Australians at War Film Archive

Ronald Dean (Dino) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:30 **Ron, can we begin by getting you to give just a very brief summary of your life to date.**

Where I was born? I was born in Western Australia at a place called Northam; it's about sixty miles east of Perth. What else did I do? I was born there, though I never lived there.

01:00 My mother worked on a property, a farm at the time, on a farm. My Dad was an intern, he was an Italian. He was interned at Northam, they had a correctional centre, where they were interning Italians. Probably because at the time of the Second World War,

01:30 Italians were, sort of, the enemy at the time. So he was interned there, but they were on release sort of thing and they worked on various farms around the area. And that's where my mother met him and I was the result of it. And that was that. And from there I don't really remember. I don't remember it of course. Then I believe that after the war he was deported back to Italy

02:00 and my Mum wasthen left with me to look after, and four other kids.

Now, Ron, we'll go into this detail later. I really want to go into that, but just as far as your own life's concerned. Quite brief summary form.

I was growing up as a young kid in a little country town called Meekatharra, it was fantastic.

02:30 Every one got on well, in a little community, there was only about fifteen hundred people, and Meekatharra is about sixteen hundred rail miles from Perth, four hundred miles by road. It's a little rural town,semi-desert, gold mining. It was just a great little place to grow up. From there, when I finished primary school, I went to high school in Perth. I boarded at a place called Swanlea, which catered for country kids, and had four great years of high school. Didn't do very well academically,

03:00 concentrated mainly on sport. Then after that I got a job when I left school. I worked for an importing and exporting firm, FJ& F. Semper, at the Metropolitan markets, and I stayed there until I was called up for national service, which came as a bit of a blessing in a way, because I was sick of my job. I wasn't going anywhere. Went to the national service and then I went into the army for two years. Which was a great adventure,

03:30 being a kid from the sticks. Then I served with a number of units in Australia, before I was sent to Vietnam, which was the highlightof my national service I suppose. A lot of national service people at that time, it was worthwhile, rather than staying at home and doing nothing, hanging around painting rocks, which was a standard joke in the army, painting white rocks.

04:00 So I went to Vietnam and had eleven months there, or ten and a half months, which was an eye-opener. Formed some opinions of politicians, and people in general, and I feel that really made me think about the Australian people. There was a lot of resentment to Vietnam,

04:30 and we had unions protesting about the supplies (UNCLEAR). And they used to put baked beans on that and that made you very resentful towards the people back home, so that was sort of a bit of a downer. Made you realise you were doing something not by choice. It was the only lottery I've ever won,

05:00 but it was to go to the funny farm, as they used to call it. So it did sort of effect me, in one sense. I didn't mind going, it was the fact of the resentment that you got from the people back home. And you read the papers, and the demonstrations, and the protestors and the university mobs carrying on. And I remember I used to say, when people went home on leave or going back, 'Punch a postie', because the postal workers went on, were anti-Vietnam as well,

05:30 and it was directed at us and not the politicians, and we were only doing what the politicians wanted us to do, and we felt that we were let down by the general public in Australia. Anyhow, experiences up there highlighted a lot of the good things of life, and some of the bad things of life as well. And the frustrations:

06:00 you start to build a shell around yourself. You're proud to be Australian, but you're not proud to be Australian. And we thought we were doing the right thing for the country at the time. And I remember when we came home, we were sort of the last flight back into Sydney, we came back on the champagne flight, Qantas charter, the crew on the flight were fantastic, and you come back on the last flight, under darkness.

06:30 We left under darkness as if we were an embarrassment, to go away. That did affect me. Anyhow, we got home, we had a few days, and then we had a sort of protest going in the papers and that, and it was a bit sad, because we were losing quite a few friends. We sort of,

07:00 a whole group of us came back together. And we were all pretty chummy, some were going back to Western Australia, and a couple of us were going to Victoria and Tasmania. So we all sort of split up and that's another chapter of one's life just cut off. OK that's fair enough. I remember going into the coffee shop downstairs of the hotel where we went. I think it was called the Canberra or something,

07:30 and if possible we féted at our own expense, and someone made some snide comment, 'Oh, how many babies have you killed?' which was a bit of a shock, coming home to that sort or thing. We sort of just brushed it off and left it at that. Anyhow then we eventually went home by train, we had a good trip, back to Perth. It used to take about four days. And

08:00 we met some interesting people on the train going home, and they asked us if we'd been to Vietnam and it always sort of came up, 'How many people are you killing?' and I thought, 'I'm not killing anyone'. But anyhow we came home, and once again, the last two of us that were together, we went our separate ways and got discharged from the army.It's a funny thing, you put your life on the line, you go away,

08:30 and you're treated just like the bloke across the road. Anyhow, I didn't expect anything from them and they said, 'Go to this place where there's counselling', and wasn't really counselling, it was about getting re-employed and this sort of thing, and I said, 'Bugger this. If they're going to treat us like this, I'll do my own thing'. I went around, I got a job by myself, but a couple of places I went to for job interviews,

09:00 the guys I spoke to, oh, one of them was an older guy from the Second World War and he started to give me a lecture on how wrong it was, and I said, 'That's nothing to do with me'. And I was only like a twenty year old kid, and I was a little bit taken back by that. I eventually got a job, a couple of weeks later, with a company, Rocksady & Nicholson, it was an electrical retail shop. I stayed there for a while,

10:00 and the same old question came up, 'How many people did you kill?' Everyone seemed to think just because you'd gone overseas you kill people. I said, 'No, I didn't kill anyone. I was in a hospital. I was a medic'. Anyhow, this got a bit on my tripe, after a while, hearing this from time to time. Ignore it, it's just work ringing me. (phone ringing in the background).

Does it pick up?

Yes, it's got an answering machine. I'm on a day off.

So you were up to the post-war aspects of your life, and the difficulties, particularly the difficulties and the attitudes you met.

Yes, the cab drivers, you know. I came home, the train arrived at about six o'clock in the morning. I went home to my sister's. And they say, 'You've been to Vietnam?' because they see your bag and all that garbage, and I said, 'Yes'. 'Oh, kill any nongs?'

10:30 I said, 'No'. Everyone: 'kill, kill, kill, kill, kill'. This seemed to be the mentality of the people. But I never thought about our guys that were getting killed. And we weren't killing people, you know, unless it was in self-defence of course. Anyhow this went on for a while, and I thought, 'I'm getting sick of this'. I went and had a couple of interviews with the Vocational Guidance Officers, I think they used to call them.

