And he was prepared to risk losing his life to go back.

What were those occasions where you were ashamed of Australians?

The only time I was really ashamed was seeing the Australians ready to take wedding rings and photos and anything off German prisoners. I don't didn't have any reason

31:30 other than that to feel really ashamed of anyone. People were different. I suppose the best way to describe it, well it was people I mentioned like Reg who would share, and you depended on each other. You were like brothers. You shared your last scrap of food, your last bit of food, your last smoke. And got straight out of a hole to help another bloke who was there. But there were the odd ones

32:00 that didn't. And it was later on in New Guinea, I suppose, I don't know whether I should talk about it, but the odd ones that if they got something special, they would sneak away to have it, and they wouldn't risk their lives. But I'd say, out of the section I was with, and I suppose with reinforcements and blokes coming in and going out, I probably knew about fifty fellows in the section,

32:30 a section was normally about thirty, and there would be only two fellows of all my experience there, who I would say fell into that class of the fellows who wouldn't do their share. I mean, sometimes fellows wouldn't do their share, but blokes like that who I would be really ashamed of. There were odd fellows, too, interesting individuals. I remember Jimmy Stuart.

33:00 Jimmy Stuart; when he was reading, he would be completely absorbed, and he could be sitting outside the hole if he was off duty and he was reading something. And you could hear a plane coming over. And you could tell the German planes, because the sequencing was not quite the same, and the noise 'burrrrrrrr'; it would waver. You could hear a plane coming over, and it would be interesting to look at Jimmy Stuart and you'd think, "I wonder how long it's going to take?" And eventually you'd see him stop reading and he'd

33:30 tip his head on one side, and he'd listen and then he'd hear the German plane. And then, of course, we'd head frantically for holes when the plane came over. But the other thing, too, was blokes had dogs in the desert, not many of them, but a few of them. We had a dog; our blokes picked him up in the Lebanon. They found some kids trying to hang this little pup. And 'Rags' he was called, just a little terrier. A lovely little terrier. So he stayed with the blokes. And then he went to Alamein with them. He used to ride around on the water

34:00 truck. But you would see; dogs used to be faster than blokes to go for the holes. You would see a plane come over and dogs used to go like a rocket for a dug-out. Because the normal thing, you know, the blokes that owned the dogs would rush for the dug-out and then they'd call the dogs, and then they'd hug the dogs while they're there. And the dogs, of course, got scared of all the bombs and stuff. And you'd see little Rags go like a rocket for a hole. And I know the fellows who had the water truck, what they were worried about was coming back to Australia, because you couldn't really bring a dog

34:30 back. And they were worried about how they were going to smuggle him in, because they'd looked after him for years, and they didn't want him to get ill-treated. Anyway, after Alamein, he jumped off a truck and was run over by another truck in Cairo. Which was probably the best thing that could have happened to little Rags. But fellows had those little things like that that were great for them, yeah.

35:00 **I just want to clarify. A situation you described earlier in the day about a man taking a wedding ring, That was for water, wasn't it?**

There had been a significant battle where there were a lot of German prisoners taken, and they'd put up barbed wire cages, and there were so many fellows in there, and I suppose there was a tanker in there, but there was

35:30 one water point in there, and they were all thirsty in there. It was jolly hot. And there was plenty of access to water outside. There were a lot of fellows outside. Prisoners were throwing their bottles over, and blokes would fill their bottles up and chuck them back for them. But when I saw this one fellow

indicate, and this bloke did take his wedding ring off and throw it over the fence to him, with his bottle, and I couldn't have fought my way out of a paper bag, but I

36:00 threatened to demolish that fellow. And I had a handful of sand, and I said this was going to be the first thing in his eyes and stuff. And I was just livid with rage, and shame, and anyway he threw it back again. And then I was yelling to other blokes that there were absolute bastards here, who were taking photographs off these German prisoners and wedding rings and stuff like that. So there were plenty of fellows going around making sure it didn't happen. But there was the odd piece

36:30 of vermin like that, that you get anywhere at all. But that was really the only time I felt totally ashamed, I suppose. And I virtually wiped that out of my memory for years and years. I didn't want to remember that. But most blokes were generous and they weren't bullying, they were kind and normal, yeah. He was an exception.

37:00 But I suppose my main reason for doing this, I still grieve for so many: the volunteers and there were so many young ones, they could be 20, 21, 22, and Depression times and hard times at home. I've had a full life and a family and a loving

37:30 relationship, I've been very lucky in my life. And some of those young fellows, they never even fell in love. They never even had a love affair, let alone a family and children. As a very old bloke, I grieve for these fellows, 20, 22, who

38:00 gave their lives, believing absolutely in what they were doing, and I think that was important, too.

Who did you feel you were fighting for? Or serving?

Freedom, democracy. I think the overrun of Europe by Nazi Germany – we were very much Empire stuff then, too. Although I think the other end of the Empire, no doubt.

38:30 Winston Churchill did a great job in the job he was doing, but he would quite cheerfully have sacrificed us in Australia. That's how I felt, then and at the end of it. And I always felt for the New Zealanders. I mean, New Zealand had a division; I think they might have finished up with a brigade by the time they'd finished with all their casualties and their small population. And they didn't come home. They went to Italy, of course, and fought on through Italy. I think we were fortunate in having

39:00 a government who could tell the British government that no, we weren't going on, we were coming home. There was a job to do at home. I suppose after El Alamein then, I had an enjoyable time as a rear guard, riding around the desert on the motorbike. Then we came back into Palestine, then the main thing after that was transferring our equipment to the British depots. And

39:30 I drove trucks with twenty-five pounders on the back, and bofors guns and stuff like that, from depots to the British depots. And then we went to Haifa, to a British barracks to sort out all the radio equipment and transfer those to the British. And we were very difficult there in that we weren't under the control of the British and we weren't

40:00 under the control of this sergeant major who used to glare at us, and think we were terrible, because we slummocked around instead of marched briskly everywhere. And Tom Maloney again, as we went into this ordinance depot, Tom would be saying, "Have you got the fuses?" and "Who has the gunpowder?" There were Jewish guards on the entry there, and I think they were totally confused as to whether we really were people who

40:30 were going to blow the place up, or whether we were just insane. I think in the end they just decided that all Australians were insane. Yeah.

Can I just stop you there.

Tape 5

00:33 **I'd like to hear more about your regimental sergeant major?**

Okay, he was Ron Pal. He was a warrant officer one, I think. First time I really came in contact with him was in the Lebanon, in Tripoli. We were to have a visit, apparently, from the Duke of York, and we were going to have a guard. And Ron Pal; in those days you were selected according to height, which was difficult if you were only five foot seven, of course,

01:00 because you never got on the guard, or maybe it was good. But Ron Paul got a few of us lined up, and he made the announcement then that we were to be the guard of honour. And we were to 'make the grenadier guardsmen look like war recruits or God help us'. And we did too, I think. We did a great job. But Ron; I remember him at Alamein, and at Alamein regimental sergeant majors had enormous power, and you'd have some young lieutenant walking across, and you could hear

01:30 Ron Pal call out, "Mr Wilson," or whatever his name was. And you knew the young lieutenant was absolutely terrified, because he was going to be taken in and castigated severely about his behaviour by

the sergeant major. And Ron had great power. But at the same time he made a wonderful cup of coffee. You could be passing and he'd say, "Would you like a brew?" And he brought the billy to the boil, took it off the fire and chucked a handful of coffee in, a pinch of mustard and a pinch of salt;

02:00 then he poured you a cup of coffee. He was a great fellow. He had enormous power but he knew who he could speak to, who he could ask, and who he could tell, and that was the great difference.

So it sounds like he had quite good discretion?

Oh yes, he did. And it was like, I suppose, before we left the Middle East, we had a new captain; Kelly, he was in charge of us.

02:30 He came from Nineteenth Cav [Cavalry], and he took over our section before we left the Middle East. And Don Kelly was very good. He looked after us for the rest of the war and we looked after him. He was a barrister from Sydney. He became a circuit judge, in his civilian life. But he was great. He knew who he could ask to do things and who he had to tell to do things. He was a good fellow, yeah. And I suppose

03:00 we were talking before, when we were getting rid of our equipment and handing it over to the British, we were in a British barracks. And the food there was appalling. I always felt sorry for the British soldiers. They weren't nearly as well looked after as us. If it was sardines, then you got a tin of sardines chucked in your mess tin. But with the British, you were likely to get one sardine. And

03:30 I remember when we went to lunch there one day, and one of [the] fellows looked at it, and he saw this, and he said, "Can you bloody well afford it?" And he turned it up and bashed it back into the main bin again. But they had plenty of bread, plenty of margarine and their food was poor. So we were assigned to this mob, and we told Don Kelly how badly fed we were. And it was around Christmas time I think, and he demanded all the Christmas parcels from other people in the section. He wanted all donations,

04:00 and it was all sent up to us so we could feed properly. So he was a good bloke.

Can you tell me more about that Christmas?

I hardly remember anything about it, except that we were just there. They always had Christmas dinner and things like that. That was about all there was to it. I suppose the other significant person we should remember too, before we left

04:30 the Middle East to come home; we were all in a camp that was well guarded, because you had to be careful. The Arabs would pinch anything. And you always took your bolt out of your rifle, and put it in your bed. And rifles were chained to tent poles of a night, but there had been cases known where there had been enough Arabs to lift the entire tent up and the entire tent poles and steal all the rifles. And they took terrible risks, because they could get shot. All the guards were armed of course.

05:00 But anyway, it was Horrie Woodford who was our major, and he came out to inspect us, and he looked around, and he said, "The tent lines look like a brothel on Sunday morning." To which somebody yelled out, "You would bloody well know!" So Horrie's response then was, "Stand forward the man who said that!" And of course no fool moved forward. So he punished us. He marched us over the sandhills in the desert. The only thing was that Horrie marched

05:30 with us, and all the other officers had to march with us. So when Horrie was punishing us, he took exactly the same dose himself. But that was Horrie. But he was a great major, and when he came back to Australia, he left us then and became a lieut colonel in another unit. But we always felt he belonged to us. He was very special, very tough, very hard but very fair. He was another fellow I remembered long and hard.

06:00 I remembered him at reunions after the war. Horrie lost his sight, but he never complained. He would come to a reunion and blokes would be introduced and he would say, "It's lovely to see you again." And he was totally blind. So, he was special.

I wondered if there was any chance to observe things like birthdays during these years?

No, I never thought about them. The only thing I thought about,

06:32 I had my nineteenth birthday the day before Alamein went off. The big Alamein thing. I beg your pardon, I had my twentieth birthday. I had my nineteenth birthday in the Middle East; my twentieth birthday when Alamein went off. I had my twenty-first in New Guinea. When I had my twenty-first I was sure I would survive. And I'm still surviving.

07:00 But, you know, that was it, you just had birthdays. No birthday celebrations, never had a birthday cake. My Mum would have been grieving.

Did you receive cards or letters around that time?

Oh, well, people sent cakes over in tins and stuff. You received cards. You received correspondence. But it was difficult because sometimes correspondence didn't get home.

07:30 And I know that my mother hadn't had a letter from me for months, when I was in the Middle East at

one stage of the game. It was difficult. But otherwise we kept in communication, reasonable communication. And I look at a letter I wrote; I've still got it now, it's the only letter that's left I think, and it was written when the big battle of Alamein was on. And I look at it and I think, 'I was just a boy', writing that letter. It was just a boy's letter, yeah, and that's the way it was.

08:02 **What kind of things did you say in the letter?**

Oh, just described what was going on. The bombardment and the vibrations in the wall and all that sort of thing. And the excitement of it. And tank battles and planes going over, and stuff like that. Normally you said very little about it. Letters were censored. Except that everybody knew about that big battle.

08:30 That's why we could write about it, I guess. Other times it was stuffy little letters, very little writing.

What kinds of limitations did censorship put on what you wrote?

They weren't even supposed to know who we were, or what we were doing, or where we were. Really, so it made letters very stuffy and insignificant, yeah. But I suppose, when you look at it now, probably

09:00 the enemy knew where we were anyway, so it didn't really matter much.

What about any little tricks that people used to get around the censors?

Oh yes, we had the odd ones. We had a lovely fellow, I've mentioned him before, Tiny Oates, who belted up the pols. When we got back from the Middle East we went on leave, and Tiny was 32,

09:31 and we had three weeks leave, and when we came back, Tiny hadn't came back. Tiny was a week late. Tiny was AWOL for a week. So Tiny explained; when he came back he told us he was married. He said before he went away, he was a mop/brushware manufacturer, and he went in to his various clients to explain to them that he was going away, and that his Father was looking after his little business. And he said he went into this office and there was a young lady there, and

10:00 while he was waiting for the manager of the business he was chatting to her, and said he was pawing the floor with his size twelve boots and trying to make polite conversation. And for something to say, he said, "Will you write to me?" And she said, "Yes, of course." So she wrote to him, and they wrote right throughout the Middle East. And he said he even got a letter when they got to Fremantle, and it was a 'Yours sincerely, Dorothy' letter. And when he got to Melbourne, we had three weeks leave, and she was on holidays; she was away for the first two weeks, so he

10:30 really only had the last week. So they had this rapid romance. She was an old woman of 28, of course. And he said he was walking down to catch the train on his final day, when he had to come back to camp. And they're walking past Scots Church, and he said, "Will you marry me?" And she said, "Yes, I will." And they went in and got married immediately.

11:00 So he said after he was married he was worried, then, lest she become pregnant or something. And he was worried about transferring some money to her, and she laughed at him, quite happily, because her mother owned a whole block of shops out in Fairfield somewhere. She was quite a wealthy woman, too. But anyway, so Tiny was lovely in the way he could tell us things from the heart. And he was a very proper and honourable man. So Tiny took the week off for their honeymoon, then came back.

11:30 And he was a lovely man, and he looked after her wonderfully well. But mind you, he came home from one reunion slightly worse for drink, and she locked him out. He told us that, too. Which was very rare that Tiny would drink. He was a lovely bloke. I used to see letters to The Age, signed by ED Oates, indignant letters of things that were done wrong, and things like that. He was a very proper chap. And I heard later

12:00 in life, once again about Tiny, after his death and his sister in Sydney wrote to me. He had a widowed sister in Sydney. He supported her and put her son through a proper education and stuff like that. So he was just a lovely man.

That's a lovely story of correspondence. Did you yourself have a girlfriend that you were writing to?

12:32 No I didn't. I worked at Myers before the war, or early part of the war at least, and when I came home I went to see the girls in the – I worked in the toiletries, perfumeries department, and all the beautiful women worked there. They used to select them out. So I went down there, and went out with a few of the girls there, and one of them I knew. Who was Molly Evans, and she was

13:00 at one stage acting as mannequin for bridal dresses and stuff like that, so she was quite a doll. So we went out, and she was four years older than me. I was just a boy, but we got engaged, and we were engaged for the rest of the war. We got married after the war.

So you got engaged before you left?

No, after I came home from the Middle East.

On leave.

On leave, yeah.

But you knew her before

13:30 **the war?**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So you must have written during that time when you were not engaged –

I didn't write from over in the Middle East. It was only from the Middle East onwards. And then we wrote a lot, yeah.

So how long did it take when you returned from the Middle East for you to know that this was a very important relationship?

Well, we only really had three weeks. It was all very rapid.

14:01 Yeah, we were out most of the time during that time. We got engaged then, really. Whether under normal circumstances you would have gone that quick; but I was going away anyway. I was going up to Queensland, at that stage of the game. So it was back up to Queensland then. A few of the blokes got married when they came back from the Middle East. They'd already been engaged before the war, yeah. Or before they went away.

It must have been

14:30 **terribly hard to be apart for those years that you were in the Pacific.**

Yeah, it was. And sometimes it fell apart, you know. I don't think people have got to point any moral fingers or anything, but some people got lonely. Some people found somebody new. Some people were badly suited to start with, and they fell apart. But I think for most of us, it was commitment made, and you kept your commitment, and you weren't

15:00 two-timing with anybody else. But I can go into detail why some of us wouldn't think of two-timing with someone else later on, if you wish.

Sure.