11:00 Some guy who was so indifferent, I may as well not even have been there. I felt sort of very intimidated, just treated like, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah' sort of thing. So I thought I didn't want that. So I thought, 'This is no good'. So I said to my Mum, 'Oh, I think I might go overseas for a little while'. She was all up in arms, and she said, 'Oh, you've been away before', and then she said, 'Oh, OK, if you want to go you go. Have you got enough money?', and I said, 'Yes, I've got sufficient funds'. Anyhow I went to New Zealand for about a month. Really enjoyed it,

11:30 and I met a mate of mine who was a patient of mine in Vietnam, and he said he was going off to the UK, and I said, 'OK' and I said, 'I don't want to go yet, I want to go in Spring' and we had about five months, so we both worked at the same firm, we got a job back in Perth. Got a flat. So everything, we were all set to go and at the last, the school I went to there were quite a few I new who lived in Singapore, in Hong Kong, and they all said, 'Come and stay with us',

12:00 and I said to my mate, 'Look, I'm going' and we booked this trip to Russia. Actually, we were going to London via the Trans-Siberian railway and at the last stage he pulled out of it and I said, 'I'm still going anyhow" so I flew out to Singapore and then I went to Bangkok, Hong Kong, and then I got a ship from Hong Kong to Taiwan and then on to Osaka,

12:30 went to Expo 70 in Osaka, had about two weeks in Japan, then got another ship and went to Kodoka, which is on the eastern seaboard of Russia, because at the time you couldn't go through Vladivostok because there was a big naval base there. Anyhow at the time, 'Am I really doing this?' I was really very apprehensive, but I was determined to go so I thought I'd go.

13:00 And I had the funds to go so I went. Anyhow we travelled through Russia, which was interesting, very interesting. I saw drunks from one end of the country to the other, right through. Drunks everywhere, always. Although we travelled on a very fancy tourist train to Korobov, then we transferred to the normal trans-Siberian train and they put all the foreigners in the one carriage. We had a mixed bunch. There was a couple of Aussies, a couple of Poms

13:30 going back to the UK with a couple of kids, the Hungarian Ambassador's wife, who was travelling back to Hungary. She was in the same car as we were. And it was very jovial on the train, people were nice. And the food on the train just dropped. We had this fantastic menu, got on the train it just dropped. Terrible food on the train. Anyhow, eventually we were delayed for about forty eight hours on account of

14:00 a military train had derailed. Because at the time there was a lot of trouble between China and the Russians, and the Trans-Siberian railway, the old line, runs pretty close to the Chinese border. And every time we came to a major bridge or something the conductor would come and pull the blinds down on the window of the train. But you'd just go to the toilet and look out the window so didn't miss out on very much.

14:30 Anyway we stopped in the middle of Woop Woop and we sat there, for about forty eight hours it was, with nobody telling anything, and people walking around the train. The trouble with the Trans-Siberian, a lot of the people just stay in their pyjamas, you know just stay in their 'jamas. You've got soft class and you've got hard class. But there's four to a cabin and you have the same bed linen for the whole eight days, or whatever it took us. Eventually the train stated, and it was all hours of the morning, and we were peeping out the toilet window,

15:00 and there was this wrecked train beside the track. Obviously it was a military train come off the tracks. And we got to Moscow at three o'clock in the morning. It was twilight, which was an experience, and then we all scattered again, all the Westerners on the train scattered again, couple of us stayed together, travelled right through to Helsinki. But the only thing we wanted to do when we got to Moscow

15:30 was to have a decent bath, because there's no showers on the train. It was a blood bath. And we got to the hotel at three o'clock in the morning, it was called the Metropolitan, which was just around the corner from Red Square. Very impressive hotel, but no service of course, no service, no hot water, no plugs, no toilet paper. So, but after,

16:00 it was nice to be sleeping in a bed that wasn't moving. The bed was reasonably comfortable, strangely enough. Spent about a fortnight in Moscow. Did all the touristy things, but by this stage I would have been quite prepared to have gone straight on to Helsinki, but I tee'd up with someone else I'd met on the train, so it made it bearable. Then we got the fast train to Leningrad, that was a good trip, but every time we passed a military installation

16:30 they'd come and draw the blinds where all the Westerners were sitting in the cars. Then we stayed at a reasonable hotel in Leningrad. But by this stage I'd had enough of Russia. I just wanted out. Then we left by ship to Helsinki and getting to Helsinki, it was absolutely fantastic. After spending almost a month in Russia. It was very depressing, very depressing, and also people would come up to you in the street, and they'd want to buy your jeans,

17:00 and things like that, you know. And you could get you know, about two hundred dollars for a pair of jeans, and they'd have all this money, and you'd say, 'How do you explain it?' when you come out, because they'd have a list when you come out, what you spent and what you didn't spend, so I went and bought all these useless souvenirs with this excess money, and then I had all these useless coupons which I didn't use, because at the time you had to pay coupons for everything you spent. And they gave it back to you in all sorts of currency so you didn't know what you had. So they basically ripped you off.

17:30 So that was an experience going through Russia.

I'd like to bring this back to your post-war life later in the interview. That's been an extremely good summary of your life to date. And that's great. That's always good to have as a basis for the interview when we start. We'll just turn things right to the beginning now and we'll go on to a bit more detail about your early years and your family background, which sounds quite fascinating. Just once again, if you can use me as the eye-line, because I notice

18:00 **there's a fair amount of looking over there and elsewhere, and it's a question of audience engagement. The audience will want to watch you if you're connecting with them through an eye-line here. It doesn't need to be a hypnotic stare, but just looking around every now and again. If we can take it back to the beginning, and of course there'll be a little bit of repetition here but don't worry about that. Could you tell us again where you were born?**

Northam, in Western Australia, which is sixty miles from Perth.

18:30 It's sort of a little regional centre,like a junction for the eastern states' line. To Kalgoorlie, and the other

one's up to Mulawa and Geraldton. And the train used to go to Meekatharra, but it doesn't no longer. It's been pulled up. It's quite an active little community. It's the only place in Western Australia, a bit of trivia, that has white swans. They were brought in by the earlier settlers. It's one of the first little settlements that started

19:00 way back in 1829, whenever WA started. I've never lived there, you know. My Mum lived at a place called Mowtime, which is a little farming community outside of Northam, and that's it.

You were mentioning in outline your parents' lives before. Can you tell us a bit more about your parents?

Mum was, I guess, one of the 'stolen generation',

19:30 but she never ever harped on it. She was Irish, her father was Irish, they were two brothers. They owned property in the north-west of Western Australia, around the Peak Hill area, which is little Woop Woop, and they were of mixed blood. They were taken away from their father because they were part Aboriginal, I guess, I never really,

20:00 yes, and sent to a mission in Western Australia, I think it was called Magumbal, which was then. Because they were fairer, not sort of black, that's where they all sort of went, so Mum was about five, four or five, when she was taken away from her father. She could always remember, and she used to tell me about it, but she never held any grudges sort of thing.

20:30 Taken away she was denied having her father there. Her mother died in childbirth or something, from what we were able to find out. Mum was quite secretive about her past life, and most of it was from friends who were in similar positions. Anyhow, they went to this place, I think it was called Magumba, or Morg River. I think it was run by the Methodists. Anyhow she was there,

21:00 and it was basically a place where you took part Aboriginals, to train them in servitude, and she was working, basically as a slave, they were sent off to work for squatters, and they were working as Domestics and things like that. And so Mum started working when she was about fourteen, she was sent out to work. She had a younger sister.

21:30 Mum and she lived together and, it's a bit vague where Mum went until she was about eighteen or nineteen.I have got four other sisters and somewhere along the line, they all popped up, and then her only sister died, which was totally shattering for Mum.

22:00 And from what I was told, my father, after the war, he was repatriated back to Italy. So that was the end of that, and so, then Mum's only sister died, and in the late forties apparently there was an epidemic of meningitis, and Mum got that. She nearly died, so I was only very young

22:30 and I was fostered out until Mum recovered. She recovered from that and then had a nervous breakdown. That's right, she had the meningitis then her sister died, and then she had a nervous breakdown. Then all the other girls were all fostered out then. So I never ever saw them again. Oh, I see three of them.

These are your sisters.

These are half-sisters, yes, half-sisters.

23:00 After that, when Mum recovered enough, I was returned. This must have been when I was very young, I don't remember it. Returned to Mum, and Mum got a job at a place called 'Naning', which was a station, where she worked as a cook/housekeeper. Which is about five hundred miles north-east of Perth again, a little cattle station, cattle and sheep,

23:30 and that's where I can start remembering what things were. Then she worked there for several years, and she got another housekeeping job, the same people owned this property. A place called 'Belilly', which is about fifty miles out of Meekatharra, and she worked there for several years. In that time, I was about school age. I went to board with a friend of Mum's in the town,

24:00 for about six months. But I was sick all the time with tonsillitis and everything else, so then Mum got a job at the hospital as a housekeeper, so Mum came into town and worked with the hospital. Then it was hunkydory then, I had Mum, and I wasn't sick any more, and it was great. Growing up, as a kid, it was a good life. I had holidays every year.

24:30 Mum never earned much money, but with friends, I used to go an' stay with friends on properties, also every year Mum would always make a point of coming down to Perth, I would always come down to Perth for a holiday. In the last year at primary school, the last couple of years at primary school, we had a top headmaster, Patrick Sweeney, and I did reasonably well at primary school, and this Swanlea hostel came up which

25:00 catered basically for country kids, and was in Mum's price range, and so off to high school I went in Perth. And I went to Governor Sterling High School in Midland, and just one of the, oh something like Liverpool, about fifteen miles from the CBD [Central Business District]. Spend four years there. Had a great time.

What were your favourite subjects?

Geography. Detested English, hated reading. Maths,

25:30 absolutely hated Maths. I wasn't too bad at Art, I enjoyed Art, but History. I enjoyed Economics as well. It was good. But I passed my Junior certificate and did Fourth Year. I wanted to be a school teacher at one stage, then, in those days, to matriculate, you had to have English, and I knew I would never get through English. And Mum was getting older,

26:00 and I knew she was battling. Mum never got any handouts. Everything we've got we did ourselves. That's one thing. Not like what they do. They just hand it out left and centre. My neighbour next door, she claims to be, her mother's quarter-cast, allegedly, and her daughter went through, did all her education on Abstudy [Aboriginal Study grant]. And she's as white as you, which I find obscene, totally obscene.

26:30 **You mother sounds to have been quite a remarkable lady.**

Oh, Mum was

Can you describe her as a person.

She was a sweetheart. She was always there for you. She never had a bad word for anybody. She always looked for the good things in people, always was thankful for what she had.

27:00 She was highly respected in the town we lived in. I just, I used to fight with Mum. Everything Mum told me, oh no, you don't know. You don't know what you're talking about, but I was kind of spoilt and I didn't have a male person I could look up to as a child, because most of the people I was growing up with as a kid,

27:30 were her girlfriends sort of thing, and I used to envy kids who had their dads. And then I thought, 'Are they really happy because they've got a dad?' Because Mum was everything I wanted, she waited on me, I was spoilt rotten. There's no two ways about it. But she never had a mean bone in her body. She was only a tiny little short lady, and always had a smile. If she had a disagreement with someone, she'd forget about it straight away. Yet people wouldn't talk to Mum for months.

28:00 They completely ignored her. Anyone, white or brindle, Mum would bring them home. We lived in a very humble house, had one tap, no electric lights, just kerosene lamp, wood combustion stove, it wasn't a fancy house. She'd flip if she saw this place. There was a lot of love, a lot of care, and she was just always there. She was just a unique person, she really was, you know.

28:30 **Sorry, go on.**

And she had a strong belief. She said you never had to go to church, you know, God was always with you. Yet she'd go to church, we had two, three churches in the little town, Methodist and Anglican, and Catholic, and she wouldn't go to the Catholic. But she'd always go to the Anglican church, they'd come once a fortnight, and the Methodist, we had a resident Methodist minister, she used to always go to that.

29:00 But she had a very, very strong belief, and she had that until the day she died.

When you say that there'd be periods, of time, even months, where people wouldn't talk to her. What do you mean by that?

Well, you know. Just disagreements, just disagreements, Like some times Mum might offer advice to somebody, and they just didn't like it. And they think Mum's interfering. People would come and borrow money from Mum,

29:30 and Mum would say, 'What about the five pounds you borrowed?' because five pounds in those days was a lot of money, when you're only on fourteen pounds a week and you've got a kid to support, and sometimes just didn't get on with people, you know just normal, when you have a blue with the people at work, you don't like, you don't speak to them. But I'm notorious, if I don't like someone, I just don't have anything to do with them, it doesn't matter what you do. I will not have, where my Mum would forgive straight away. I don't forget, I never forgive.

30:00 You cross my path, that's it. Because the true colours are coming out. Where my Mum wouldn't, my Mum would turn in her grave, well, she hasn't got a grave, she'd say, 'No, you can't have that sort of attitude'. I'm probably more like my father. He would hold a grudge apparently.

What did your mother tell you about your father?

30:30 She reckons he was a fantastic guy, caring. Because she was part Aboriginal and because he was basically returned during the war, their lives was governed by the Government. You know, the Department of Native Affairs, they had in those days, and they had no say. He was prepared to marry Mum apparently, and from what my sister found out,

31:00 and from what we've been told, they wouldn't allow it. They were very strict, they were very, you know, 'You can't make a decision for yourself'. Mum used to have to get permission to go and visit her sister. It was ridiculous, it was a kind of part of apartheid, I suppose.

How long did that continue for?

Well, this was really before my time. I think it went right through to the mid-sixties. Mid-sixties,

31:30 I believe, I've never, it's never really affected me. Mum said, 'Well, we got on with life, what happened, that's the past. You're healthy, you've got a job. Why worry about it?'. She would never have accepted charity, no way.

It sounds like your parents really loved each other?

Well, apparently, from what I gather. Yeah. But poor old Mum, sort of had four attempts at it, didn't she, sort of thing. She thought she had found the right person, and then because of the system at the time, was,

32:00 you know, they know best.

She had four attempts?

Well, I've got four sisters, four step-sisters, well, I presume we're not all blood-related. Oh, well, partly related, I guess.

So they are all step-sisters?

Yes, I'm just me.

So in other words, she had four separate partners?

Four separate partners. Yes.

And as far as your father was concerned, once he'd been repatriated back to Italy, which I presume was at the end of the war,

32:30 **did he make any attempt to come back to Australia?**

Apparently, he wasn't supposed to come back for fifteen years, before they could re-apply. Some stupid rule. I never worried about him. He was never a part of my life. But Mum got on. Mum came from the street of hard knocks, and she accepted the hand she was dealt.