Well, I suppose I could describe it now. When we came home from the Middle East, we had a little talk by a doctor, an army physician. He was actually in the army, but he only had one arm. He was a lovely bloke, and he talked about

15:30 health in the Middle East and gut worms and stuff like that, and the fact that we just took it all out and bathed it and put it back in, and stuff like that. And survival. So he was an interesting fellow to talk to. We had the same fellow on the boat I was on going to New Guinea. We were going to Milne Bay. And he was talking to us, and he said, "Now a lot of you fellows have been to the Middle East. So you know all about venereal disease. In fact, some of you have had it. But up here there is a new one."

16:00 And I can't remember, it was called ulcerating something or other; this 'ulcerating' disease. He said, "Now what happens, is you get a little ulcer on the shaft. Now if it's not properly treated it goes all the way around and the end falls off. Now you're all young fellows, you're 22, and 23. How could you go home and get married and explain to your new bride you've only got a half-inch stump?" Now, I don't

16:30 know whether what he said was true or not, and I never ever actually saw any New Guinea women, but I never knew of any bloke who thought for one minute he would have anything to do with any woman in New Guinea. Because they were all scared of having a half-inch stump. So that was one of the lovely little stories on 'keeping us pure'. And highly moral. But I've jumped ahead. That was on the boat to New Guinea.

Were there any similar instructions

17:00 **to you when you were in the Middle East from doctors?**

Oh, no, every now and then there would be 'short arm inspections'. Which meant that you had to expose the member and it was examined by a doctor. No, that was about all. But the fear was enormous. It can be treated easily these days, but how are you going to write home to your Mum and explain what things are when you're behind a barbed wire fence for eighteen months? And you're in the one place, and you've got to keep your Mum thinking that you're

17:30 at war, and you're doing all these sorts of things, and you're in prison, yeah. So it was one reason to keep it in the trousers.

So going back to the Middle East, we'll ask a couple of more questions from that period, then we'll move forward to your time in New Guinea. Were there any other parcels or anything special that you received in the post during

18:00 **that time?**

No, not really. We just received ordinary parcels from our parents. My mother was a knitter, but she wasn't a good knitter. She knitted mainly socks. And I did have one jumper, it had beautiful soft wool,

which I could wear like a sleeping gown. It was supposed to be a jumper, but it came down to about my knees. That was very handy, I enjoyed that parcel. But no, mostly it was just letters from home

18:30 and things like that. And socks.

Did the blokes tend to share their letters with other people?

Yes, very much. And I had, and sadly I haven't got any; my grandfather was a lovely bloke, and he wrote really beautiful letters. And he wrote in copperplate, and there was never the slightest mistake. If Grandfather had made a mistake on the last

19:00 line of his letter, he would have scrapped that page and started again. And his letters were so good, and so friendly, that they were all passed around. I might have had twenty blokes reading my Grandfather's letters, he were so good, as well as his good, down to earth advice. I'm leaping forward once more: when I got home from the Middle East, my grandfather – my grandmother died when she was about 82, I think,

19:31 and Grandfather lived on his own. When I last saw him he was 89. He had rooms in a house, not far from my mother, and he still visited my mother. But he still shopped for himself, cooked for himself, after living that family life all those days. And before I went back, I went around to see him and I said, "Well, I'll see you next leave, Grandpa." And he said, "No, you won't." And I said, "Why not?" And he said, "I was walking down the street the other day and an old girl told me, 'you should mix more

20:00 water with it.'" He said, "You know, I had the staggers. I hadn't had a drink. Now," he said, "when a man gets the staggers and he hasn't had a drink, it's time to go." And I think Grandfather decided to die, he was about 89, and he died, before I came home the next leave. But I had a lovely relationship with him, so it was good. But he was 89, so he didn't do a bad job, yeah. But that was Grandfather. He was one of the people I wrote to often in the Middle East.

20:31 **Did you come to believe, then, in the idea that someone can will themselves to either live or to die?**

I really did think that Grandfather decided that he'd enough and he would die. I mean, I suppose his body was worn out anyway at 89. But he was never miserable, or unhappy or grizzled about anything, Grandfather. He was a lovely man.

Were there any men you knew of

21:00 **during the war that had to will themselves to live, or lost their will to live.**

No, none at all. I think we all battled on. We were all determined to live if we possibly could. Most blokes were happy and got on with life. I did mention Tom Maloney, who had bright or depressive moods. And Tom probably had difficulty in sharing his deepest emotions.

21:31 Most fellows in the army, because of the environment, got closer to their mates than they would ever do to any other human being in this world, yeah.

You mentioned about sharing the letters amongst one another, were there also times that you served as a sounding board, if you like, for your mates, and had chats about how each other were feeling or going?

I think we shared

22:01 more of our hopes and our joys and our fears than you would under normal circumstances. I think most people try to not reveal too much of their weaknesses in normal life. I think people weren't afraid to reveal their weaknesses. It didn't matter. And I think that was

22:30 something you shared that was very special. Very different, too. You could share your fears, too, as well as everything else. Which was important. You didn't have to pretend to be brave and stuff like that.

And you felt like you were very much accepted for those feelings?

Oh yes. Each of us accepted the other person, yeah. [Break: technical problem]

23:14 **Now, I wanted to ask you more about your actual duties. We might move forward to New Guinea and I'd like to follow up there –**

Okay.

– with what some of your duties and messages

23:30 **were like and what conditions were like there.**

Well, I suppose the tablelands were our training thing for New Guinea. Yes, after leave we traveled up to the tablelands by train. For days we slept in luggage racks, and on the floor, and all sorts of things. And at times, we stopped at staging camps on the way up, so that you could have a shower and have a feed and wash your clothes and things like that. And then to training

24:00 camps on the tablelands. And considering the inconvenience, the tableland people were really lovely to us. They were a lovely people. I even remember one little incident when we were out on a training exercise, just a wireless van, and we were deep in the jungle, in rainforest, and it had been pouring all night, and we'd been in communication. And there was no hope of lighting a fire. So I could see smoke along the track and there was

24:30 a little house there. So I took the billy along and knocked at the door and said was it possible to get some hot water to make some tea? And the lady there said, "No, it certainly isn't." She said, "You go back and get the rest of your fellows and you come here and you'll have a proper cup of tea and a proper breakfast, too." And she fried us bacon and eggs and gave us a lovely breakfast, and things like that. It was the little things like that that made it very special. Our camps were pleasant

25:03 tent camps. And we did an enormous amount of training. We just had to get fit. So we'd do marching twenty miles a day, sometimes, three days in a row perhaps. And that of course raised another issue. Don Kelly, who was our captain, without using the language he used, he was saying to me one time at the end

25:30 of a day, he said, "You know, I've never drunk less. I've never smoked less. I've never taken more exercise in my life, and I've never felt so and so worse," he said. But Kelly, as soon as we got out of sight of camp, even if we were going on a march for half an hour of a morning, as soon as we got out of sight of camp, he yelled, "March easy!" Which meant fellows who wanted to take long steps, took them. Little steps, they took them. You carried the rifle by the muzzle if you wanted to. And

26:00 we would plod on all day long like that. But if he was going out on a normal march, just the normal little march of a morning where took us out for ten minutes, as soon as we got out camp he'd tell us to march easy then, and we'd slummock along. And then we'd get some new young lieutenant, who had been to an officer's school, and he hadn't done any overseas service, and he came to us absolutely terrified.

26:33 And he came to a division that had an enormous reputation; Tobruk and El Alamein behind them. And so he was already terrified when he got there, and then he had been taught to march at a hundred and twenty paces to the minute, so he might take us out on our little normal march of a morning, and we got a few hundred yards out, and the fellows would start muttering, they'd be saying, "I wonder what this bastard thinks he's doing?"

27:00 So he would then turn around and say "Stop that muttering in the ranks." And the next time he looked around he found out he was leading by fifty yards, everyone had slowed down. So then he would come back and march alongside the first row, and when he looked around the last three rows had about twenty yards between them and the ones in front. So then when he would rush back to them he would say, "What's the matter with you fellows?" And someone would say, "You set such a cracker of a pace, sir, we can't possibly keep up." And this could

27:30 be from fellows who had already been about three years in the army. So, some made the grave mistake then, they went back and told Don Kelly about it. So Kelly would come out the next day and he would march us and make us change arms. And we'd be absolutely superb, and Kelly would look around and he'd beam. And Kelly was, in fact, saying to his poor little subaltern who was at the back, "See? This is how it's done." And we were saying,

28:00 "Kelly can do it. But don't ever bloody well kid yourself that you're going to do it." So some of them we destroyed, poor fellows. Others they fitted in and worked out okay. It was cruel and terrible, but Kelly knew we were the best possible section in Nine Div, and we knew he was absolutely right. Our collective arrogance was unequaled in the unit. That was part of life there.

28:30 **Were there any casualties during jungle training?**

Oh yes, we had inefficient people teaching even less efficient people unarmed combat. And one morning, we'd been doing unarmed combat for a while, and I had the misfortune to mention I could get out of a dakkajammy. Which was an arm around the throat, and the other arm across the back of the head.

29:00 It was a strangle hold. And there was, if the fellow was the same size and you were quick enough, you could put your foot behind you and trip him up and fall backwards on him, and then to save his head bashing in the ground, he'd let you go. But the fellow who put this on was considerably shorter than me, which meant I was bent back and I couldn't reach his feet. He didn't know what he was doing, and I didn't know what we were doing. So the next thing I knew was, I was wondering why I could see all these legs around the place. I was unconscious on the ground and

29:30 he's saying, "Oh Geez! I'm sorry, mate! I'm sorry, mate!" He thought he killed me. So I managed to get to my feet from that and we went on through unarmed combat. And then there were two of us: Jimmy Payne in the section and myself were about the same height as Andy Wells. Andy Wells was at least a stone heavier than me. Andy Wells had a degree in law and he was a Rhodes Scholar. But he couldn't go and do his Rhodes Scholarship because of the war.

30:01 He was heavyweight champion of the Adelaide University, and he was fitter and stronger. So either one of us was marched up to Andy Wells for unarmed combat. Now after I'd been strangled and unconscious, Andy Wells accidentally threw me and kicked me in the head and I was unconscious again.

But a few went to hospital from unarmed combat. And we were wireless operators. We weren't going to fight the Japanese hand-to-hand, so it was stupid.

But no

30:30 **quite serious injuries?**

No, most of the injuries that people went to hospital were from football matches and things like that. We just trained and got fit and went to rifle ranges and did more wireless work. Some of us had to do communications. We went out on exercises in the truck in wireless communications and things like that. I had one splendid job there. I can't even remember the little town now, but we had

31:00 to take our truck out, and we had to park across this road with our wireless van. And there was a sign there: the road was closed because it was a firing range, but we had to park there in case anybody wanted to go down that road to get to hospital. So we lay around in the sun, and had our set switched on all the time. And we were in communication with people at the actual guns there, so if anyone wanted to get to the hospital, we could tell them they had to stop firing.

31:30 So we were in the pub one night and having a few drinks, and the barmaid wanted to know what we were doing, and we told her. And she said, "That hospital was closed three years ago." Now we didn't want to upset army high command, so we didn't tell anybody else about it. We stayed there for the rest of the time. But then to go forward onto that story, years later, after the war, I was working with a fellow who had been up country a lot of the time.

32:00 So he didn't got to his army reunions at all. And we just worked in an office and we didn't talk about other things. And then it was reunion time, and we went to reunion and stared at each other; we were both there, found we were in the same unit. Then I found, when I got chatting, he was the fellow on the wireless set, on the other end where the guns were. I also found, later on, in New Guinea, I was attached to an infantry battalion; he was also attached to the same infantry battalion. So you could go through a war and

32:30 you could work with someone for years after, and never even knew you were associated at that time. No, New Guinea training was good. We had plenty of time to swim, and got fit, plenty of food. Plenty of good milk. A can of milk came everyday from the local dairies and things like that. It was just good.

And besides sport, what sort of recreation did you get up to?

33:02 Some of the recreation was less than it should have been, I suppose. We had a – I can't remember how much. Maybe it was only a bottle of beer a week or something like that each. But the section I was in, that section was put on the blacklist. That was a special instruction that no one was to supply any member of that section with alcohol as that section were misbehaving; spewing in the tent lines, and generally causing

33:30 mischief. And obviously, we had more alcohol than anyone else. So Don Kelly was asking his batman, he said, "Where are that section's fellows getting their grog from?" And Phil Leonard said, "You know I can't tell you that." He said, "I don't want to stop them. I want them to get me some." So we had fellows who had 'initiative', that's how we put it. And were villains. Oh, I don't

34:00 know, we kept ourselves busy and happy and contented. We had peculiar fellows. We had Freddy Davis, the same fellow that strangled me. Freddy Davis, when he had too much to drink, he would get up during the night to empty his bladder, and he would go back and climb into the first bed he got to. Even though there was somebody else already in it. So fellows would try and fight for their blankets, and Freddy would be hanging on to their blankets. Some just got out of bed and just went and got into Freddy's

34:30 bed. Others stood up and took the blankets right off him and waited until Freddy froze to death and eventually got up and went and tried to get into somebody else's bed. But that was Freddy Davis. That was one of his little foibles. Oh, we had some peculiar fellows.

This probably seems like a real question out of left field, but when you say peculiar fellows, were there any fellows that you heard of, or knew of,

35:00 **that didn't like girls? That were homosexual?**

Oh yes, there were. I'd never heard of those blokes. You see, I was a well brought up eighteen year old virgin when I went away. There was a fellow – oh, I can say his name. He's been dead for many, many years, and it was no problem that he was homosexual. His name was Bill Park, and as you've interviewed Reg Ballard, I can

35:30 can even tell that relationship there. When I first joined the unit I thought Bill was a bit queer, or a sissy boy, or something like that. After a while I just thought he was eccentric. He could drink more than anyone else, he could swear more than anyone else, and if you were on a march somewhere, he could march the legs off most anybody. He was a teacher; he was a very intelligent fellow.

36:00 And cutting into Reg. He and Reg were great mates. And Reg hadn't woken up. And Reg was even saying one time, something came up about Bill, and Bill said, "Don't you know why I want to be friends with you?" And Reg said, "Oh, we're just good mates, aren't we?" He said, "No, I'm in love with you."

And Reg, who was very much orientated to females, shied away in horror. But

36:30 Bill said, “Reg, I understand. I understand completely. That’s different.” And Reg said Bill knew that from then on he must never put a hand on him and he must never, ever mention it again. But Reg just accepted that that was Bill. Later on I talked to Bill Park. Bill sometimes, with a few drinks on, he wanted to do the strip of the seven veils or something, and maybe George

37:00 Henry would say, “Bill, it’s time you were in bed, mate.” And Bill would say, “Oh, sorry, George.” And off he’d trot. So with ordinary heterosexuals, he could behave quite well. And he was telling me, he said, “Little boys love little boys. It’s natural. Little boys love little boys the same as they love little girls. You’re just friends. Then, when you become sexually mature, little boys love little girls. I found I still loved little boys. When I was fourteen, or

37:30 fifteen, I realised there was something wrong with me. That I was different.” But he said he was no risk to children. He could never be a paedophile, he was just a homosexual. And he said, “I think there might be a family – I think my sister’s probably a lesbian.” Now Bill was the first one I knew, but because of Bill, I realised that the

38:00 odd couple of others there. Most of them were nice blokes. I remember there was one fellow, a particularly handsome fellow, and somebody had been rude to him. But he was classy with his knuckles, [so] that anybody that got fresh could get a good belting. But the other thing, going on with Bill, when we were home from the Middle East, Bill was friends with George Henry; he and I were friends. And Bill was staying in Melbourne, and at that stage, the basement bar of the Australia Hotel was

38:30 the haunting ground for the homosexuals. And George said they were passing the pub and a bloke came out of it and said, “Oh, hello Bill. What are you doing here?” And Bill said, “Oh, I’m down from Sydney.” And George said this bloke looked him up and down and said, “Oh, how ducky.” And Bill said, “Oh no, no, it’s not like that.” So George was also a very vigorous heterosexual, and slightly horrified.

39:00 But there were a couple like that, and that was part of my learning. And Bill was a terrific fellow, but most blokes hadn’t a clue that he was homosexual. And I remember years later, in a pub in Melbourne, we were meeting up with a few fellows and I remember this Bill Stewart, who’s long since been dead. He said, “You married, Bill?” And Bill said, “No.” And he said, “Jesus, how did you miss out, mate? How did you escape?” He hadn’t a clue. And he’d been in the army with him for five years. So there

39:30 were the odd ones, but for Bill, I probably wouldn’t have realised they were there. And the other thing, like blokes on ships, travelling on an American ship; some of our blokes, if you’re short of blankets the two blokes would be under the same set of blankets together. The Yanks wouldn’t have dared to do that, because the finger would have been pointed at them as homosexuality. So, yeah –

But not so much with the Australians?