And you mentioned that you and your mother were fairly independent . . .

Oh, yes,

As two people, sort of living together.

33:00 **Did you ever miss the fact that you didn't have a father living with you?**

Oh, I guess so. When I was older, I used to say, 'Mum, you've got a lot of lady friends. Have you got any male friends?' You know, she had friends, school friends, I used to call them uncle and that, but they had their own families and things, but that was life.

And from what your sisters have been able to determine, what happened to your father once he went back to Italy?

Well, they just came to a dead end, after about 1950.

33:30 I think, there was not more communication, He probably got married and got on with his life. I've never bothered about it. My sister tried to follow the family tree, but I've never bothered. Why live in the past? My mates, relatives of theirs have just come out of the woodwork, after about fifty years. Well, my older sister came out of the woodwork

34:00 about five years ago and wanted to make communication, and I thought, well, goodness me, she never worried about Mum when Mum was alive. Nobody bothered about Mum. They were there when the money was dished out. Mum had left a little bit of money, not a lot. About five thousand dollars each, she came out of the woodwork for that. But they never ever made any attempt to come into contact with Mum. Yet Mum used to send them Christmas cards and that, and write letters and they always used to be returned.

So once they were old enough they were gone, were they?

34:30 They were gone. One sister, the mother of this young lass here, Tracey, she came back, when she left school, she was a bit of a problem, her mother was a bit of a problem child. She sort of came and lived at home, when she was 17. And caused all sorts of problems, Her and Mum just did not get on. Two different people. And then I've got a younger sister, another sister, Pearl,

35:00 and she came and she was all right. But we don't talk. We had a dispute over an orange when I was about eight.

A dispute over an orange?

Yes, she wouldn't give me an orange! Oh we talk now, but I just talk to her as a person. I don't see her

as a sister. That's Joan, that's the one that I get on with, and it's her kids that I really get on well with, and we get on like a house on fire. My sister comes for a holiday every now and again, but she gets here and she moans and groans all the time,

35:30 so no point in bringing her over. But that's life.

OK, as life has gone on, connections to family have been very important to you.

Yeah, I think when my Mum died, I was in the army at the time. She got Alzheimer's. That was, I don't want to go through that again ever. To see such an active person become like a little old lady,

36:00 not knowing who you are., She was in a nursing home for about five years. I had to have her committed, because no one else was there, my sister was going to look after her. I said 'Don't be stupid. You don't even like Mum'. Anyhow we got her into a nursing home, and they were absolutely brilliant. We were very lucky, it was a government-run nursing home, at Mount Hawthorn. And they were absolutely fantastic. They treated Mum like a gem.

36:30 But to see her gradually go down hill, over the years. I used to go back to Perth twice a year to see her, and ring up on a regular basis, and the last time I saw her she was just a tiny little old lady, hunched up in a wheelchair and didn't even know who I was. I used to say, 'Do you know who I am, Mum?' and she'd say, 'Ron is dead.

37:00 Ronald died in the Viet man [sic] War'. That cut me up. But we had a very good support staff. The matron of the hospital in particular, and one of the sisters there. They were just absolutely brilliant. I survived that, but when she died, she fell out of bed and broke her hip, and managed to get back into bed, and the nurse said to her, 'Dais', are you getting up', and she said, 'Oh, I've got a sore hip today', and they didn't take much notice of it, and she still didn't get up

37:30 and then they discovered she'd broken her hip. So then they palmed her off to hospital. They did a block to put a new hip in, and she got out of bed, broke it again. And basically, she became bed-ridden after that, two months later she was dead, which was a blessing. Which was just a blessing. But the army was absolutely fantastic.

38:00 When she was very low, they sent me home. That's one thing I can say for the army. They really look after you with your family. They were fantastic. I was home, Mum died at seven o'clock and I was home that evening, which was basically fantastic. They really look after you that way. But, once Mum died, sort of thing, and most of Mum's friends had all gone; it's a bit hard going home now.

38:30 You go back and see just little parts, sort of thing there, you know, but you sort of have a little sniffle, but it's not the same.

Tell me, while you were growing up, did anyone talk generally about World War II?

My head teacher used to, he was in Changi, Mr Sweeney. He never said much about it, but older people in town and that, as kids we loved to listen to what they did in the World War.

39:00 Fighting, oh, Anzac Day, we'd be running down, in the little town I was living in. And it was the best thing, everybody was so patriotic. Not like they are now. And everybody wanted to be a part of it. We used to love talking to the old guys. We were really fascinated. It seemed the manly thing to do. Join the services sort of thing, but some of them spoke of the horrors of it,

39:30 and I thought, did I really want to go into the services? One of our local doctors, he was, Dr Murray, I think his name was from memory, and he was in Changi apparently, and he was the local GP [General Practitioner], doctor at the hospital, and he had a breakdown. I believe he eventually committed suicide and that was really sad. But you know, you hear about it as kids, and you know, that's terrible, but no,

40:00 that's about it I think. But older people, as we go though high school, and at boarding school, and a couple of the masters were in the Second World War and I was fascinated to listen to their stories.

Right we'll pick this up on the next tape.

Tape 2

00:30 **Ron, you were saying that Anzac Day clearly meant something to you.**

Oh, it always has, because I think I was most always fascinated with Simpson and his donkey, from a very, very young age, because at our school, maybe the fact that our principal had been in the war, that played a very important part in our lives. And it was taught at our school, we were taught history when I was at school, Australian history, and I used to crave for it, anything on the reality of the war,

01:00 I used to read it if I could get hold of it.

What was it that appealed to you?

The people, the sacrifice, they did it unwittingly, it was fighting for the Poms, basically, wasn't it. Basically, it was, you know, all those thousands and thousands of people who gave their lives for the Poms. That's how I look at it. And a lot of those people that went were people from the country, and I know, living in a little country town,

01:30 how patriotic country people are. It's just a, it's Australia, you know what I mean. I get really choked up about it, sometimes. I get choked up about it when people start knocking, getting rid of Anzac Day, and things like that.

When you say the spirit, what was it about the spirit, do you think?

I don't know. The enthusiasm, the larrikinism of the people going. I suppose when we went to Vietnam was similar, but

02:00 it wasn't a popular war. Vietnam was a lost cause. Even I knew that. Even at a young age I knew that.

You mentioned Simpson and his donkey. What was so inspiring about that particular story for you?

Oh, well, rescuing people, putting his life on the line. You'd always go and help your mate out. You just do. I think it's just if you're in a position like that,

02:30 I don't know, it just gets all, to helping somebody, and service people in, I'm very toward service people I don't know, I feel more towards them, then say, what's happening in the Middle East. I just detest what's going on in the Middle East at the moment. And even when I hear service people getting shot, murdered you know, basically getting murdered,

03:00 it just gets under my collar.

So where the spirit was concerned, it was loyalty, sacrifice . . .

Dedication.

And obviously mates helping mates.

Yes, and the fact that you know people. You see I've known people, different people over the years that I've met, they'd do anything for anybody. Where I draw the line, a lot of people, like Mum, used to say she'd give her last dollar. I'd never give my last dollar.