No.

40:00 Two ordinary blokes like that and they knew they weren’t queer. And that was it.

We’re just at the end.

Tape 6

00:37 I can’t even remember getting on the ship, but the SS Aquitania was a big ship, can’t remember where we got on her. It was quite a big convoy. Anyway, we were on the SS Aquitania, and if the weather was good, it was okay. Blokes slept in passages and on the deck and everywhere. But the holds were divided up into great areas where you might have four hundred blokes in one hold. It was in

01:00 bunks, and I remember one occasion. Of course we were very young and probably all very fit. I even remember waking up and getting my dixies, and thinking I was going to breakfast, and it was actually dinner time at night. The lights burned permanently in the hold. But I remembered waking up one time, in the top bunk, and I stared across and here are all these blokes, and it was a hot and humid atmosphere, and they’re all lying there, naked

01:30 in the bunks. And there was a complete forest of erect members, all standing up, and I thought it would have been wonderful to have taken a photo of it. But there were all lying flat on their backs, fast asleep, with all their members erect. So it was peculiar. But the SS Aquitania, it was a very pleasant trip home. We

02:00 just laid around and did nothing, and drank when we could drink, and ate when we could eat, and enjoyed our trip home. We even met the British Fleet. The British Eastern Fleet of warships came in sight of us. I mean, we were escorted by destroyers and stuff like that. And the British warships came alongside and sent messages to the various ships, the SS Aquitania and so forth. One of our fellows who, like a Morse

02:30 operator, read the flashing lamp, “We’ll see you in Tokyo.” But we never ever did. But the other thing, it was supposed to be a great secret, our convoy coming home. And they warned us, ‘Everybody be on the lookout for submarines’ as we were heading towards Sydney harbour, and there were forty-five thousand odd pairs of eyeballs looking for submarines I think. But we got in to Sydney Harbour and

03:02 it was incredible. The whole of the harbour: everybody knew that the convoy was coming home. And the whole of the harbour was lined with people. It was very exciting for young blokes coming home. And I could always remember one lady on the Spit somewhere, and she had a walking stick and she was waving and waving and waving, and stopping every now and then to mop her eyes. And I thought, ‘Could be her grandson, could be

03:30 anything’. And then from Sydney, us Melbournites – I don’t even know what we did after that. We hopped straight on trains and headed for Melbourne. We had people alongside the railway lines all the way down. And that was the other thing, we were fascinated to hear Australian girls speak again. Because the only women we’d heard speak were Arabic women. And the voices were quite fascinating. It was strange all over again.

04:00 And then we had about three weeks leave in Melbourne, but that was lovely; then back up to the tablelands.

What was the mood like on the ship coming back?

We were great, and we felt very happy to come home. But I think we wanted to – we were very happy to come home because we were worried about the state of the country in Australia. And we knew the

04:30 risk from the Japanese and we really needed to be here. And I’m not being boastful about it, we knew we were efficient. We knew we had been efficient at war. So we felt we could do something useful.

So you sensed that there were definite fears of Japanese invasion?

Oh yes. When we were in Alamein and places like that

05:00 we were very fearful that Australia might be overrun. And I think the other thing; from what I understood, after the war, very little accurate information was given out about the attacks on the Darwin area. And those fellows in Darwin had suffered enormous casualties and an enormous number of attacks, and they weren’t credited for the work they did.

05:33 **And did you sense that people locally – your family, your friends, people you knew around in Melbourne – that they too, had a sense of this fear?**

I don’t know whether they were fearful, but I think the greatest example ever, or the saddest example: we were on an exercise in Queensland, when we were training on the tablelands. And, I don’t know, once

06:00 again we probably pulled into this little farmhouse to see if we could get water. And Ron Gillies, who I’d mentioned before about, the fearless one that stood with his back to the oncoming aircraft, they had a radio which wasn’t working. Not that we were skilled electricians, but Ron dusted it all out and put the valve caps back on, and it worked. So they thought he was a genius. But there was an old bloke there, and two younger women. Now I don’t know how old; boys,

06:30 when you’re twenty you think a woman of forty is an old lady. Now at my age I think that anyone under 70 is a mere girl. They were older, and they might have been in their late thirties, and they were twins and they ran this vegetable farm, with their father there. And they told us they were above the Brisbane Line. They were above that line that was going to be abandoned if the Japanese – I think that was [an] appalling piece of propaganda, that.

07:01 And they said they used to cry themselves to sleep. They could see they didn’t have any access to escape if the Japanese came down. And natural imagination: they saw themselves as rape victims. And that was appalling. Talking to them, and hearing that, it was like our sisters.

07:31 So we grieved to them. Anyway, it didn’t happen.

It really hit home.

It was just terrible. We thought, “Here’s these lovely ladies, and they’re busy on this farm, feeding the nation with vegetables and stuff, and they could be abandoned.”

Just going back to that trip, as you’re coming back into Sydney Harbour from the Middle East. Did the men sing

08:00 **on the way back in? We’ve heard some stories of that.**

No, I think, particularly coming back in there, we stared in amazement, I suppose, and bled a little inside. And waved, waved, waved and waved.

You must have been thinking a bit about the mates that didn’t come back with you?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Even then we really didn’t realise

08:30 how painful it was for our mums and all that sort of stuff. And for other mums. I remember down the street from me as a little boy, there was a friend Billy McKenzie. His mum had one son and one daughter. He went in the navy, and he was dead at nineteen.

So young.

You know, my Mum lived

09:00 six doors up the street. And I think it would be very hard for my mother because she had a husband who went to World War I, and she knew that half the people that went to World War I didn't come home again. It was as bad as that, the casualties in World War I.

One question we didn't ask earlier was about your siblings. Did you have any brothers?

Yes I had an elder brother who I think felt it

09:30 very difficult that I was going away, but he was an accountant and he was involved in the spring manufacturing works. He couldn't have gone; it was necessary for him to stay. I think the one I think most about is, I had a brother, three years younger than me, and people often didn't think about those fellows. He was apprenticed as a plumber. So he was fifteen, when I

10:00 was eighteen. A lot of the men went away, and virtually Phil, as a young fellow, he had to do a man's work. And, the other thing, my father's health [was] deteriorating, and he had to be the backstop at home. And I think life was very hard for Phil. It was, quite frankly, easier for me to be away than it was for him to be home. Because no doubt he would have loved to have been involved

10:30 and so forth. And he had to grind on all those years, and I'm very proud of my brother.

It's very generous of you to say that.

Oh well, that's the way he was. And I had a sister, ten years older than me: Eve. Who I had wonderful, wonderful relations with. Having a ten year old sister –

11:02 I was born post War World I, and having a ten years older sister, and then my brother was three years younger and my other sister was three years younger; it was like having two mums. And I had a lovely relationship with my sister, and the relationship was such, that even later on in life, when I had four kids and a happy family, I'd see something fascinating or hear something on radio; I had to ring Eve up and talk to her about it. She was always

11:30 my backstop. And she was my backstop with problems in the family and all that sort of stuff. She was religious. I knew that my sister prayed for me everyday. So I was lucky with that life, a beautiful relationship.

During those three weeks when you were home on leave, your parents must have been

12:00 **overwhelmed to see you.**

Yeah, but when I think back, I was appalling. The people who were most important were the blokes I was with, I had been with them all the time. What did I do? I got up in the morning, had my breakfast and went straight in and saw my mates. And that's what we did. We spent most of our time together. It was terrible, the small amount of time, of the table time I gave my parents, and that was awful. I think of it

12:30 now, but I didn't think of it then.

Yet the blokes must have had a hard time not being together, because you had been together so long.

That's right, you were absolutely dependent on each other. My father understood, I'm sure, but it must have been terrible for my mother. Sorry Mum. [Break]

13:12 I think it might have been a Liberty ship [i.e. American merchant marine ships which carried cargo for the American armed forces] we went to New Guinea on. Anyway, we went to Milne Bay on that. We'd done a lot of training, landing exercises and so forth on the coast around Cairns, before we went up there. We went on a Liberty ship. I remember on the

13:30 way up, somebody spotted a floating mine, so they fired no end of shots from this four inch gun at it, but never managed to hit. So they had to send a message then and of course they really couldn't send radio messages. So the next time they saw a war vessel, the message went across with a Morse lamp to tell them about this mine, and to try and warn other people about it. But a ship like that couldn't take the risk of traveling and letting enemy ships know where

14:00 they were. So we landed on Milne Bay, then we did a bit of training on Milne Bay, which was very wet. And then we trained on an island off the coast of Milne Bay: Goodenough Island. Got ourselves ready then, and then from there we went to land on Lae. I'm sorry, if I could go back so that we've

14:30 got some additional little information as to how fortunate we were. But anyway, I was on the tank-

landing ship to Lae. I'll finish landing at Lae I suppose and then go back to an interesting thing in Queensland. When we got near the coast, I was a driver of a jeep. Now the landing ship had this huge open area underneath, with the jeeps and trucks and everything in it, and stores. But on the deck

15:00 above, and once you got into that area, and only the drivers went in there when you were getting ready for landing, all the doors above were locked and closed. Which meant if they got torpedoed at that area of the base, the ship wouldn't sink because the air was locked in there. But when we're sitting there, and we look at the back and see all the ammunition, we think, "If we get a bloody torpedo in this, we've had the chips!" But while I was there, I happened to notice some of the Yankee stores at the back; the ship stores.

15:30 And I relieved them of a seventy pound box of beautiful Australian prunes, which I dumped on my jeep, then hopped back in my jeep for the landing. We were all quite scared of course. And we couldn't see a damn thing. And as we're getting near the coast, it was infantry ships being bombed as they came ashore, and we could hear other ships being bombed. Anyway, we landed safely there. My jeep was loaded with much

16:00 stuff that normal authorities didn't know about. Because part of our training exercises in Queensland; we did a training where two wireless truckloads of us were to go across north Queensland to the Gulf of Carpentaria. And we got part way across and the rains came, as they did in Queensland, and we were flooded in. We couldn't get through, we couldn't get any further forward, and we couldn't get back.

16:30 Their railway line could still get through, which meant that every now and again, the rail came with a barrel of beer in it. And when the locals saw that the train came in with a barrel of beer, they all rushed madly to the pub. Because the pub only had beer when the barrel came in, and we used to join them of course. We could [have] run out of money, except that we had a forty-four gallon drum of petrol in the back of one of our trucks to get through to the Gulf. Now we weren't going to

17:00 get through to the Gulf, so we didn't need all that petrol. And the locals were very glad indeed to be able to buy petrol off us so we could continue to eat and drink in the luxury which we felt we were entitled to. So we stayed in this little town for a while, and out of it was another interesting place. It was called Wolfram Camp. Which had been a little town, apparently it had about thirteen pubs in it, and you could see the stumps of everything around there. And it was fascinating. They were still mining Wolfram from it.

17:30 And we had people who had local geological knowledge, and they could show us the quartz crystals, and iron oxide crystals, so we had a lovely time there and people were really nice to us. And then eventually the floods went down and we could start heading our way back again. In the meantime, one of our fellows, whose name I have forgotten, leapt on a horse that was passing by, without a saddle and bridle or anything. And unfortunately when he was thrown off, he finished up with his face hitting a stump,

18:00 so he damaged his teeth and his mouth. So we're driving back and we drive through the Mareeba, and then Ron Gillies again, who was in one of the trucks, said he would take this fellow to a hospital. And we would continue on, over the bridge out of Mareeba, to this CC [Civil Construction] camp, where we were going to camp temporarily. They had civil construction corps at that stage, and this was an abandoned camp. Concrete floors, nice buildings, sewers in there,

18:30 like coppers and things. And we camped there and set up our radio set, and were in communication, and then we had a message that said, "Gillies cannot get to you." We thought, "What's this? Gillies is in Mareeba, of course he can get to us." And then we had to ask for a clarification, and they said, "Gillies cannot get to you." So, I thought, "Something's wrong." So I hopped in our wireless van and drove back towards Mareeba, and then found that the

19:00 bridge that we had passed the day before was completely underwater. The floods had come down. Then on the way back, oh, no, it might have been that day or a couple of days after, a bedraggled group of infantrymen who were exercising there; we found this group of blokes there. There was probably about thirty, a little platoon. They had no food, they were drenched to the skin. So I loaded

19:30 some of them into our wireless van and rushed back to our CCC, and there was the huts with concrete floors. So when we heard all these blokes were absolutely drenched, our blokes got firewood and they lit little fires all along the concrete floor to make the hut hot. And I ferried these blokes back, as many as we could get in the wireless van at a time. And they all stripped off, and it was like a sauna bath then. They were all trying to dry themselves and their clothes out. And then, all of the food that we had,

20:00 the whole blessed lot, went in one feed. So we sent a message then that we were out of feed and we had a batch of blokes there. We were fortunate; they didn't have any communications, we had a wireless set. So it was arranged that feed would come. And an Avro Anson airplane flew over, and they dropped bags of food to us: tinned food and stuff. So we had [a] great feed for these blokes and it was a lovely time. And then the floods went down; ferried them back to Mareeba and they went on their way. And

20:30 we've got all this food. Tinned food, lovely tinned food. So we loaded it all in the jeep and headed back to camp, and we were told that the surplus food that we had to give it to the cookhouse. So any tins that were slightly damaged in falling, we gave to the cookhouse. The rest we hid. And when I landed off that tank-landing ship in New Guinea, I had every spare area in that jeep

21:00 stocked with food. And to think we had eight men to a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits per meal

for ages thereafter, the blokes in our section were very glad to get it. So it was lovely. What with that and the prunes, which kept their bowels in good condition, we were okay. I didn't always have a jeep there. I drove a lot of the time. I remember one time, Don Kelly, who was CO of our section; I'll go back to Queensland later for him.

21:30 He caught up with George Henry and myself. We hadn't shaved for days, we were filthy, we were trying to get in communication. I had tinned sausages, with the top torn open on a stick, with holes punched in the bottom to let the stuff out, over a fire to cook a feed, and he was terribly upset. He said, "I see you fellows here, and you're always clean and well dressed and well shaven." He said, "Have you read Somerset Maugham's stuff about the decay of Englishmen

22:00 in the tropics?" And George said, "We have indeed. If only you could get us some booze and women, we could really decay properly." So that was Kelly.

Tell me, how did the jungle affect your daily life?

It was very, very different to the desert. We were at much more of a risk of being killed in the Middle East, in North Africa. But we were short of food.

22:31 We had very little transport. You had the clothes on your back. You had a shirt, a pair of pants, no underclothes. I finished up, no socks. I used to put the fat out of the bully beef tins into the boots to make them soft. You'd come to a creek, you'd strip your clothes off, bathe them, bathe your body, hope you had enough time to leave your clothes in the sun to dry, and put them back on again. You'd have one

23:00 blanket, maybe sometimes only half a blanket, a groundsheet and a mosquito net. You used your groundsheet really as a roof for a little hut that you had to make each night. You chopped fork sticks and put rails along and made a little bed off the ground, because you couldn't sleep on the ground. It was too wet. In the Middle East in action, you could sleep in a hole. You couldn't sleep in a hole there because it was wet. So you had to have your little

23:30 do, your little bed you made out of sticks, and you had a hole in the ground alongside you. And if planes came over, or you were going to get bombed, you had to wake up and roll into the hole at the side of the bed. But early, particularly at Lae, we were on the go, day after day after day, and it was very hard. And for infantrymen, it was appalling. And then it could pour and pour. I remember Robbie Carruthers one time, I

24:00 remember sitting – we had a tarpaulin over us I suppose. And Robbie was sitting down on his heels, with his hat on his head, in a state of half-sleep meditation, and I watched the water rising, and I was thinking, 'I wonder how much longer it's going to take for that water to reach Robbie's bum. And he'll be cold." Now we're on Robbie Carruthers, one time in New Guinea, feeling a bit depressed, I suppose, and down in the dumps,

24:30 short of food, all that sort of stuff, and wet; I saw Robbie walking past and I said, "Where you going to, Robbie?" And he said, "Out to the Bangalow River to admire the beauties of nature." And I said, "What are you talking about?" Because he was a rough nut. He'd drink to excess like everyone else. And he said, "Come out with me and I'll tell you." Now Robbie, he would have been an old man of about 28, I suppose. He said that everyday he

25:00 tried to put some time aside to admire the beauties of nature. And he said, "When we were in the desert in the Middle East, you've got the beautiful sunsets. Or you can look at the chameleons, or look at the salt bush, or the sand hills. Nature's incredible, there's always something wonderful. On the ships you hang over the front and you look at the flying fish in the sea, or the porpoises at the bow of the ship. I come out here. Look at the rounded stones, and think of all those. Look at the beautiful trees.