03:30 Because if I give my last dollar, then I'm not going to be able to help myself, or help anybody else. I might be able to help somebody, by myself, if you know what I mean. But people, you know, 'Oh, I'll give you my last dollar', you know what I mean. Keep something in reserve. No, it's just, people I spoke to. That's why I got interested in the Medical Corps, I suppose. I can go down the War Museum [the Australian War Memorial],

04:00 now, and I could spend a whole week down there, and I'd still enjoy myself. Just wandering around.

Now you mentioned your principal, your school principal, as a particularly inspiring character . . .

He was.

Can you tell us a bit about him.

Patrick Sweeney, he was a white-headed guy. He had about six kids, I can't remember, one was Ruth. It was in the Bible there was some girl called Ruth. I can't remember what story it was now. My religion's not what it used to be. But he was always, giving encouragement,

04:30 give praise where it was deserved. If you did something wrong you knew about it. He was a born teacher. And he did it to everybody. But he seemed to take a bit more interest in me, because I used to be a bit of the odd one out at school. Because I didn't believe in going and shooting animals. I used to have mates who would go out shooting with their dads,

05:00 and I wouldn't go. I wasn't interested in killing innocent kangaroos and emus and birds, what's the point in doing that?

This is what your mates did?

Oh, you know, kids would go rabbit-shooting and trapping rabbits. I used to trap birds and all that. But this killing animals, shooting animals, I just couldn't, and enjoy doing it. I used to see the gleam in their faces. I used to say, 'You're sick'. But a couple of my best mates, Peter and Russell Renoldi,

05:30 their dad, Dominico, his wife was my teacher at school, and I often used to go out with them when they'd go shooting. He had a peg-leg, old peg-leg, and we used to go shooting and I used to see the gleam, and I used to say to Mrs, 'I don't like it. I don't want to go'. And she used to say, 'I agree. It's terrible to shoot the animals'. And now I detest people who are cruel to animals.

06:00 **So, in what way was Patrick Sweeney kind of guiding you and offering support?**

Well, he encouraged me, and he was my teacher for a while, in my last year, and always gave me encouragement, books to read, you know, you'd put your compositions in and the person who corrected compositions, and do this and do that, this way, but he always let you have a free run, if you know what I mean.

06:30 When I was very young I used to stutter a lot. I still do if I get frustrated or, I stutter a bit. Andhe was, just sort of, I used to think he'd be an ideal dad. But he had six kids. His wife's name was Mary, and she was a beautiful lady as well. And you know, we used to oftenwalk past their place to go home, and he'd come out to talk to Mum,

07:00 and Mary would ask Mum to come and have a cup of tea, and talk about what I was going to do at school, and how I was doing, and that sort of thing, and he was just a genuine person, he'd probably be one of my best teachers I've ever had.

How do you think he influenced your outlook on life?

Truthful. You only get what you put in, you've got to work hard to get the rewards.

07:30 And be prepared to accept the disappointments, as well as the good things as well. That was basically Mum's philosophy too.Academically I wasn't what you'd call brilliant. I wasn't an Einstein. But they always used to say, I'd get high marks in my History and Geography, and I had at one stage, that's what I wanted to do. But I knew my English would always let me down. But then I never had anyone pushing me. I was never forced into anything.

08:00 If I wanted to get down and really do it, I probably could have done it. And I know people who pushed themselves, and had nervous breakdowns, and end up derros on the streets. You know, they just push, push, push, push, push, and they end up with nothing. And then nobody wants to see them. You walk around Sydney streets, and the number of people sitting on the streets. How many of those people may have been professional people. It's really sad. I don't know if you've walked around Sydney streets.

08:30 **I've seen them around Sydney streets. I've seen them in the streets of other cities as well.**

Yeah. Not as bad as overseas though.

No, places like Philadelphia, it's endemic.

Yes, and when I was living in London we saw a lot of 'bag people'. And some of these people are young people, and I never give money to anybody, some of them are just taking you for a ride. Because there was one young lass hanging around, I used to work at the McKell Building, she used to be begging for money, no money, everything else,

09:00 people were giving her money, and then one day, at lunch time I used to go for a walk to get away from the office, and I was coming back and I saw her jumping into a BMW. And off they drove. So every time I saw her now, I get the mobile phone, and she takes off. So she wasn't, you know, she was obviously playing on the sympathy of people. But you often see people in town,

09:30 go up to people and say, you know, but I've got no time for druggies. No time at all.

Yeah, I think you've got to follow your own instincts as to whether you actually do want to help someone in a situation like that, and maybe make your own immediate call as to whether it's a genuine . . .

Well, too many people take you for a ride anyhow. Well, when I used to work at the Prince of Wales, and I was working there in winter, all the derros come in and they say they've got chest pains,

10:00 and if they say that the doctors will have to check them to make sure, and they never had chest pain. They just do it to get out of the cold. You give them a biscuit, and they used to cramp up the whole of the department, of people complaining of chest pain, and you knew they were just derros.

Just moving back to when you left school, what was your first job after school?

I left school, the results came out for my exams, and I went back to school and half way through the year I thought

10:30 I was coping OK in fourth year, I was doing OK, English was shocking of course, and I thought 'Oh, this is no good', and I just said to Mum, 'I'll just go get a job'. And I got a job, the first job I applied for, I went to H J &Simper, they were an importing and exporting firm at the markets, and I got a job. I worked as a junior clerk there until the time I got called up. And they were good. Mr Sadker.

What sort of company was this?

11:00 Ah, an importing and exporting firm, fruit and vegetables, that sort of stuff, to Singapore. He was the founder of the place. He used to come down from Singapore, he was a fascinating man.

In what way?

He was an old Jewish gentleman. His son was a pain in the neck, but old Mr Sadker was fantastic. He would tell you that he was smuggling rum and drugs and things, during the late thirties onwards,

11:30 sort of thing. That's where he made his money, but he was just fascinating. You would think, I'd love to have him as a (UNCLEAR) but he used to come down from Singapore and he used to go through all the accounts, and I was a junior, and I used to stay with him, and he'd follow every penny, where it went. He'd want to know why, and he'd spend, you wouldn't get paid for it. He'd take you out to dinner somewhere, he'd go through and he'd watch every penny, and it had to be one hundred percent. He wouldn't accept anything less,

12:00 and he never had. He said, 'You'll never make money in life, if you go for the lesser'. Always a hundred per cent, and I can see how he makes money. But he was a fascinating man, but his son was a total pain in the neck, and his other son was a pain in the neck, His daughter-in-law was all right, so, but the other partner of the company he was very good, he was very good.

And this was in Perth?

In Perth, yes.

So where were you living at this time?

12:30 At the time I stayed with my aunt, well, she wasn't my real aunt, she was one of Mum's friends. I stayed with her for about two weeks, but she had three kids, four kids, oh, God, and they were only little. And then we had a friend, a Russian lady, and she had a house, and she used to let rooms out and so I went and boarded with her, and that's what got me interested in travelling through Russia. And she was, Mrs Kabanos, she was a fascinating woman. Fascinating woman,

13:00 and she was telling me about the Uprising, the Boxer Revolution and this sort of thing, and she, old, but a beautiful lady. She, I stayed with her about eighteen months, and then I moved to get somewhere closer to work, and I went to another boarding house, and the people were fantastic there. I was the only boarder there, and got spoiled, like I was one of the kids and they were fantastic.