25:30 And that's what I do everyday. It doesn't matter how bad conditions are. I try to do that. And that's what keeps me going." And he was a wonderful philosopher, Robbie. So he was another fellow who has been very impressive in my life. And although I don't try to do that everyday, I try to do it every now and then. And it's the old – I know there's some pretty awful things, but there's a lovely song that

26:01 Tony Bennett used to sing, about It's A Wonderful World. And that was Robbie.

That must have been such a contrast between the horrors of war and the beauty of some of those islands.

Oh yeah. Robbie started me thinking about it, but I didn't appreciate it like he did, the beauty of the trees and stuff like that.

26:30 It was very hard. I'd say all the time we'd probably be on about a third rations. And then there was odd cases, I was on a little beach, on a little area there one time with this Jack Riek, who I mentioned who I thought had brain damage, and the Japanese are supposed to be landing. They had pulled back and they had a few of us in these little holes there. And

27:00 I'm there in a hole with Jack Riek. And he said, "You know, if the Japanese get here, we're never going to get out of this, mate." And I said, "Why Jack?" And he said, "Because they've got the olds and bolds behind us." They used to have little guard battalions of older blokes, and he said, "You know what they're like. As soon as we lift our head up, they're going to shoot." So that was Jack. And the same

night, about fifty yards behind us, was a huge tree. And we were worried about the Japs landing, and lightning struck this massive

27:30 tree. So it was a night I wouldn't forget. But there were other nights – I should deal again with Robbie Caruthers. We're in this little area, where Robbie had quite a nice bed. In fact, Jimmy Payne reminded me the other day, it was Langemak Bay in New Guinea. And we got attacked. And when the Japanese planes come to attack; I don't know whether they expel the bombs with an air

28:00 compressor or something like that, but you could hear them pop from the plane. So you could hear it pop, pop, pop, and getting louder and louder as they come towards you. So we had a fear of getting attacked by Japs. And it landed, and some of the bombs they dropped they were sweepings off aircraft floors and things like that. They have rivets all sorts of things in them, nuts and rubbish in them. And they had, apparently, a long

28:30 stem on the bomb so that they exploded off the ground, so they were daisy cutters. And Robbie had coconuts alongside his bunk, and he rolled out of his bed, onto the correct side of the coconut logs, and Robbie said, "Look at this, geez I'm glad I didn't roll on the other side." He had about thirty holes in his mosquito net. And he said, "Look at my boots, I'm glad I wasn't wearing those." He had about eight holes in his boots. And he said, "Has someone got a little cork? Because I've got a little hole in my guts, too." It was just a

29:00 little rivet in his belly. But that was Robbie. And he showed us his aluminium pannikin. When he was at Alamein he was actually shaving one time and he had his pannikin up there and it was filled with hot water for him to shave in. And a bit of shrapnel came across under his arm and clipped the top of his pannikin and folded the top of the pannikin over. He was lucky it didn't kill him. So that was his pannikin. He was very proud of it. When this

29:30 attack happened, a rivet or something went through the pannikin and left a hole about the size of a .22 about halfway up. Someone stole his pannikin and threw it away, because it drew the crabs. They'd got spooked in the head. Robbie's pannikin was dangerous. That could happen to fellows. They could be spooked, yeah.

What do you mean by "drew the crabs?"

Drew the crabs. Well, if there's a bit of meat on the sand the crabs will

30:00 all come to it. And drawing the crabs was like that with shell fire or planes or stuff. In fact, if someone put a light on in the desert, someone would say "Put it out! You'll draw the crabs." Which meant it would draw the shell fire, and draw the attack. And somebody had got so spooked with Robbie's pannikin, that it had been hit twice, hadn't it? Someone had obviously got spooked and threw it away. Robbie was devastated, because it was his pride and joy, yeah.

30:31 **Yes, they'd come to believe it was a bad omen.**

Yes it was a bad omen. And nobody would admit, of course, to ever doing it, but somebody was obviously spooked.

How did the wetness affect your equipment? Your actual work, if at all?

Oh, the sets were pretty good, in pretty good shape. We had to be very careful not to get them wet. That was where we got very tired, particularly if you were on the move. If you only had three

31:00 men to a set, it had to be kept going twenty-four hours a day, and because line communication in New Guinea wasn't as good as it was in the desert, more work had to be by radio. And that led to another problem. It meant you moved; as soon as you stopped you had to dig a hole to get set in, that was the first thing, and we had a little two-man tent over it, then you had to try and rig your own bed up. And if you were lucky you

31:30 dug a hole alongside. And I can remember one night; people would get so tired. We had just moved and everybody's dug in the equipment they've got to dig in, and then thought, "To hell with it, I'll dig a hole tomorrow." And we got raided that night. At one o' clock in the morning you can hear blokes with their trenching tools frantically digging holes. I was lucky. I had a full size axe and I was pretty handy. So I could make good beds, and cut sticks and stuff like

32:00 that. And I had reasonable expertise with my hands. But you depended, and that was the other thing of a little bit of shame, we were lucky of having one man on the set. So if there's a group of three, or sometimes we had four on a set, and that made life much easier. But whoever was on the set, they could hear a plane coming over and they could hear the bombs start to fall, and then they'd jump out and wake blokes up who were around

32:30 them. Quickly, so they could get into a hole. And that was it. It didn't matter how close the planes were. That's what blokes did. But there were the odd ones, who never risked their lives for anybody else. And I think out of the fellows in our section, there were only two that I'd put in that category. And there was one fellow, he'd managed to pinch a Yankee hammock from somewhere. The Yanks had these magnificent

33:00 hammocks. A lovely hammock with a built-in roof on them, and mosquito nets with zip fasteners on the

sides. So he had pinched this Yankee hammock and he was suspended in his hammock, and in his panic to get out when the bombing started, he had turned his hammock over and he was lying in the roof of it. And he couldn't undo the zips. And I heard this pitiful voice call out, "Someone help me out of here!" And a booming voice belted

33:30 out, "Let the little bastard stay where he is!" And they did. Now he didn't get hit or anything. He would never have risked his life for anybody else, and someone knew that it was stupid for someone to get out of the hole at that stage of the game to go and get him out of it. That was true. That was the way he was, he wasn't worth it. And there were the odd ones, particularly in New Guinea where we were very short of food and short of

34:00 smokes. And you mightn't [have] had a smoke for days, and someone would smell a smoke, and it would be someone who had got a smoke and snuck away. Other blokes who had a smoke would share it amongst half a dozen fellows. And it was the same with food. And the other thing that we would do. If there were only three to a set, well you were from six to twelve o'clock, and twelve to six and so you went on. And because there

34:30 was four shifts, you wandered around the clock. But just on the hour, you'd send a message to the other fellow to wait ten, or something like that. And then you'd go out and wake the next bloke who was to come on, gave him time to get up, get himself a smoke also and get on the set. With this bloke – he's dead so it doesn't really matter, but I wouldn't use his name anyway. You'd go on the set and you'd find it was still ten to the hour or something. He'd wake you at twenty to.

35:01 And then – you know, he was terrible like that. But the fellow who was on before him, they could knock off an hour and they'd go and wake him and you'd be lying there thinking, "He hasn't got up yet, the lazy sod. Go and wake him again, get him out." And I remember this Andy Wells, this big fellow who became a Supreme Court judge in South Australia. This fellow was following him, and I remember hearing him one night and hearing Andy. And what Andy did,

35:30 he was a big fellow, he went over to this bloke's bed, and he lifted him up and he carried him out into the scrub and he dumped him and he said, "If you go back to that bloody bed again, I'm going to bloody well destroy it." But some of those fellows, they never learnt. And nobody wanted anything to do with them. Anyway, sadly, that was the way it was with some, yeah.

We're just near the end of this tape. I was wondering how the humidity and the weather and jungle life affected

36:00 **your health?**

Oh well, I had dengue fever. And once again, Don Kelly our captain was superb. Apparently, blokes told me, I went into the hallucinations, and I can even remember, I was going down this great vortex, it was like a tunnel with everything swirling, and going down and down and down and down, and never getting to the end. It was like it was forever there, and I was forever rushing to the end.

36:30 And with dengue fever, every joint in your body aches. It's a terrible feeling. And then I knew that I had – it's peculiar what happens to your mind – I'd lifted off the bed and all my aches were gone. And I could tell blokes that. But Don Kelly – he was our captain – he fed me sweet tea for a couple of days. And he was just terrific.

37:00 That was the other thing about the vortex thing: even after the war, if I couldn't get to sleep, I could summon that thing back, to put me off to sleep. And it reached the stage one time I couldn't get rid of it. And I thought I'm not going to do this again. And any time that came into my mind I used to sit up in bed to avoid [it]. I thought it might drive me stark raving mad. So I had that. Yeah, you could get very crook up there.

37:33 We had radio aerials that we needed to put up trees, and a lot of blokes wouldn't climb trees. I'd climb coconut palms. You had climbing irons on the side of your boots, and a safety belt. As a twenty year old, with arrogance, I wasn't bothering about the safety belt, and I'd climb up a tree, hang onto the sides and put the aerial up. And I slipped, and my feet came out and I slid all the way down,

38:00 opened my chest up to the bone, tore all the meat off to the bone and landed on my backside on the ground; I've still got a crook back from it. I damaged my back, but not long after that, I got dysentery, and I had to go to the dressing station, and that was where I told my little tale before of the sadness of the other fellows that came in there. But when I went into there,

38:30 they gave me sulphur grenadide, which was the great medicine of the day. And they gave me a whole batch of sulphur grenadide tablets to put in your pannikin and crush them up and drink them down. And I was in there for some days, and that virtually cured me. But when the first meal was borne around, I said to the orderly – and they were so busy those fellows. You never saw a doctor; they were too busy, doing surgery.

39:03 And I said, "I don't want to eat anything, mate." And he, well he put it plainly; he said, "If you don't eat, you don't shit; if you don't shit, you die. We've got enough blokes dying in this place now. If you don't eat mate, we bloody well feed you." So I ate. It was thatched roof; bags on poles for beds. Some blokes that had lost it in holes

39:30 there. I was glad to get out of the place; I thought I'd be balmy by the time I finished. But then you get out of a place like that and you've got to find your own way back to your unit, somehow.

We'll just stop the tape there.

Tape 7

00:32 I remember coming around at Milne Bay, and they'd just been attacked. And there was a fellow there, big enough to hold the proverbial bull out, and he was sitting there with his dead mate's head in his lap and weeping. The old Anglo-Saxon stuff we were fed about 'grown

01:00 men don't cry'. In fact I think I heard one of our politicians say that a few years ago, and I thought, "Mate, you should have seen this bloke. He would have eaten you." And he grieved. He grieved for his dead mate. But there were other funny things of course. I spent a fair bit of my time driving a jeep around. And I remember one time having to go down and pick up a new officer from somewhere. And he was still dressed in khakis, and he still had his rank on, which was extraordinarily dangerous of course, because

01:30 Japs shot wireless operators; the snipers. And the same with officers, too. People didn't have their rank up. That was stupid. The jeeps very soon finished up with no brakes whatsoever, because they went through water all the time. And they were drum brakes. They're not like the modern disk brakes. And you learned your techniques. You would go near the beach, and you try to work out with these little creeks where you would head across.

02:00 Every now and then, the wheels just dropped in it. They all had chains on, and you hoped that someone with a big truck the other side could give you a tow and pull you out, and that is invariably what happened. And I remember picking this bloke up, and the authority had gone to his head I think. And I was just sitting in droop. I had my boots, just loose on, because I knew every now and then I would have to hop out of the jeep and hook a tow rope on the front of the jeep to get pulled out. And we went to one of these little crossings, and he's beautifully

02:30 dressed in nice clean clothes. And as I'm heading for it he said, "Further out! Further out!" So I thought, "Okay, I'll go further out." So we go further out and it bogged down straight away. So I immediately put it in reverse gear, and with the chains on the front, this black sludge picked it up and threw it straight into the passenger seat, all down the front of his uniform. I never saw him again. I don't know who he belonged to, but I was quite glad to have

03:00 done it. But sometimes we could have a jeep with so many blokes sitting on the bonnet, and everywhere, and standing up in it, with so little transport. You could be driving a jeep and fellows are telling you which way to go, right, left and centre, because you couldn't see anything. Water: we'd back trailers into a stream and take the bung out of the bottom of the stream, and waited until the trailer filled with water, things like that. Jeeps took a terrible thrashing up there, and we wore a lot of them out.

03:31 But there were a lot of interesting incidents, yeah. As far as our works were concerned. George Henry was the wireless operator with me. With the wireless operations a good sender moves his wrist. But a lot of them send it with a stiff wrist. George sent it with a stiff wrist, he was good sending

04:00 but it was easy to break down that way. And George broke down. There were three on a set, and he couldn't send anymore. He'd keep making mistakes. So I had to do all the sending and he had to do all the receiving. So it really meant that for sixteen hours a day we were on the set together. So sometimes it was very, very hard work. I did a variety of things.

04:30 There was a fellow by the name of Stewy Baylis. We needed a lot of batteries and the batteries were rushed up and down the coast in jeeps. And Stewy Baylis ran the battery charger. Nobody liked battery chargers because they made a lot of noise. But you tried to put the exhaust of your battery charger – you dug a great long trench and a tunnel so the noise would be further away; an exhaust pipe. Anyway, so I helped Stewy Baylis on the battery charger. And we used to load all the batteries on the jeep the next

05:00 day, and tear up the coast. And about two o'clock everyday it rained. So as soon as it came pouring down, we stop, stripped all our clothes off and soap ourselves down. And that's when we cleansed ourselves. That's the other thing with Stewy. They'd push roads through anywhere. And there was one area there where they had obviously run over a Jap. And as you drove past, there was this arm exposed outside, and you drove past carefully and he'd raise his arm to you. That only happened for a few days before his arm fell off.

05:30 But then, there would be huge gashes in the earth where the streams ran down, in the soft soil. And the engineers just pushed dirt down both sides to make roads to go across. So we did that for a while, and I don't know what happened to Stewy Baylis, and then we lost a few blokes and Don Kelly knew that I knew how to operate battery chargers and stuff like that. And he said,

06:00 “You tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” So our captain Don Kelly and myself ran the battery chargers. He was just a superb fellow. But the problem I suppose with sending and receiving, and I described that business where when you lost the position and you sent this little ‘de da de da’, which is ‘AA’, which is ‘All after’.

06:30 The fellow would be going ‘did dit did dit’, and then you’d send ‘de da de da’ and then he’d sign off. And then you’d come back on and you might send the call sign, and then ‘de da de da’ and then ‘GR’, which is ‘Group’ and it might be ‘Group 52’ or whatever. And he would go back on with his work. Now that was quite wrong. One should never do that. Earlier on there was X signals we used to use for

07:00 various things, which we’d send to imply various things. And then the Yanks came into it and were supposed to use these ‘Q’ signals, and they were quite complex, and it took a long time. Now to do what we did, was very quick. And we had stacks of messages and so much work to do, so the wireless police got onto us, and they then sent a report in that what we were doing was quite wrong, and we weren’t doing

07:30 the proper procedures, and the Japs would be able to decide who was who, and who was where. To which we said, this was absolutely bloody stupid, because anybody who knew about Morse code and knew about transmission could pick the way you sent things up anyway. So you could come onto a set sometimes and you’d say to the fellow there, “Who’s on the other end?” And he might say ‘Jimmy Stuart’ because he knew the way Jimmy Stuart sent.

08:00 Now, you know, good interceptors would pick that up, too. But anyway, what we did was quite wrong and quite illegal; Freddy Reeves was one of them and he was charged, and his stripes were removed from him. And a couple of other fellows were caught – I wasn’t caught – and they were fined. So one of them asked, when they were finished – it was explained what we did, why we did and the fact that any intelligent

08:31 intercept people would know who was who anyway, without any of this nonsense – if he could speak to the CO when he was fined. He said, “Yes.” He said “I feel I’ve lost confidence of the commanding officer of my section. As a result I can’t see how my work can be up to the same standard as my work before.” Now, we didn’t do anything, we didn’t rebel or anything. But we sent according to the system, and the

09:00 messages piled up and up, and real panic set in. Then within a fortnight, Freddy Reeves had his stripes back again. I hadn’t been charged, so I was lucky. Freddy Reeves, another couple of blokes and myself were pulled; they brought reos in, and I was sent to Sydney to the Advanced Wireless Training School. So that’s how I got out of New Guinea.

09:32 But that was that part of it. That was how I got out.

When you said they brought Reos in?

Reinforcements, sorry. That’s the language. New reinforcements to replace us.

And why is this again, because they think that you’re going too slowly, or – ?

Oh, they knew morale was shot to ribbons, because we had worked so hard to try and do the job properly, and then you get smacked across the mouth like this. It was nothing

10:00 deliberate about it, but morale was shot. And they didn’t know how to undo it. Now I was gone after that, so I don’t know how long it took for morale to improve. But that was the end of it. But before that – what I should go back to. Every now and then, as well as going up along the coast, we would go up by Yankee barges, and they would move us further up the coast and we would land on and on and on. And then the day came

10:30 we did a landing at Finschhafen, which was the next major attack point after Lae. And the Yank barge battalion fellows were just magnificent. They had a difficult job to do, a dangerous job, and of course, they were better supplied than us. And I remember even going up to Finschhafen, every scrap of food on their barge they gave to us. And it would have taken them twelve hours to get back to

11:00 their own place again. And their smokes and everything. They were terrific blokes, and they were the one unit in the American Army that was eventually allowed to wear a colour patch, and they wore Nine Div’s T-shaped colour patch. But they knew more about being at sea than we did. And when we got into Finschhafen area, the little bay, the Japs had spotted us and they were bombing us and trying to machine-gun us. Now

11:30 as soon as they did that the Yanks turned their engines off. Because travelling, particularly in the moonlight, with the phosphorescence there, they’d see the phosphorescence of the wake. You turn the engines off and there’s no phosphorescence. You don’t get seen. And besides which, if you’re in the water, you’re more likely to survive when a bomb is dropped in the water twenty yards away from you, then when it’s dropped on the land twenty yards away from you. Because you don’t get all that shrapnel. But we wanted to land. And we were determined. We said,

12:00 “Start those bloody barges, we want to land.” So we forced the Yanks, really, to land us. And we landed on the beach and then we had to unload them all, and the Japs are machine-gunning. And I always remember Robbie Caruthers and myself, we found a coconut palm, and the Japs are strafing down the

beach, and we'd watch to see the

12:30 fire coming down towards us. And I've lost the word to describe it. Then we'd get ourselves behind a coconut palm, lying on the ground behind it. "Have you got enough room there, Robbie?" "Your legs will be all right, mate." Then we'd have to hop around and go to the other side of the coconut palm. Anyway, it was complete confusion there. We didn't know where we were. We didn't know what the score was, so we holed ourselves down for the night. Then the little sad performance there:

13:00 there was a fellow on guard, and there were various fellows around with their rifles, and this fellow saw someone coming out of the Jap pillbox there, and he yelled at him to "Stand fast!" and the figure didn't stop. He yelled again and the figure didn't stop. And he shot him, and it was his mate. He killed him.

13:33 And the sad thing was that that fellow had two kids, at home. Anyway, the bloke who shot him, there was nothing, nothing he could have done, there was nothing he did wrong. He was transferred to another unit, to get him away. But it was very sad. But anyway, that was Finschhafen.

Just utter confusion then?

Oh, we were absolutely confused. We didn't have a

14:00 clue where we were or who was there. It was dark. We landed in moonlight, and then a strange creature gets out of a Japanese hole, and he doesn't stand to when you tell him. You shoot him.

Do they know why this fellow had taken off running like this?

No, we don't know why he didn't hear, why he didn't understand. Maybe he thought he was talking to somebody else. Haven't got a clue, yeah. Here I'm using a word there that I've got to go back

14:30 into Queensland for you, for Ross Thomas. With Kelly, with all the funny things. Kelly was always very quietly spoken. But sometimes when he raised his voice he would almost go into falsetto. And we had this Ross Thomas, who was the funniest bloke. Ross would get off parade, and he would fall on the nearest

15:00 bed, and he would [put] his rifle and hat down, and I don't know how many rifles Ross lost, or how many hats he lost, but he came on parade one day and he's got a pith helmet on. And Kelly said, "Sig. Thomas? Where is your hat?" And Ross went into falsetto to tell him. And Ross said, "I really haven't a clue, sir." And Kelly said, "Well, get that blasted thing off your head and go and

15:30 find a hat!" But that was Ross. We had some incredible fellows. Ross, I reckon, for an alcohol he would have drunk torpedo fluid. But he finished up in Sydney with a series of florist shops and was an extremely wealthy man. There I've diverted, but I had to mention Ross Thomas.

That brings me to a question about jungle juice? Did you hear of jungle juice?

16:00 Well, blokes used to – in New Guinea, you really couldn't get it. You couldn't get any booze there. You were really stunk. So they'd find raisins and sultanas and stuff like that. And, of course that was the other thing that was handy for us. As wireless operators we had batteries, and batteries needed battery acid, so we had flagons up there, glass jars, that the battery acid came in. When they were well washed out, everybody wanted one of those, because you could make

16:30 jungle juice in it, couldn't you. They'd raisins and sultanas in, and brew up appalling alcoholic fluids.

Did you ever try it?

I never bothered to make any. I've tried drinking some of it, and some of it I drunk was absolutely appalling. You would have to be confirmed alcoholic to ever think of drinking that. I had a few sips, but oh God it was awful.

17:03 **What did it do to them?**

I don't think anybody ever got enough to make them boozed or anything like that. They'd have a sip, but they'd never get enough to make a decent drunk out of them.

Speaking of life in the jungle, what did the effect of the humidity and the heat have on your uniforms?

Well, we were very poorly clad. Just a shirt and a pair of pants, and they rotted.

17:30 And you'd be struggling to get enough clothes, really. It was very poor. You had one battered towel and stuff like that. So our living conditions were really poor, compared to particularly the Yanks. The Yanks would want refrigerators and everything with their stuff. We lived very hard, and just short of food. If we could find a banana palm, or something like that, we'd be into that quick and

18:00 lively, yeah.

And your boots?

I had just one pair of boots, and they gradually finished up with a hole. I had a hole in my boots for ages

before I could get another pair of size nines, which I needed. Someone would say, “Oh, there’s some boots there, about size five or something.” “Yeah, you can keep those things.”

Did you lose weight?

Oh yes, we were all quite thin, I think, when we were up there.

18:31 And we were always on the move. We had plenty of exercise and not enough food. But you got used to it, really, I suppose. When you came home and put a big feed in front of us, when we came home from New Guinea on leave, we really found we couldn’t eat very much. But I was lucky getting out, I suppose, before a lot of the fellows did, to go to Sydney for the radio school.

Before I go back with you

19:00 **to Sydney, what sort of diseases and illnesses did you have to be aware of, or take preventative measures for?**

Hookworm was a bad one; it was a faecal complaint, it went through the bowels. But then it could be on the ground, of course, and it was bad news to walk barefooted, because the little worm could get onto the feet, hook

19:30 in and then get into the bloodstream and go up. Another friend of mine, Alan Forster, got scrub typhus. He was pulled out, and he was so ill he had to learn to walk again, when he got over his scrub typhus. He was very sick. Alan was – I’ll go all the way back to the Middle East in Homs:

20:00 we were camped in the desert. At night it was very cold there. And get up in the morning, and I’d never heard Alan use a single swear word ever. He was a very proper fellow; he didn’t smoke, he didn’t drink. He was a lovely bloke. He wasn’t pompous or anything like that. He was just a lovely fellow. But he didn’t swear, at all. And Alan got up, and he’s folding his blankets up, he pulled his blanket away and then he looked down and it slithered away. And he said, “I’ve been sleeping with a bloody snake!” And that was the first time I ever heard Alan

20:30 use the word “bloody.” And he said he and Cleopatra could have been in the same boat, because it was an asp. It was the sort of snake that bit Cleopatra: an asp, in the desert. That was Alan Foster. Now the other thing about Alan Foster, too, we’re back to New Guinea again and the same thing happened in the desert, Alan could be sitting up in a hole, and they’d be shelling over the top, and you’d yell

21:00 out, “Get down you stupid clot, there might be a drop short!” “No, it’ll be all right, mate.” But when Alan went up to get an injection, there had to be one of us on each side of him, because as soon as the needle went, he fainted. And if he saw blood he fainted. But he wasn’t afraid of getting shelled. So that was Alan.

That’s a funny contrast.

21:32 **What other interactions with animals did you have in New Guinea?**

Never did see any animals. Heard about pigs, and some blokes managed to catch and kill pigs. But I think the New Guinea pigs had so much disease in them, I wouldn’t have wanted to eat any New Guinea pork at that stage of the game. That was the only animal I ever saw. Saw a few New Guinea natives, but we didn’t have much to do with New Guinea natives. But the New Guinea

22:00 natives, they were horrified with us, because we all lived together. When we went in swimming, we just went in swimming native. The New Guinea natives would never come out of the water with their private parts exposed. They always had hands over their private parts. Although they had hardly any clothes on, they weren’t exposing themselves. They were very modest about that, yeah. We saw a few blokes around.

You didn’t have much interaction in terms of your work, or

22:30 **help with transport, or anything like that, with natives?**

No, not at all. Not in that area. Just saw a few of them in passing. But I never really got into the town of Lae itself. Whether there were any natives there, I don’t know. But the little villages, they shot through quick and lively, which was very wise, because areas were shelled before people came ashore. Some fellows had interesting jobs. This – Don Scott, his name was. He was the oldest bloke in our section, about 40, and he was attached to an American

23:00 torpedo boat group as an Australian signalman, to communicate with us. And he was describing some of the things they did. He said they would go up the coast with these torpedo boats, with their massive magnificent engines on them. And cruise quietly, way up the coast, where the Japanese had their lights on and everything there. And he

23:30 said they would storm into these little bays, and form around in a great circle, and fire at everything around, and cause all hell to break loose, and then they were gone again. Another thing those torpedo boats did. I was talking about being in a little hole with Jack Riek, waiting for the Japanese landing. What had happened, they had shot a Japanese lieutenant somewhere. The infantry

24:00 had. And he had on him a diary and all the details of a landing that was to take place. And when and where the landing was to take place. They would be part of the party onshore. So, they knew this Japanese barge group were going to go ashore and attack us. They had them all waiting. In fact, they had Bofors guns on the beach, pointed low down to attack them.

24:33 So the Japs didn't have a chance. But before the Japs got anywhere near the shore, apparently the American torpedo boats, they rushed alongside these barges, and they would come alongside at an enormous high speed, and turn on an angle and put a huge wave up which dropped into the barges and sink the barges. I can't remember exactly how many barges actually

25:00 hit the shore, but I think there were only about seven barges got into the bay and they were shot up. And only one barge got ashore, and only a few Japanese got ashore, too, but they stormed into attack still, even though there was only a few of them left, and they got the rest of them in the morning. So we were never under serious threat from the sea.

I wonder if you could take me through an average day of work. You told me a bit

25:30 **about the shifts and the way you worked in the different shifts. If you could take me through your day, in terms of your toiletries in the morning and what you ate and what you had to in the shifts and the work –**

It varied enormously according to the situation.

Yes.

But you'd get up in the morning, it would be porridge for breakfast, three hundred and sixty five days a year. Not a great deal at that time. You'd try and find a creek somewhere, or if you were near the sea, you'd go to the sea to bathe.

26:01 We all shaved, still. And then it depended, with us, who was on shift. But everybody got up to go and get breakfast, because they weren't going to make any allowances for the fact that you worked all night. You had to get up. It was the same with all meals. One little area that we were in, which I've still got quite clearly in my mind, we had a nice

26:30 hole in the ground nearby, and a little path leading up to it. It was a good area. It was Langemak Bay area, I think. And on our set there was a line; we call it a 'D3 line', heading across – it was a communications line heading across. And it headed across through some little bushes, and one of these little bushes had those hollow stems, and those pithy stems, and it was occupied by

27:00 black ants. And the little black ants used to come out of that little stem, and they used to get along this wire, and up in the tree were these red ants, the tree ants. I beg your pardon, they were green ants. And you would see someone come up to visit us. Could be Don Kelly, could be somebody else. And they'd be standing stationary there, for ages, on this little path. And what they were staring at were the little ant battles.

27:32 But then, one of us would be on shift, the rest of us would be trying to rest. And on a thing like that, and do absolutely nothing, and beat the living hell daylights out of your clothes or something and hang those up, and sit around and rest. Have you got a smoke? Have a smoke, and have a chat. And that was virtually your life. If you were moving it was vastly different. The other thing, I mentioned the ants, I didn't tell you you could be walking along

28:00 a track, and you could see a linesman who has climbed up a coconut palm. You would see a fellow suddenly coming down from a coconut palm, and you would think he was stark raving mad, because he's stopped in the middle of the road and he's stripping his clothes off and throwing all his clothes off madly. And what had happened when he got up there, the green ants would attack. And when these green ants would attack, they just dug their needles in and they just stayed there. And you could have hundreds of green ants all over you. And the only thing

28:30 to do was strip every stitch of clothing off, and try and smash the green ants off. And we'd all been attacked by them at some point. And they were terrible things. And they built their nests out of bits of leaf, and they were hanging nests. They stitched them all together with their secretions. And they were terrible when they attacked and they would bite anybody. So, if you were walking along and you saw somebody come down out of a tree tearing all their clothes off, you knew they'd been attacked by

29:00 green ants. He really wasn't raving mad after all.

And you mentioned that you had to do a little bit more sending of signals than you anticipated because your mate George had broken down.

He broke down. But he'd receive all the messages and I'd lie back when he'd receive the messages and he'd do the rest. He recovered again.

Can you explain a bit further what breaking down meant? It was like your muscles refused to tap?

Yes, well I can. And if you like to just interrupt your tape just a

29:30 moment, I'll even get a Morse key out and show you.

Wonderful. (BREAK)

Okay, we're on now.

That's my own Morse key. The army Morse keys might have been slightly different, but I carried this with me, most of the time. It didn't have this great thing on, I've leant it to somebody and they've put that on the back but the real action should be to bend the wrist, like that, but some fellows got very stiff and they sent like that.

30:01 And it cracked up. That's X279. I can still send, but I can't receive very well. What happened with George, his wrist went on him and he'd keep making mistakes, in sending. So I had to do most of the sending. But that was how we did it.

30:32 That's the Morse key.

What did you spell just then?

X279. And I can't even remember what it was. It was a symbol. A symbolic thing. So there you are. But I remembered how to send it. It was like a language. Some fellows went in as amateur radio operators after the war, and they kept good; they kept the knowledge. I can receive it, but I'm very

31:00 slow. I'd get back into it. I'd get back to twenty-five words a minute in a couple of months if I practised. But I'm not going to bother. I'd rather do wood-turning.

Nowadays they would call that injury George had, repetitive stress injury.

Ah, yes, it would have been, indeed. But if you carried it out in the correct way, you rarely got wrong, yeah.

There was a question I wanted to ask you earlier. How was it learning this new language? How did you get your

31:30 **mind around it when you first learned it?**

I think the greatest mistake was the visual thing. They had 'A' and then they had a thing down and they called it dot-dash. And dot-dash is not in your head at all. And later on they taught people that if it was 'A', it was dit-tah. It was sound, it was not visual. But that was the great mistake. Early in the piece, the slowdown was, they virtually

32:00 created a visual thing for it, and then we had to take it to an audio thing. If you were taught just the sounds, it really didn't take very long. And in the end you could see fellows just standing there listening, and it was like listening to a language, yeah. And because mostly I used figures I wasn't as good as other fellows were. Like Reg Ballard would have been much better at plain language than I was, because he was a line operator, and they

32:30 used the alphabet. We knew enough of it. You gradually got more and more efficient at each thing you worked on.

Now were you privy to the contents of many of the messages you were sending?