What was your day-to-day job with the import and export firm?

We used to do the markets in the morning, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, that was a six o'clock start. That used to be a bit hard to take, but just doing all the accounts, orders for Singapore, south-east Asia, and I used to do the basic stuff and then it went on to the girls to finalise and for the deliveries and that. That's about all. Did that for several years.

And can you tell me a little bit about Perth at that time?

14:00 Perth. There weren't very many Chinese restaurants. There was one called the Pagoda and they had the best Chinese food in Perth. There was another one down near the fire station, and I remember reading in the paper, that they had a dead mouse in a takeaway, and that turned me off Chinese. I wouldn't go to what's-a-name, a Chinese restaurant, but in those days Chinese restaurants were pretty grotty, and there weren't very many, it was sort of a novelty, to go to a Chinese restaurant,

14:30 you know. There weren't that many Chinese restaurants, although there's been quite a lot, not a large population of Chinese people, in Perth, they were around, but not as many as now. It's full of them. All my favourite shops in Perth have been taken over by either Chinese, or Muslims.

Perth at that time, apart from the Chinese . . .

Very laid back.

Was it rather like a large country town?

Big country town. It still is..

15:00 It's still a big country town and they had the mentality, 'Anything in the eastern states: bad'. Everything's bigger and better in Western Australia. I'm a Western Australian, will always be a Western Australian at heart, but sometimes, they are so narrow minded. But after travelling around a bit, it compared well with anywhere else. And the only time you saw different people, like Indians and Pakistanis or any Chinese, that was early

15:30 Columbo Plan students and they were a novelty, you know, but it's not like that, but there weren't many around at all. The ones that was were really uni. students.

You mentioned your own background with Italian blood and Aboriginal blood, have you ever felt any close affinity or connection with . . .

No, neither. I'm me. What my heritage is, you know, OK, so, luck of the draw.

16:00 I take people as I see them. I take them, black, brindle, blue. If I don't like somebody, I don't like them. Visa versa. But it's never been a major topic with me. You know, you either accept me, or if you don't well. I don't care. It doesn't worry me. I don't sort of run around carrying on, 'I'm an Aboriginal, I've been wrong done by', like these Redfern types, there's no way, no way. I do feel that the conditions

16:30 of some of the people, see, I haven't been in a little country town for years, so I don't know, but I can remember the first time, when I went to Alice Springs, I must have been about twelve, I think, I went on one of those YAL [Young Australia League] tours. They used to be the young kids, travelling around

Australia and that. They were good tours actually. I don't know if it exists any more.

That had been in existence for quite a while, hadn't it?

Mmm. I think it was a Christian group. Anyhow,

17:00 I remember going to Alice Springs. I couldn't believe it. I said, 'This is pathetic'. Then I reflected back on the little hick town where I lived, although over the years, we got a decent sort of house, you know, and had hot water and electricity, and indoor loo, all that sort of stuff, but because when I was growing up, there were still people living in the desert, the desert people, you know,

17:30 and they were primitive, you know. Mum would talk to them, wouldn't know them from a bar of soap, Mum would see a group of them and go and talk to them, and I'd say, 'Mum, what are you doing?' but she said, 'They're people. Just because they come from the bush, you don't have to be ashamed of them'. But, no.

What was your attitude to those people?

Well, they were scruffy, and dirty, and you know, I just felt this is not good,

18:00 Mum. You can't talk to grotty people, but Mum would go to Perth and she'd bump into people and, different friends she'd be with, they'd say, 'Daisy, do you have to speak to every black face you see?' and she'd say, 'They're people. I'm not going to be stuck up with them'. Mum would talk to anybody, even the old drunk, she'd chat him up, tell him off. You know. Many a time she brought some local drunk home, you know. 'Come on, feed him up, go in the back, have a sleep,

18:30 go and clean yourself up'. And he'd go, oh, you know. But that was Mum.

Yeah. She sounds a remarkable woman.

Oh, she was. She never complained. I never heard her complain. And if she was a bit down she'd say, 'Well, I've got my faith. That'll get me through'. I'd say, 'Faith don't pay the bills, though'. But when I was sending Mum extra money home, and things like that, and when I went back home, she'd always pack my suitcase, and she'd always put the money back in. And things like that.

19:00 You know, Mum wasn't a material person. She was happy doing things for people, and that was just Mum.

When you say her faith, what was her faith?

She was brought up as an Anglican and a Methodist.

What about you. Did you have a religious belief?

Yeah, boarding school, even at, I always used to go to Sunday School. I went to the Methodist Sunday school one month, and the other month, I'd go to the Anglican, because I'm an Anglican, but the Anglicans used to have really good school picnics, used to go to that. Everyone in the town, but the only ones we wouldn't go to, was the Catholic school, and there was quite a large Catholic community there.

Why wouldn't you go to the Catholic?

Because I don't, personally, I don't believe that the Pope's appointed by God,

20:00 for a start. That's just a band of silly old men. You know, I don't believe that any one person can say that they've been appointed by God to do this.

Of course, there have been long-running divisions between Protestants and Catholics.

Well, Catholics are, well, the state school was next door to the convent, because we had a convent and we had probably the rockiest primary school in Australia. It was built on a rocky hill, and what we used to do,

20:30 the nuns used to hang out their long johns on the line, it was the Dominican Nuns, you know, the full veils, there was four of them living there, and we good little Protestants, we used to get pea-shooters, make the pellets, and aim for the crutch of the pants on the line, and they used to be constantly complaining to the headmaster. You know, these Protestants, but it was good, when we had a tuckshop or something, everybody supported everybody,

21:00 but there was that division between Catholics and Protestants. It was really marked. But, as individual people, we had no problems with them. Because most of my friends were Catholic, so, it didn't make any difference. So.

Now in your later school years, and probably the first couple of years that you were working, what was your awareness of the growing warfare in Vietnam?

The papers. Reading the papers,

21:30 and looking at magazines, and Newsweek, and I used to think, 'Oh, I don't want to go there'. There was national service, I thought, no, I'm not going to go there. But then I used to say, 'Oh, if it happens, it

happens. Might be a way out'. But I remember I got called up for national service, oh, I thought, 'This is good fun'. Oh, Mum was absolutely petrified. She was, 'Oh, I'm not going to let my little Ronald go', that's what she used to call me.

22:00 Anyhow I went.

Well, could we just take it back a step or two. What was the first that you heard that you had been conscripted?

I got the letter in the mail. To report to the, what did they used to call themselves? It was in King Street. It was the Employment Services Office. You had to go down there. And they said, 'Oh, yes, you've got to report at such and such a time'.

22:30 And I reported in late and then I got fined for that. I got an actual fine. I rang up, they had a hot line, I think it was one of these labour organisations, sort of thing, protesting, and they said, 'No, you don't have to'. Anyhow I got another letter, 'You'll have to appear in court'. I thought, 'Oh'. So it tripped off and I think it was twenty five dollars fine or something, pounds, think, in those days, I thought, 'God, oh dear, I'm a criminal'.