No, no. Virtually almost never. Leaping right ahead, the only message I was really privy to was at the end of the war, when war was over and I was down in Kuching, communicating with Lacuna,

33:00 which was an island of North Borneo, and I received a message from Captain Don Kelly, telling me, henceforth that I was going to become a corporal. So I sent a message back to Kelly, and they were plain language then, that I had been a comparatively contented signalman for five years, and I preferred to remain that way. And he sent another message back saying it didn't matter much what I preferred, it was extra money, I was getting married after the war, I would become a corporal.

33:30 So I sent another message back to him saying that would not be possible because in the revolt earlier in the war I had been AWOL, and I had been extremely rude to an officer, calling him something unmentionable on this television. And Kelly sent a message back saying my record was scrupulously clean and I was going to become a corporal. And this went on. So after the war, my father, who was of course in the permanent [army], and I didn't realise, had looked at my records,

34:01 he said, "You must have known someone with considerable authority." I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because someone cleansed your record in Craig Building." Now Don Kelly, from Borneo or wherever he did, managed to get my records in Craig Building cleansed of all previous crimes. So that was Kelly at the end of the war. But that was what he was like. He was like our father, almost, he was.

34:30 I leapt ahead then.

So you did become a corporal?

Oh yes I did, I never acknowledged though. Never wore the stripes. In my heart, I [was] always comparatively content with signalman.

So just to follow through. You came from New Guinea, back to Sydney for further training.

Yes, we did. We went to an advanced wireless training school. We were camped on Randwick Racecourse.

35:01 We used to go by tram, I think, to Parramatta, every morning of this radio school. There were old ships' radio operators there for whom not only was Morse a language, they even nodded their heads. I thought they were balmy. We were already very good operators, but we did this advanced training course there. Then we went out

35:31 and enjoyed the good life of Sydney. And ate beautiful fish, and all that sort of stuff. All the good food that we had missed out for years. And had a few more drinks and stuff like that. And, of course, we weren't taking any Atebrin. Because Atebrin was the medication we took all the time in New Guinea, everyday. We didn't have any Atebrin. Nobody told us anything about it. I had a lovely time in Sydney at that stage of the

36:00 game. And it wasn't very long before I'd get sick and I'd have to come back from school on the tram. And I remember coming back, and people – and I don't blame them a bit. But you'd have the shakes, you'd be this bad. And then of course I'd have to go to [the] outside edge of the tram so that I could throw up. So people reckoned this was just some drunken soldier. And I quit back to the medical orderly back at Randwick. "Just the 'flu,

36:30 mate. Just the 'flu." Until I went in the final day and he took the highest temperature that he had ever taken, and it was mine. And then he panicked. So then I finished up in Randwick military hospital. And I had a gorgeous time there. After a few days on quinine, the ravages of the 'flu' calmed down. And there was a room with six of us in, not seriously incapacitated.

37:00 And we were attached to a heavy surgical ward. So we used to wander around and help taking the food around, and if somebody didn't want their high protein diet of a beautiful piece of steak, we'd say, "Thanks very much," and we'd take it back to our rooms and eat it. Everybody had a sense of humour including the young nursing aides, who, when you wanted a bottle to empty the bladder in, they had this lovely sense of humour. They were stainless steel, so they put the stainless steel

37:30 neck under the super heated steam and then brought you the bottle, to see if you could scream and injure yourself. But we learned about that quickly. We had some interesting fellows in that little room. I remember one bloke there. He was another one of these fellows, he had everything going for him, big and charming and all that sort of stuff. And he was a piece of vermin. He was trying to kid that he had beriberi. And laughing about it.

38:00 Eventually, one of the blokes said, "Look, we hate to see you wasting your time," to one of the nurses, "he's a bludger." And she said, "Don't worry, we know. And so do the doctors know." But he was terrible. They had to work so hard and pieces of vermin like that, we didn't like them. We were there, an exciting time. There was a lad there, a young lad, and was so incapacitated, in his mind I think, that he

38:30 wouldn't even clean his own teeth. The nurses would clean his teeth for him and stuff like that. He just used to sit around. He was lethargic. We treated him with contempt, I suppose. He didn't want this great food, so we were happy to eat that. But that was the first time in that hospital they had penicillin and they gave it to him. And to see the change, it was just magic. Of course, what worries me now as an old bloke is, that these antibiotics,

39:00 they're going to be useless in future generations. And we were there before, and people died. We saw what penicillin did, and it was wonderful. We had a lovely time there. There was a fellow in our ward, he had all the charm, I can't remember his name now, and the nurses; I remember one of the sisters coming in. And she came in to lean over and take his temperature or something, and a pair of great

39:30 arms would come around and seize her and drag her onto the bed. "Now you behave yourself. You're supposed to be a sick man." He'd say, "I'm not that sick!" But he had this gorgeous sense of humour, and he could get away with it. None of us clots would have ever got away with it. But then we had another fellow in the heavy surgical section, he had a body plaster on that went down to his legs and up to his chest. When they wanted to change his bed,

40:00 he would put his feet on the rail at the end of the bed, and get the chain over the top of the bed, and drag himself right up so the bed was completely clear and they could get underneath. And one of the sisters was saying what a beautiful patient he was. She said he had his body plaster changed one time, and she came in. And he was not complaining, he was just lying there, puffing for breath. He had plaster shrinking on his chest, and he could hardly breathe. And she said, "I didn't have the authority to do it," but she got a scalpel

40:30 and she cut the plaster down the chest so he could still breathe. I can't remember his name. We'll call him McNamara. But he was the funniest fellow.

We'll have to talk about him on the next tape.

Tape 8

00:33 Yeah, well, they loved him. He was courageous. He had shrapnel wounds in the groin and his pelvis had been badly damaged and so forth. And they loved him, and he was outrageous with the nurses, and that sort of thing. The matrons in those days were not very far removed from the sort of thing you saw in

01:00 some of our English comic films of yesteryear. The tough matrons, that occupied the stage. Matrons were very powerful figures. We used to go and chat to McNamara. We were going to the pictures and he said, "Geez, I'd love to go to the pictures. I haven't been to the pictures for months and months and months." So one night – we were amongst the walking, you see – we said, "We'll take you if you like." And he said,

01:30 "Okay." So we got a stretcher and we waited until nobody was looking, we loaded McNamara onto the stretcher, and to get him in the lift, we had to stand him up, so we stood McNamara up. He had his plaster on, don't know what we did to his back. We stood him up and we took him to the pictures. We had McNamara stood up at the back of the pictures, in his fully body plaster. Anyway, one of the young blokes in the other beds said the matron came out and she said, "Where's McNamara?"

02:01 And he said, "He's gone to the pictures, Matron." And he said, "I thought she was going to bloody kill me." And we got back to the ward; we thought matron was going to kill us, too. She was waiting for us when we brought McNamara back. But he did enjoy the pictures, and he was still alive. So, that was one of the lovely things of the hospital. We had a lovely

02:30 time there. And it fixed my malaria up and got me back. So, then back to leave.

It was a short amount of leave in Melbourne. How long?

I'd have thought for another, maybe, three weeks, it wasn't long. Then back to the tablelands to train for Borneo. We were much experienced, I suppose, but we

03:00 needed to get fit again. I think most of us were probably not in very good condition. So we went through our usual routine of training, and of course with all the years that had passed, to separate that time on the tablelands – the previous time on the tablelands was very difficult for me anyway. But we did the similar training. We landed on beaches. And then for Borneo, I suppose, the thing that happened to me, we went to Morotai,

03:30 to go to Borneo. And I went on the advanced party to Morotai. Driving a jeep around and carting people around to conferences. So I was there for probably a fortnight before the main group got there. To which I've just found recently was very lucky, because my trip there was pleasant, whereas the trip there for the other people was most unpleasant indeed. So, I suppose one of the interesting

04:00 things of Morotai was, in my memory, I was sitting on a shell case under a coconut palm. And I must have had my head back, I was looking up, and I saw a green coconut dislodge itself from the coconut palm and descend towards me. And it all seemed like slow motion as I moved slowly forward and took my body right off that seat and the coconut crashed onto the shell case on

04:30 which I was sitting. So it would have crashed on my skull, and I wouldn't be here today, I suppose. That was interesting. But the main mob got to Morotai, and we had the things that I did mention, the 'Keys of the Kingdom' and the peculiar member of the religion who really had, as far I'm concerned, no Christian love in him at all. But we were out there and

05:00 two interesting things happened up there. Don Kelly was complaining that our section only had one jeep and it was hopeless with only one jeep. So the fellow said, "We can get you another jeep. Can you get some paint so we can paint out the markings on it, and paint the unit markings on?" So a few days later, Kelly said he got the paint, so we acquired a jeep. The Americans had lots of jeeps. The first thing you had to do was steal a

05:30 rotor from somewhere and then we stole a jeep. So we got the jeep back to camp and in next to no time all their markings were painted out, and we had new markings painted on for our unit. And Don Kelly said the CO said to him, how did our section get two jeeps. And Kelly said, "The men of that section have great ingenuity." And the CO said, "They're a pack of thieving bastards." And Kelly said he said, "That's true, but with ingenuity." So we had

06:00 two jeeps when we went to Borneo. And we should have only had one. But that was Don Kelly. And the other thing that happened, they were a rebellious mob again. We had a lieutenant come to us, a new lieutenant, a new 2IC to our section, and he marched us out one morning, and Morotai was stinking hot. We were fit as Mallee bulls and we had marched and marched our legs off. And

06:30 he's marching us out, and he's still marching us formally, and blokes are starting to mutter and he called us to a halt, and this fellow had come from the Middle East and he had a lot of experience, he said, "I know all about A Section, but don't think you can put it over me. You'll do as I tell you and you'll do it properly." So off we marched. And he's marching us up and down, vigorously, and then Freddy Reeves, who was a corporal, fell out and he protested that we were fit, we knew how to march and to march us under these circumstances was

07:00 ridiculous and he was going to complain to Kelly when we got back. So this fellow screamed at him to fall in again, so Freddy fell in, so then we did the sluggard job. He looked around and found half of us were trailing behind and we weren't keeping up, and were all out of step and we did terrible things. And he said, "All right, if you're going to do that, I'll stand in the shade and you can march up and down all day." So he stood in the shade, and we'd march up and down, and we'd march a little way and then he'd yell at us to about turn, and we'd

07:30 about turn and march back again. So we marched off and we got too close to the corner. And they said, "We won't hear the bastard this time." So we kept briskly marching and he's yelling, "About turn! About turn!" And as soon as we got around the corner, we ran like hell. Rifles down and we ran and ran and then we stopped, and we're marching again, way around the corner. And he's running and running after us, and he caught up to us, and his face is streaming with sweat, and he's furious. He's livid

08:00 with rage. There's nothing he can do. We were all being obedient, we were marching beautifully. So we marched back to camp. Now not a soul said a word about this. When we got to camp, Freddy Reeves, he had to dismiss us. So he said, "Squad dismiss." And nobody saluted, not a soul. And this fellow screamed at us to fall in again, and he said, "You salute when there's an officer on the parade!" So we did, we fell in and saluted. As we went through the tent lines, I think Jimmy Stuart was the bloke,

08:30 Jimmy Stuart started, "Pig, pig, pig, pig." And we all screamed, "Pig, pig, pig, pig, pig" as we went through the tent lines. We never saw him again. He was flown off Morotai that day. Kelly got rid of him that night. But he was a fool. We'd do anything we were properly told, and we did it very well. And Kelly always said, "The problem is the 2ICs that have been sent, they've been the intellectual inferiors of the men in

09:00 this section." And we knew he was right. But we had a collective arrogance. So anyway, that was Morotai. So from Morotai, we went on quite a large ship to land at Borneo. There was enormous rocket fire from American ships to landing on shore. And we landed on the little island of Labuan. From there, time sort of

09:30 escapes a lot of us. A lot of us were separated. Some fellows finished up in North Borneo. And from there I was sent with the Thirteenth Infantry Battalion to land on an oil town: Miri. So we landed at Miri, and we were quite separated from anybody else. We were just one little group there with a little perimeter around us. We had a

10:00 very big set. At that stage of the game, to get through, we had a big airforce set, which had a Jenny motor on it, which meant it made a lot of noise at night. And we were camped in this area at this stage, operating the set. And the CO, who was the lieut colonel and battalion commander, came one time and he asked us how we were going. And I said, "Okay. It's difficult because in the middle of the

10:30 night, we're the only set that's ever got a light on. And we're the only place where there's got a noise going. We're all the same, we all get spooked. You're sitting in there, sending messages, and in your mind you've got some great big Jap with a sword behind you, waiting to chop your head off." And he wasn't overly concerned about us being spooked, but he was overly concerned about us getting chopped up because we were the wireless operators. So then he had infantrymen come and stand guard on us at night, and they didn't

11:00 like it either. But, nothing ever happened down there. And it was an interesting town. We wandered around the town, there was old oil fields there. And the Japanese had tried to damage so much machinery. But then we finished our little stint there, we had to go back to North Borneo again. And I had to drive a jeep back. I wasn't going back by barge. So we went to an engineers' camp, and on the way there the Japs had incidentally put fire to

11:30 some of the oil wells. And the ingenuity of a lot of the Australian engineers, there were fellows there with great sheets of metal, and they had through them, pincers, great big pincers, with iron pipes on the end, and they'd each be behind sheets of metal, with somebody else directing them and maybe a couple of wheels in front, to go forward, so they could go to the top of one of these red hot

12:00 burning pipes and crush the top of the pipes together. So some of the ingenuity from ordinary Australian engineers was just really incredible. Anyway, we got to a little engineers' camp where there was a ferry over a river which we had to cross. So we had to camp there that night and they said, "Don't go out at night because we've got trip wires everywhere." And because they were engineers they had well established it. And they had trip wires with explosives

12:30 and stuff, and if you walked into one of these trip wires you'd get blown up. And an occasional pig did get blown up, and dogs and stuff. But now I don't know whether what they said was true or not, but when we crossed the barge the next day on our little jeep, with maybe four of us in, I'm not quite sure now, they said, "Well, good luck fellows. You're the first blokes that have been up here since we put the ferry across." Now the war had just

13:00 ended at that stage. So I was driving, so we drove flat out all the way up, and when we had to stop for petrol, blokes leapt out the back and they've got grenades and their Owen guns in, fill the petrol up and start again. And there was cars abandoned and things, but we weren't game to stop and look at anything. We thought we'd stop somewhere and some Japs would come out and mow us down. So we

made a frantic trip up north along the coast. Back to Labuan again, and then, that was

13:30 just the end of the war, I was sent down to Kuching. And this is going to be very difficult, because I have a great deal of trouble with this. We went down on an American destroyer. And when we got to Kuching, the draft of the destroyer was too great to get up the river, to go to the town of Kuching where they'd dock.

14:00 So, we met there an Australian sloop, which is of a much shallower draft, and we'd anchored and the sloop had anchored and they had a gang plank from the sloop up to the deck of the destroyer. Walking up the gang plank was an Australian sailor with the sort of face you could crack rocks on. He was

14:30 carrying a man in his arms, and as he carried him up there were tears streaming down his face. They were the prisoners of war that the Japs had had. They were Dutch and English, and they'd been in the prisoner of war camp there. No transfer took place, they just brought them all onto the American destroyer.

15:06 The Americans were magnificent. They brought up tubs of water for us. When maybe two of us would take a prisoner, we'd strip his raggy clothes off and we'd just chuck them overboard. The Yanks stripped their Q stores out and their own private lockers and they brought up their t-shirts and their underwear and stuff like that and the

15:30 tubs of hot water, and we bathed these fellows. And their cooks were cooking up soft food for them. So, then we virtually spoon fed them. And I always thought that because they'd had been in such terrible conditions before, nobody had wept for them,

16:00 everybody was weeping. The Yanks were weeping, we were all weeping. And I reckon I wept for a couple of hours. And I remember spoon feeding a little Tommy bloke, and some of them, they were pitiful. Their lower leg could be the size of a normal thigh, with the fluid in it, the beriberi. They had their little shoes on, they had ulcers on their feet, they'd tip their shoes down and

16:30 fluid would drain out of the holes in their bodies. Their thighs could be as big as my forearm. There was no meat on them. Little Tommy there, I was busy spoon feeding him and he was sorry for me. And he reached his little hand across to pat me on the shoulder, and he said, "Don't cry, mate, we'll be okay."