23:00 'And you'll report to Karakattaon such a date', and I thought, 'Oh, this is becoming', and then, "Oh, this is good. I'm going to get out of this. I'm going to get the big plane trip across to the eastern states'. And from there, didn't worry about it. I'm good. My Mum was totally upset, she didn't show it, but I knew she was.

So what was your response? Was it something you were wanting to do?

I was getting sick of my job.

23:30 I'd just gone for a job interview with the ES&A Bank, I don't know if you remember them: English, Scottish and Australian Bank. I think ANZ [Australia and New Zealand Banking Corporation] bought them out. And I got the interview and I was due to start but my national service came in, and I was going to defer it and I said, 'OK, fair enough'. Anyhow. it sounded like a great adventure. What do you do? A twenty year old kid: 'Oh, great. This is going to be good fun.'

24:00 But then I'd think, 'I'm fighting, I could get killed. Oh, I might be lucky. I'll survive it'. But, you know, dumb things, the John Wayne crap you go through. No, once, reality set in the day I had to report in to Karakatta, and that was the day we had to fly back to Mangalore in Victoria. That's where we did our recruit training. Then it set in. I went home,

24:30 back up to Meekatharra to see Mum, and that was the first time Mum cried in my presence. Because Mum never cried in my presence. And she tried not to, but I knew she was. It must have been heart-wrenching. For me, I sat on the bus coming back and I was thinking, 'What's going to happen to me? What will happen to Mum?' all those things.

25:00 I wanted to buy a house for Mum so that she'd live happily ever after, and all that sort of garbage, but it sort of dawned on me: 'You're actually going away, and there's a possibility you won't come back'. And there are a number of people I know who went away and didn't come back, and how would they feel? How would their parents feel? They'd be devastated. There's a couple of the kids from the same town, we went away together. But we all came back.

25:30 But a couple of people who weren't in my platoon, they'd only been in Vietnam a couple of weeks, and they were killed. One guy just got married, his girl-friend was pregnant, and he got killed, Darren. And that really shook me up. And another mate from my platoon, was injured in a shoot up. That was before I went to Vietnam, and that shook me up a bit, too.

26:00 I thought, "Oh, God, they're playing seriously over there'. And another guy, a fellow Western Australian, an Italian kid, he got shot up really badly and I think he eventually died. But I met him once or twice after I came home. And he used to be able to pull himself up by a rope by one arm. He was built like a little monkey, I can't think of his name, Samuel, Sammy, but he was shot up terribly in Vietnam. I don't think he lived long after that.

26:30 He recovered, but I believe he died a couple of years later. As a result from the injuries he had.

Was he in a wheelchair?

No, no. He was able to walk around, limited, you know, and he had, he was working with the Repatriation Department. He was on a hundred percent pension, which was a pittance even then. Then it is now, it's a pittance, and that's the way it goes. Then I went to Vietnam and it was a big adventure,

27:00 because I was at Shoalwater Bay, they were building a camp outside of Shoalwater at Yeppoon, they were building a training area up there, so I went up there with the engineers, and I really got on well with everybody. It was really good. And then they said, 'Well, you're going to Vietnam', so I came back, they sent me back, it came through, so I was packing my bags to go, so I went back to Perth,

27:30 had a week, and came back to Sydney and then I think what really struck me, when we flew out of Sydney at night, about half past eleven at night, that I was really going. 'Oh, God. This could be. It's for

real', you know, before it's just like a real big adventure. Right to the end, it was a bit of an adventure. But then, we flew to Darwin, and they were briefing us, we had to wear civilian shirts,

28:00 and there we are with khaki polyester trousers, you know, hats, they wanted, it was under darkness, it was so stupid. Everyone knew who we were. Oh, and we transferred there, for a couple of hours for daylight-saving crap, and there were other passengers there, and they were keeping us away, and 'Don't talk to them', and some of them were going, 'Oh. Are you going to Vietnam?' It was so obvious. And when we got to Vietnam, the same thing,

28:30 they kept us separate from everybody else, as if we were lepers. And then we got to Vietnam, and that was an eye-opener, when we got there.

Just before we get to Vietnam, could you take us through what happened once you were flown east, obviously for further aspects of recruitment and training?

Yes, when we got there, it was freezing cold, and we flew in an old Electra, Ansett, and I remember the meal, it was curry. That was the meal they served on the plane, and I absolutely hate curry, and the guy that I was telling you about, the one that eventually died,

29:00 Sammy, and he was sitting next to me and he was, 'Oh, I'm going to get out there and I'm going to do this, going to do that', this is in Vietnam of course, and I was 'Oh, this is great fun' and everybody else flew in 737s and we flew in the old Electra, but we got there, and the crew on the plane were absolutely fantastic. Then we got there, and it was three o'clock in the morning, and if you know, Mangalore or Puckapunyal,

29:30 it is freezing cold, and the buses were there, and took us to our accommodation, were allocated positions, and then they sort of gave you breakfast and from then it was rush, rush, rush, going through the general indoctrination of what you had to do, and by the next day we were right into starting with the drill and all that sort of stuff,

30:00 and I've got two left feet, so it was a lot of fun. And one thing that really bugged me, they used to get you up at about five o'clock in the morning, and in the middle of winter, and freezing cold, ice on the ground, or frost everywhere, and you'd have to wrap your sheet around you, and go and stand in the parade ground. You were freezing to death there, you know, and this is the thing, 'Make your bed'. And you had to make your bed this way, it had to be right,

30:30 and the RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] would come through and they'd measure it, all the, measure it and it had to be right, oh, crazy. It would send you mad. This is why sometimes this house is a mess, because the what's-a-name of it, I know the reason why they do it. You've got to instil discipline. Because a lot of guys, they were so undisciplined. They were real mummy boys, too. But that's beside the point. And no hot shower. Because the first lot who used to get through,

31:00 so you'd go out and do your morning PT [Physical Training] and this and that, this is at five o'clock in the morning, and you get back and expect a hot shower, and there's no hot showers. Freeze to death, oh God, it was cold.

Why, had the water run out?

Yeah, it had run out We had, I don't know, there was over fourteen hundred people using the ablutions, so four companies, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta,

31:30 they were the four companies. And they consisted of Western Australians, South Australians and some Victorians. So, but we were in our own groups, sort of thing. And then the meals. You would eat like a horse. It was rush, rush. You were going all the time. You were totally exhausted. And half-way through recruit training you'd get a long weekend off, and it was sheer paradise, just go and sleep and not have to get up at the clock of dawn.

32:00 And once that, then you'd go through and finish your general training, which was good. It was good fun and then me being, sort of, not really into weapons. I hate guns of any type. But I survived, I qualified for everything.

Can you tell us what the training consisted of?