17:02 And he was sorry for me. Anyway, so that was my entre to Kuching. And although I had run into prisoners of war before, I suppose that was my entre. I suppose it's easier now, but I thought then

17:30 that the Japanese; nothing really terrible happened to me, but I think I'll hate the bastards as long as I live. However, that was my Waterloo, it really was. It was the toughest time ever, for me.

18:03 So we got us all to Kuching. And Kuching was interesting. And the British Raj type of thing, the post office at Kuching could be identical to the post office at the GPO [general post office]. It had the columns out the front, and all the concrete and cement stuff. And that's where we established ourselves.

18:30 So we provided communications there. We did a number of things. We had Japanese working for us, trying to get the communications back in the area. Clearing underneath the telephone wires and stuff. And I know we'd take them out, and they didn't want to sit down in our dirty truck because they had new clothes out of their Q store. And we sat down and we thought, "Man, will you be sitting down when you come home tonight." So we worked them into the ground. There was one fellow there, he was

19:00 a very big fellow and he had just heard that his brother had died in Changi. And he was working with us as a guard, too, of the prisoners there. We gave them machetes and cane knives and things and they had to chop scrub down. And when they'd finished there, they'd be directed to go a little further along. And when they went past him, they pulled their little buns in, because his size twelve boot was going to cop their backsides as they went past. But other than that, nobody did what they would do to us, I suppose that's what we could say.

19:31 That was part of my job. Part of my job was radio communication, part of my job was working on the switchboard. The other part of the job was there was a very small force of MPs there. There was an MP sergeant and a couple of blokes, and now and then things were pinched, and we might cordon off a Chinese section of the village and we'd search everything. He'd cordon a bit off, and we'd go in and work with the MPs, and we'd

20:00 search the building. And he told us to all be very polite. And we would bow to the Chinese occupiers when we went in. And we would bow to them and say, "Thank you," when we left. We did our best to be very courteous and polite. And we got on very well with the Chinese. But there was a problem there. The Chinese resented the Malays there, because they said the Malays co-operated with the Japanese and they never did. And they hated the Malays. So every now and then there would be a Malay killed,

20:30 one night, and the next night there would be a Chinese killed. So that sort of thing went on. There was a canal that divided the Malay section and the Chinese section, and I suppose what I should say about this sergeant; [I was] wandering up through the Chinese town there one day with him, and there was somebody doing a poster on a pillar there. And he made them interpret what it was. And it was incitement to take over and go down and

21:00 do over the Malay section, and he made them strip it all off. And there was a very angry crowd around us. So he then said, “I’ll tell you what you fellows do, you take your belts off.” And we’ve got belts with the brass buckles on, and he showed us how we folded the belts around our fists, and we had the brass buckles outwards, and he said, “We go out, shoulder to shoulder, in a circle. If anyone comes to attack you, you slash

21:30 them straight across the face with this. And mate, that will lay the cheek right open and nobody else will want to have anything else to do with you.” So he was a very calm and tough cookie. I would say he was in his thirties, probably a former policeman, and we backed out with him. Later on, we heard him coming, yelling, “Right, you fellows I need you!” And we looked over the top of the flat roof of our building, and here’s hundreds of Chinese marching down together. And they’ve got

22:00 spears, swords, pistols, pitchforks, and they were all coming down to go to the Malay section. And they had to cross a little narrow bridge over the canal. So we belted down, got in the jeep, and there could have only been about seven of us, with a Grade A sergeant. And we went around the other side. We went down the street, parked the jeep in the middle of the street, and we had an officer with us, and he said, “Okay, sergeant, you tell us what to do.”

22:30 And this probo sergeant, he told us to line up there. He said, “Get your rifles ready. Nobody’s to fire unless I go down. If I go down, fire, and don’t bloody well hit me.” That’s the first thing he said. And he said, “The other thing, you fire at their legs. You’re not going to kill anybody, and you’ve got a good chance of each bullet taking two or three down. You fire at their legs, you hit them and they go down.”

23:01 And he stood with his fists on his hips, with his revolver holster button down, in the middle of the road, and this great mob came down towards him, he reached out to the lead bloke who was waving a pistol around, took the pistol off him, smacked him one across the face, and – he had learned enough Chinese – he was telling them to clear off and go home, and there were about four hundred angry Chinese, and they turned around and they went home.

23:30 And I don’t even remember his name, but I thought – we were talking about courage before – “Where would you find a braver bloke?” He was a terrific fellow, yeah. That was a little incident in Kuching. The other lovely thing that happened to us in Kuching was, I was driving out one day and there was a couple of nuns walking along the road, so I stopped to ask if I could give them a lift. The older one; in the jeep, driving

24:00 sideways on the left – it was a Yankee jeep – she had to sit behind me because her left ear drum was gone. She said, “I can’t hear you.” She was the only one who could speak English. She would sit behind and turn towards me. And she was the elder nun, she was about fifty I suppose, and the younger nun sat beside me. And she explained to me why she was deaf in that ear, because a Jap had smacked her across the side of her head and burst her ear drum with his open hand, at one stage. And they were going to work out at the hospital. So I drove them out to the hospital.

24:30 And then when I went back, I said, “Do you work here every day, sister?” Oh yes, they do, so okay. And the next day the jeep is going out and she said, “I hope you boys don’t come out just to pick us up.” I said, “Sister, we’ve got to come out here everyday, it’s part of our job.” So, she was a lovely lady. They were Dutch ladies. And I said, “Sister, can we buy you a pair of shoes?” Because

25:00 they had these horrible Japanese sand shoes on, and she said, “No, but you can give me any money you’ve got for the work in the hospital.” So I gave her what money I had. Other blokes did the same. Others blokes would take in turn. We’d look where their feet were and as soon as they got out on the steel floor, we’d get a screwdriver and scrape across. And in about a week we went down the shoemakers and we got sandals made for them. And then I was driving out one day – it was

25:30 terrible, in that climate they wore these black habits – and I said, “Sister, your clothes are so bad. All your clothes must be bad, aren’t they?” And she said, “Oh yes, they are terrible, but we get by.” So I went back to the blokes, and we went down to the Malay section, and there was a huge bolt of pink rayon down there. It was a great big bolt of it. So we bought the pink rayon, and wrapped it all up. And I had to do this. The next time I picked her up I said, “Sister, the fellows are all worried that your

26:00 underclothes must be as bad as your outer clothes. We’ve got some material here, but we can only give it to you,” – oh, and they did their dress making – “if you promise not to use it at the hospital but to use it on yourselves.” So she promised. Anyway. It was not long after that, she was laughing, and she said, “You know, we’re the only nuns in existence who’ve got pink rayon underwear.” So that was one of the nicest parts.

26:30 I suppose, talking about prisoners, earlier on in Borneo, we were in a little area, and I was attached to a mob there where they’d had some Indians who had been prisoners of the Japanese, and they had them there. This is just the end of the war. And they were bringing Japanese prisoners in. Now these Indians were little better than the Englishmen that we had taken up. They were skin and bone. But they needed to get square.

27:00 And so, there was a major in charge of this company and he said, “Look, I know it’s not our culture, but these Indians want to make these Japanese prisoners run the gauntlet between two rows of them. They want to beat them. They want to get square. We’ve got to let them do it, okay?” He said, “Your fellows’ job is to make sure that if anybody gets knocked down, you’ve got to rescue them and get them out. And

you mustn't let the Indians have sticks or stones," because some of the Indians were secreting big stones in their hands.

27:32 And the bloke in front of me, he had a piece of wood in his hand with a three inch steel nail driven through it. So I had to take that off him. I said, "Sorry, you can't have this." He was going to get square by beating them with that. And it wasn't nice to see, but we had to let them do it. And they couldn't do much harm. They were so weak from lack of hunger. So that was my other little incident with prisoners.

What happened in that conflict?

28:00 The Japs just had to run down between two rows of blokes, and they slapped their faces and stuff as they ran down, and then they were carted away. They just wanted to hurt them. They had been hurt so much themselves. And that was the way they felt. They needed to beat somebody. Now, none of our fellows ever struck back. But then, the other thing that I think people should understand, and I don't argue when people say how terrible Hiroshima was and Nagasaki was,

28:30 I don't argue about it at all, it was terrible. I belong to Croydon Probus Club and I was talking to a fellow down there, and things came out. He was a prisoner of war at Kuching. He was an Englishman, and he said, "You know, I've got two prayers."

29:00 He said, "I thank God for the Ninth Australian Division. And I thank God for the atom bomb." Because they'd been told, they were all going to be killed, when we invaded Japan. And if America had to invade Japan, Japan would have fought on and on and on, and there would have been more Japanese killed in the battle for Japan than there ever were killed at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And there would have been a lot of Americans killed as well.

29:30 So, terrible as it was, in the balance it probably saved lives. It certainly saved the lives of prisoners. They knew for sure they were doomed. And I heard from blokes that were there. They said there was a very small company of Australian troops – the Japanese they did think that even though peace had been declared they were still in grave danger of being killed. And the gates swung open and in perfect formation, a small group of Australians with the

30:00 officer at their lead marched in and demanded to see the commandant of the prison camp and just took over. He said it was the way they did it that was so commanding. And they took great risks themselves, and it was just wonderful to see them. But even the terrible things; the nun told me, where they were, they were so short of food, when she was in prison. She said they had a hole in the wall, and they had

30:30 a grating, a drainage grating on a stick. She said they knew there was a dog there, and they had a piece of fish and bit of wire netting in that hole, and when the dog went in after the netting they dropped the grating and they killed the dog. And that's what they ate. It was very hard. I really got over my detestation of the Japanese, and it was very difficult. The only thing I cannot forgive

31:00 them for, something else, and that is the Germans have accepted what happened, and they've made it public and we all understand it. The Japs have sanitised their history and particularly about the comfort women. These women, the Koreans and the Chinese and so forth, that were forced into brothels. There is absolutely no acknowledgment that that was the most heinous crime. And I can't forgive them for that.

31:31 So, that's my big problem with the Japanese, I'm afraid. But other than that, in Borneo, a lot of the Chinese people were lovely people, and met some lovely kids there. Beautiful people. And Borneo again, there were lots of things that were nice there. I flew out of Borneo eventually, back to Labuan, on a Catalina.

32:00 And that was another thing, the Cats. There was a bloke there that had a monkey. The monkeys were interesting, too. You'd go to a picture theatre, I remember going one time, and the Malays might capture a monkey, but they wouldn't treat them as kindly as we do. This fellow had a monkey, and it's inside his shirt or something and it's perched there. And this monkey is quite happy with him, and he's looking after the monkey. And the monkey looked along the row, and there was a Malay

32:30 bloke sitting in the seats watching the film. And that monkey scuttled along, and they just grabbed him in time, and he got to that Malay and he held him and he had his teeth out and he was going to bite lumps of the Malay's face. He hated Malays, the monkey, because they had been cruel to him. And he loved blokes that had been kind to him. But the monkeys did some terrible things, of course, they had them in canteens. The Australians were typical of picking up things like that. But anyway, flying back

33:00 to Kuching, there was a lot of us on this Catalina, because all the weapons had gone off it. And they went up and down the river to try and get a wave, so they could take off from the water. And eventually it took. And we'd take it in turns sitting in the blisters, and looking out. You could look down over the sea and the little villages. And there's a bloke there, and he's sitting with his monkey, and the monkey's looking out. And the monkey must have suddenly

33:30 decided how high up above he was of those trees and the island and the things there. And he turned against this bloke and he wet himself in fright, And then his bowels gave way, too. So I was glad I wasn't holding the monkey. It wasn't my monkey anyway. So from there it was back to Kuching. From Kuching back to

34:00 Labuan.

Where were you when you got news that the war was over?

I think on Labuan. I was in Borneo of course. I'm not sure. Probably in Miri. It must have been in Miri, because we'd done the salt on Miri. Halfway down the coast of Borneo.

What was it like getting news that war had finished?

It was wonderful news,

34:30 because all the excitement we heard about the war being over in Europe; it wasn't over for us. We still had the Japs, so it was a funny feeling, thinking, they're celebrating the end of the war, and it's not over yet. Yeah, it was a great feeling. It was a great feeling to think about getting home.

35:01 And there was little sadness. You just think, well, nobody else will get killed and things like that. And it must have been terrible for some people. In the last couple of the months of the war, they would have lost some of their kids in Borneo and places like that. Get killed in those last moments.

In later years have you reflected back about the usefulness of those campaigns at the very end of the war, in places

35:30 **like that?**

I've never had any doubt. I've never had any worries. I believe what had to be done, had to be done in New Guinea. And the Japs came in afterwards, because they thought the Germans were going to do a good job and they would take over the Pacific, no doubt. I think some of the various actions were silly.

36:00 Some of it was political. They should never have gone to Greece. In fact, the generals in North Africa warned Churchill if he took the Sixth Australian Division away and sent them to Greece, we would lose North Africa. And we did. So Greece was useless. A lot of good fellows died there, and others died in North Africa, unnecessarily. But it was a political decision at the time.

36:30 **We're just near the end of this tape. I just wanted to ask what transpired then when you found out war was over, between then and the time when you actually got home.**

Well, from then on they fed us like fighting cocks because they had so much food lying around. We just hung around on Labuan and it depended on how many points you had. Whether you were married, your age, and then suddenly someone discovered my age, which made me younger than I was, so I lost some

37:00 points there. And I don't really know how that happened. So it was waiting to get home. And then, getting home we were on an American Liberty ship. They were terrible things to be on. With all the stuff on the deck, and all the blokes smoking. They were filthy dirty. And what I did, I managed to get myself a pair of khaki strides and a khaki shirt, as

37:30 clean as could be, and quite bleached in the sun, and I packed those away, and I went all the way back to Townsville, or Brisbane I think, on this ship in a filthy state, like everybody else. And while we're getting near the shore and all the blokes are rushing to the side, I got in the shower, I scrubbed myself clean, I put my spotless clean clothes on, I dumped the others, and that's how I went ashore there:

38:00 in clean clothes, and felt much better. And from there it was a train I think. Funny, I've hardly any recollection of it, until we got home to Melbourne. In Royal Park, actually, we met our families. Our families all knew [we] were coming, and our families were waiting for us, yeah. I was home.

It must have [been] marvellous.

It was lovely.

38:30 **Who was there to receive you?**

Molly, my fiancée who I was to marry, and my Mum and my father. And I think my brothers were there, too. I can't remember if my sisters were there. And it was difficult.

Did they throw you a little party?

Oh, it was quiet.

39:00 It was difficult to be back. I'd been away in all male company for five years. I was socially incompetent. It was difficult to fit back into anything. It was difficult to be away from the people I depended on all those years. I suppose it was a rush, rush, rush, because I got married shortly thereafter. Then I went to work in a factory, so once again, virtually no

39:30 females I was mixing with. I had a nice uncle who had a house which we rented. And then, Molly had an abortion, and then Bronny my eldest daughter was born. And then there was peculiar things. And I think it's an example of my social incompetence that I didn't know what to do.

40:02 I worked in a furniture factory for quite a while, and then I went and worked at Myers. I got a job at

Myers as a maintenance carpenter. And then part of that job was – Coles were opening new stores. We were sent up to Ararat, where we took over a new store up there. And I've got a little girl. And when we went on these trips you got an extra pound a week or something for being away, which was a big deal.

40:31 So I was up and we used to work; I was rebuilding counters. It was awesome, the weather was lovely. I was rebuilding counters out in the backyard and enjoying myself. And there was a young lady there, a girl, she would have been about eighteen. Pretty as a picture, beautifully put together. And she'd wander down, the storeroom was underneath, and she'd wander down and she'd have a little chat and go and get something out of the storeroom.

41:00 And eventually, one of the store ladies came down and she said, "I wish you would stop encouraging that girl." I said, "I'm not encouraging her." I was a proper married man, with a little boy. And she said, "Of course, I know she's young and pretty. But I'm staying in the same hotel you're staying in." And I thought, "Blimey, what the hell does a bloke do with this?" So that night, having a beer with my mate Eric Chappell, I said to Eric, I told him the

41:30 situation. I said, "What the hell do you do?" He said, "I'll tell you what, mate. In country towns," – and this was many years ago – "if girls get broody, and they want a bit, they target a bloke from out of town. Because if they have it in town, they're known as the town bike. The old WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s from the head office, when they're after you, they'll talk about your gorgeous wife and your lovely kids, even if you haven't got any. And any bloke that lets his dick ruin his life is a bloody fool." And that was my Eric.

42:00 Beautiful morality.

Tape 9

00:33 **We just need to clarify that you accidentally used the wrong term for what happened to Molly when you first married.**

Yes I did. I used a terrible term. I used 'abortion,' when I should have used 'miscarriage,' because Molly would have no more thought of having an abortion at that time. All she wanted was baby. So, there was definitely no abortion. And she miscarried again. She miscarried a couple of times. But she was good, she coped. And I

01:00 had to collect the early fetus and show it to the doctor and all that sort of stuff. She was a terrific lady, I was lucky. I've been very lucky.

And how long were you married to Molly before she passed away?

Forty-five years, I suppose. And when she was 47, she was playing pennant squash; very good, very competent, the most beautiful woman. And when she was 50, she could hardly walk,

01:30 with the rheumatoid arthritis. I always remembered, I tried to be gentle. We had a daughter in London at the time, and we went to London, and we're crossing Oxford Street, and we started to cross as soon as the little green men came up at the lights, and before we got to the other side, a fellow in a new Rover in a three piece suit with his hat on, tooted, and in protective enragement, I turned and yelled at him, "Drop dead you bloody mug!"

02:00 And Molly said calmly as we got [to] the curb, "You don't have to let everyone know you're an Australian." But she was stoic. She never complained. She just faded away to skin and bone and she died of emphysema. I look at it now as I can look back at the anniversary of her death as [the] anniversary of the time she ceased to suffer.

02:30 And what's lovely, Adrienne knew her, too. Adrienne had known her for four years.

Adrienne being your second wife.

Adrienne being my second wife, yeah. I never expected to marry again, but there you are, it happened.

That's beautiful. Going back to your early life just after the war, how difficult was it to resettle into civilian life?

It was very difficult. I think the most difficult thing really,

03:00 was for the wives of the blokes that came back. It was difficult for Molly. It was difficult to realise that, really, the greatest bond we had was with other blokes, who we depended on all those years. It was very difficult, more difficult for them I think than anyone else. And then we reached the stage where we never talked about it.

03:30 We couldn't talk at home. There was an incredible series on where a fellow by the name of Grabowski, 'The World at War'. And it didn't deal with good blokes or bad blokes, or good people or bad people, it just dealt with people at war. And I'll tell you the little bits I remember. One was a Dutch lady being

interviewed and talking

04:00 about her brother, who was only twelve, being taken away to work in Germany. It was cold, and she took off her overcoat and made him put it on, and she thought as he was going away, it was buttoned it up the wrong way. And she never saw him again. That was the end of it. But the world at war. I had a terrific family and four kids and an understanding wife. And I would sit and watch that, and as soon as it finished I would go and take the dog and walk for

04:30 maybe three quarters of an hour. And I couldn't share it with anybody. We all had to wait until we got to work the next day, and there was a bloke who went to war, and they were the only ones we could share it with. So for most of us, for most of our lives, we've never been able to share it with anybody who hadn't been there. And that's probably been difficult for quite a few blokes and difficult for some wives. I think the other thing we need

05:00 to imagine too, without mentioning any names, I went to one place one time to see some fellow and I really never got off the front porch. And I think some of the wives felt threatened, and maybe got over possessive. And I'm not being horrid about it, and it was so. But they were going to separate their fellows from the blokes they went to war with,

05:30 and I think quite a few of them did. And it was the way it was. And I try to understand that, too.

So most men you knew didn't talk about the war to their families at all?

No, never talked about it. I didn't talk about it to anyone, even my father. My father, he'd make a few odd references to great fellows I met, but no, I didn't talk about it to anyone. I didn't talk about it with my

06:00 kids. I didn't talk about it with Molly. The only bloke you could talk about it with was other blokes. And then, you really didn't, it was part of yesteryear.

When did that desire to talk about it more publicly start to change, or start to come about?

When deaths became very common. When a lot of blokes started to

06:30 die. Then I think, then most of us felt we needed to talk about it. I was on a – I don't know where I was. I suppose it would have been the end of the war. Maybe it was Labuan? I don't know. We had a visit from Louis Mountbatten, who had come out from Burma. He had just fought the Burma war. We had been drilled

07:00 to fill this great hollow square around the dais where Louis Mountbatten was going to speak from. And we had this formal square formed around it, and when Louis Mountbatten arrived on the dais, he just beckoned everyone to come right in, and to sit down. And he talked for three quarters of an hour without a note, without a break. But before that, I was part of a mob being presented to

07:30 him, because of long service I suppose. I had a lot of service. I mean, the bloke next to me, I think his name was Starcevich, he was a VC [Victoria Cross], he was a little bloke standing alongside me, and he's a VC fellow. But I remember Mountbatten talking to him and saying, "Oh well, I just had a job to do and I did it." And he was a gentle quiet fellow.

08:00 So, he was another fellow. He would have come home, and he was a VC bloke, and he wouldn't have wanted anybody to know about it. You don't want that stuff known about.

So even with your father you didn't talk about it?

No, being careful not to mention anything. My father, when I came back from the Middle East, from the big barrages and the death, and there was somebody else that wanted to enlist but couldn't,

08:30 my father mentioned that, "I now understood why this fellow should never go to war." Some people could cope, some people couldn't. And because some of them were really good fellows, I wouldn't even give the slightest hint of who they were, but there were just occasionally, just one or two fellows who, maybe late in the war, just fell to bits, really. They just

09:00 had too much. But that was it. It was hard.

It would have been a very hard time, in the war.

I mean I was very, very lucky. I didn't have the terrible stress that a lot of these fellows did. And I was well behind all that, those blokes on the other side.

09:30 Nobody ever really caught up with me. It was interesting.

Despite that, it had its own challenges to re-enter civilian life.

Oh yes, very big challenges. And I think back how difficult it was, particularly for the all the wives like Molly. I was fortunate that I moved up into the Croydon area. There was something that influenced

10:00 me very early in life. A book. I think Out of the Earth might have been the name of it. Louis Bromfield, he was an American writer, he spent half of his childhood in France, and part in America. He wrote

about the Depression in America, where a fellow's out of work, he's buying his car on higher purchase, his refrigerator on higher purchase.

10:31 They go back: there's one less refrigerator to be manufactured, there's one less car to be manufactured. He's turfed out of his apartment; there's one less empty apartment. And he reckoned it mushroomed because of that. And he compared it to France where at that time a lot of the workers lived in little allotments, and they had a little cottage and some rabbits in a hutch and they had some chickens in there and they grew their own vegetables and they got their wood out of the forest. And they survived

11:00 like that. And they survived better than the Americans did. It always very much impressed me. And moving into Croydon, I then found I had got myself a couple of acres of land. So I had my vegetables and my chickens. And early on we had goats. And later on we had a cow. So I was very busy. I got up at five o' clock in the morning, I milked my cow, I went to work, I worked hard all day, I got home at night and I worked in the vegetable garden. So I

11:30 think, I was very busy. And then because I had children in the community, I got involved in school committees and park management committees and conversation societies. And once you've been secretary of something and on a committee, you never escape, they've got you for the rest of your life, wherever you go. So that's been my life. And that's what I think helped me get back into it. Being forced into the community again.

Have you seen a

12:00 **difference [in] how people in the general population perceive Anzac Day, over the years? Have you seen a difference in that?**

Well, I think at the moment it's increasing, for some reason or another. I mean, I didn't march for years, but looking now, and what I'm fascinated by is the number of different ethnic backgrounds that come. When I was a kid, we would have been ninety-eight percent Anglo-Saxon. We had a few Greek shopkeepers and Italian shopkeepers,

12:31 and Chinese vegetable growers. But now it seems more interesting.

And what has marching meant to you in recent years?

Well, I only march for one reason. I march for those who are dead.

13:04 I march for mates who are dead and gone, I suppose. I march for those who died, virtually, as boys. The twenty year olds. So that's it. And giving a bouquet to somebody else, after we march we go down to Melbourne Town Hall,

13:30 us old sigs, together there. And there was an old sig. down there, he was just an ordinary sig., and his name was Lindsay Thompson, and he became Premier of Victoria. And I went across to Lindsay Thompson at one gathering down [there], and I said to Lindsay Thompson, "You, like me, have seen quite a few heroic blokes."

14:00 I just told him I wanted to lift my lid to him because I can think of no more heroic action then when Lindsay Thompson offered to be the hostage for that teacher and those children, who were held captive by that particular madman. And Lindsay Thompson is premier of the state, but prepared to do that. And he's just an ordinary sort of a bloke. He's no great muscle-bound giant or anything, he's just an ordinary fellow. And he's a very brave man. So,

14:30 that was one of my joys.

How do you think the war changed your life?

Hard to know what I would have been like if I hadn't gone to war. It sounds crazy, but I'm sure it's enriched my life. I mean, I had an incredible section that I was in.

15:02 We went from school teachers to this champion violinist to storemen to blokes with an LLB [Bachelor of Laws - university degree] and became Supreme Court judges. Just a great mixture of ordinary fellows. And with very rare exceptions, they had a lovely moral code, they knew what was right and wrong, and that's the way they lived. And most of

15:30 them, when they came back in their ordinary lives, they lived like that. Mind you, our early reunions, when those blokes met again, half the blokes got rotten drunk. They did it once a year. But now we go to reunions and you're lucky if you can have more than three beers, because that's all they'd think of drinking. As I said, the fellows I knew, they become jolly good citizens

16:00 and highly moral men.

And the drinking, at least temporarily, was a way of dealing with all that sadness?

Oh, I don't know. I think we were young blokes, and we were free and you did terrible things, and you didn't have responsibilities. And you didn't have a mother to go home to who was going to give you a good thick ear if you got home. Or my mother would have called me a 'blithering idiot'. That was her language. So you just did riotous things that boys did. And after all, a lot of us

16:30 as boys, we could get blind drunk on eight beers anyway, so it didn't really matter. And after the war it was, I suppose, for a little while, those early years, reliving things. And you were suddenly with your old mates again, and you drink, drink, drink. And it all had to be out of barrels. Now it's the quiet jug on the table.

Well, there's obviously lots more things that we could discuss, because

17:00 **you have a wonderful memory, an expansive perspective on things, I just wondered if there was anything that we haven't asked about that you would like to speak on?**

I've probably confused myself at this stage of the game. I suppose the only thing I can say is, and a lot of names I haven't mentioned but I just had wonderful people I knew. Wonderful people I served with, and

17:34 just ordinary fellows who believed they were doing a job they had to do. And of course I'm lucky to have had my father that made me a signalman, which made my life more interesting and kept me alive, too. So I think that was lucky. That's about it, I suppose.

You felt that you had a lucky war?

Oh yes, I did. I could say I injured my back;

18:01 I might have taken up smoking like mad anyway, even if the army hadn't given me the cigarettes, so I can't really blame them for my emphysema, although they do agree with it. But that's about it. I'm very fortunate at my age. I'm still reasonably fit and well. I had good friends, a good time. We led our separate lives when we came home, and we were completely different. I mean,

18:30 George Henry, my mate, he didn't have any children. His main interests were race-horsing and fishing. I had four children and I couldn't have afforded racehorses. Nor could I have had time to go fishing. Our lives were completely different, but we had the particular war-time bond. We've been lucky.

I've wondered about

19:00 **how you felt the war changed Australia?**

Yeah, it's difficult because probably not long before the war, things were very tough here. It was a depressed time. I mean really when we came home, I suppose, business boomed then. Everybody had a job, that was important.

19:30 I think although we were originally part of the Empire, that tended to separate us: a nation on our own. Not just part of the British Empire. I think that was an important part.

That we became more Australian?

Yeah, just more Australian. It even changed in things like early radio announcers, and after the war, too, they announced in

20:00 dinner suits and they talked with English accents. They talked plum. And gradually those sort of things changed. And I really think it had an impact on that sort of stuff. And we weren't going to have that sort of bull anymore. Although I had great interest in the English history because that's where my parents came from, and that's where my background was, I suppose.

20:32 But I was Australian first and foremost and that was the end of it. The English upper crust and the class system, of course, is still appalling, even now, in England. I think that's one of the great things. We recognised we were different, we weren't going to have that sort of nonsense going on.

On that point, were there

21:00 **distinct differences you felt between Australian soldiers and British and American troops?**

Well, a lot of the British we say – it had to do with the 51st Highlanders, supposed to be Highland Division. I remember talking to one of the Highland blokes one time, nice bloke, and I said, "They're supposed to be the Highlanders, they're rough as guts." He said half of the 51st Highlanders were a part of the Glasgow

21:30 razor gang boys. And they were conscripts, a lot of the British. And there were some very crummy British soldiers there. Unfortunately we can do the same thing here today. I had four days leave in Cairo, from Alamein, and all I wanted to do was get back to my unit. I was with a couple of blokes I had nothing in common with. One of them, as soon as we got somewhere,

22:00 he got in a fight with somebody. I told him I wouldn't go out with him and drink anymore. And I was in café there one night, and a fight started, and blokes immediately, they didn't know anybody there, they picked up their glasses and started throwing glasses at everybody. They had no relationship with anybody at all. So we had a lot of Englishmen who were conscripts, and compared to our blokes they were at the bottom of the barrel. Some of them I

22:30 ran into like that.

Is that what you were wanting to say in general about the differences in the troops?

Yeah, I think by standards, I've got to say this, we were better. Can't help it. There were differences in others, too. It was very interesting to see. Compared to the Sikhs, we were terrible. You'd see the Sikhs

23:00 at lunch and having dinner, and they'd [be] spotlessly clean, the Sikh fellows. And when they were finished they would brush down and all sorts of rubbish was gone. They would never leave a place untidy. The average Australian would get up and leave the place looking like a pigsty. I used to look around and think, "A little less than perfect there, mate."

During the war itself, did you believe that we would win the war?

Oh yes, I don't think I ever doubted it.

23:30 Funny that. I don't think I ever doubted it. But I think that was boyhood stupidity. I mean, when you think of the might of the various armies there. But I suppose, really, the diplomacy between Churchill and Roosevelt was very important, because a lot of the Americans didn't want to come into the war at all. And Roosevelt would have been very happy to

24:00 come into it. Of course, it made a vast difference when the Japanese decided to attack the Americans; that soon brought them in tooth and all. But what we'd have done if the Americans hadn't come in, I don't know. But they might [have] had to decide to come in for their own security anyway. If the world had been dominated by the Japanese and the Germans, they wouldn't have had much hope either.

24:31 Yeah, I don't think I had any doubt. I did very much feel that Australia might have been invaded by the Japanese, that was my big fear when we were in the Middle East.

And finally, what role do you think faith played in those very difficult years?

Faith? Religious faith?

Well, faith in something other than – God.

For some fellows it was very important. I had,

25:01 and I would never had said anything to my gorgeous sister, of course, who was very important. I suppose I hadn't thought terribly, deeply about it. I probably, basically, became an atheist. I tried to live on the basic principles that my father had taught me. About trying to avoid causing unnecessary pain to any creature on this earth.

25:31 And trying to be completely honest in word and deed. And I felt that if tried to live by those I couldn't really go far wrong. It covered most of the commandments and most everything else I guess. But I very much respected other people's faith. And I struck some lovely blokes that were very devout in their own faith,

26:00 including Jewish blokes and Catholic fellows there, that I worked with. I mean, Doc Sharpe, he was interested in faith, because he was sure the cook was a Jew. And the cook used to look at the doc and he said, "With my nose he thinks I'm Jewish anyway. I had better feed him [UNCLEAR] than you blokes do, because he thinks I'm Jewish." I think for some people it was important. I don't think it was ever expressed very much.

26:30 We each had our own way of doing it, I think.

Do you think you had any thing or quality in particular that carried you through the war.

I think at that stage I was so young I didn't have any qualities at all. No, I think it was almost good companions that carried me through.

27:00 We just kept going. I had some true blue mates. The companionship and the sharing, that was the great thing. I had pride in the Australian business. And we had collective arrogance in our own section, which we knew was the best. And that helped. Which we had by laughing at ourselves.

27:30 Our arrogance made us laugh at ourselves, I suppose. And made us do the normal thing, and take the piss out of authority when necessary. So I think that's what carried us through as much as anything. Just terrific human beings I was with.

Well thank you so much for participating in this project. We're very grateful.

Thank you. I've been fortunate.

INTERVIEW ENDS