Get up, first thing, get up in the morning, reveille, race out on the parade ground, they do a roll call. Then you race back in, get changed into your PT gear,

32:30 and then you do a run, get back, and then you've got to race in and have a shower, and then you race back, and then you've got to go and get your bed everything, inspection order. Then off to breakfast, back, get changed again, into whatever activity they've got on that morning, for you, whether it's drill or weapons training

33:00 or whether it's just routine type stuff, then it's go go, you haven't got any time to yourself. From the time you get up it's go, go, go, go, go. It's good, you hate it, but it doesn't take long to get into the system of it. Because once you do it right, and you've got people cursing and swearing at you, and, 'We'll ram you up -', won't say something I was going to say. But it was good fun.

So, there'd be some fairly strong motivational language, would there?

33:30 Oh, boy. Some of it, you know, you'd never repeat it in front of a lady. But it's not now. They get issued with a box of tissues. That's how the system's gone. Because they've got more and more women, and you can't speak like that to women, but then, I've met some women in the army, oh boy. They're just as bad as the blokes. But they're not women, if you know what I mean.

So how did the guys generally react to the strong language at the time?

We didn't have much choice but to accept it.

34:00 It was a part of it. Well, I sort of, you know, you see movies and things as a kid. You've go to have discipline. You've got to be able to react spontaneously. You can't have somebody, 'Oh', scratch, 'Oh, I'm not going to do this', but everybody survived. And got through it you know, and I think you were a better person. Because you've got to remember, a lot of these kids, they came from all backgrounds. There were kids from well-to-do families, and country, country kids seemed to do well, especially

34:30 on the range and things like that, but I did well in the sport aspect of it. My drill was my biggest downfall because I've got two left feet. And used to be bellowed out, or I'd be marching in the opposite direction, so and that really used to get me down a little bit because you couldn't convince me there was something behind that hill, but when you worked out the formula, it's behind that hill but I couldn't accept that. But it was go, go, go most of the time, and

35:00 when you finish you feel so fit in yourself, and you sleep like a log and you eat like a horse, and but you don't gain any weight, and you're so fit, it's a fantastic feeling fitness-wise. Then after that they do your selection for what corps you want to go into. Most people used to go into the grunts, but then you get the specialist corps, you get a whole lot of psych. tests and sometimes I really don't have much faith

35:30 in these psych. tests, IQ tests. I met some real weirdos.

Just before we move into the psych. tests, what were the 'grunts'?

Troops. Cannon fodder. You know, that's where the bulk of the people go, that's where the bulk of the nashos [people conscripted to national service] went. It was a bit of a resentment from the regulars, because the regulars still went through Kapooka, so there was, the battalions at Puckapunyal, they were specially for the national service people.

36:00 And the bulk of the people, training you, were regulars, and there was a very marked resentment towards a nasho.

In what way?

Well, you know. You're only in for two years, I'm here. It used to, a lot of the nashos went out their way to progress, I went out of my way to get as much what's-a-name, experience, as I could possibly get. You know, because it was interesting.

36:30 To me, it was really interesting.

But did you ever find yourself on the receiving end of any tongue-lashings from the regulars?

Yes. Many a time, but it just goes through one ear and out the other.

You accept it as part of the culture?

It was, it used to be, sometimes they can get an individual, and sometimes they would just crucify that individual. I know of incidents, after I got out of the army, where a young kid, it happened at Ingleburn, he went AWOL [Absent without Leave] and the victimisation of that kid was absolutely incredible. I was NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] in charge, each night you had a drilling, and I would just give him ten minutes and that's it, but others would stay there, constantly giving it to him, this kid committed suicide eventually. It was all a hush up thing, hush up like everything else, that's the system. It doesn't matter what system you're in, they hush it up.

Are you prepared to say what his name was?

37:30 No, no.

Why did they pick on him, specifically.

Well, he was having an affair with an officer, nursing officer. That's a no no. ORs [Other Ranks] do not associate with nursing officers. I had a very caring relationship with a nursing officer. And, we, nobody knew about it, it was really great. Except we were on the Gold Coast and we went out one night and we went out to this quiet little restaurant where you wouldn't expect to see anybody.

38:00 Who should walk in? The CO [Commanding Officer], but they were actually good about it.

What, the CO, nothing was said under those circumstances?

No, no. It was done outside, in our own time, nobody knew about it. They just happened to walk in. But nothing was, you know.

So why was this other kid picked on?

I think it was the mentality of the people at the time, you meet some real derros in the system, you really do, some real degenerates.

38:30 **So, in this case was the nursing officer that the affair was being had with, female or male?**

Female.

Yeah.

Yeah, they don't have gay people in the army.

Seriously?

I'll leave that to you to work out.

Well, we've heard different stories covering all kinds of conflicts, and we've had different . . .

Of course, look, of course there is. But it's looked down upon of course, but you know,

39:00 it used to be very bad, I knew a couple of guys in Vietnam who were gay, and one was a hairdresser, but he was such a pansy, he was a real pain, but he sort of had the right ear of the nursing officers, because he used to look after their hair, and do their makeup and everything else. But to the guys, he was very much an outcast. No one would have anything to do with him. I used to talk to him, and say hello, have a yarn, and that's it, but hardly ever, you know, but this other kid, that, he was only about nineteen too. Always can remember it.

39:30 **So this other kid?**

The one that committed, he went up to a dump up near Tamworth, and they found him near the rubbish dump. He'd gassed himself. He was a really nice kid. But even at recruit training, people just can't hack it. I think it depends on your makeup. I suppose you can take so much. I've had some crap thrown on me over the years, but just go through one ear. And leave it at that.

40:00 **Depends on how resilient you are?**

Well, my last twelve months in the army was a bit, I was getting a bit of crap thrown at me, but I didn't, took it with a grain of salt. Everything that they told me I took to the commanding officer. I was getting out, so it didn't matter. I got my twenty years up.

Tape 3

00:30 **So Ron, at the end of the last tape we were talking about a young chap that had been victimised and bullied during the training. How prevalent was this type of behaviour in the army?**

It didn't happen on a regular basis, but it did happen. People would sort of take a dislike to somebody, and this particular kid, he was only a kid, only about nineteen, I think he was nineteen. He was an obliging kid.

01:00 He just had, his personal like just got a bit mixed up, and that's about it. The army sometimes can be cruel, and they close ranks too.Like every organisation, they close ranks if something goes wrong, or in the civvy system. I've seen things happen in operating theatres, they just close ranks. They never make mistakes. It's always somebody else. But I've never ever experienced it personally,

01:30 but I have seen people victims of it. I just, you know, how they feel about it, some get through it and are better people for it. But some, you know, not everybody's the same.

I mean, you mentioned that when you were growing up, you lived in a community that was quite inclusive, and non-racist, and . . . . ..

I never came across, even in the army, people, you go for a job interview, and you make an

02:00 appointment over the phone, and you walk in, and you know, you feel it as soon as you walk in. You feel it straight away. And you feel so demoralised. It's happened various times, it's neither here nor there, but other times, you know, you could just be another person. You know, the real professional. You just become another person. I've never really come across, but I've had a couple of incidences where, being single,

02:30 I've been discriminated against. I mean promotions-wise, in the army one guy had a couple of kids and we both drew up for promotion, and I was fully qualified, ready to take the position, and they wouldn't promote me until he got qualified so they could promote us both together. In the meantime, he was still getting the HDA [Higher Duites Allowance] , yet I was doing the work, do you know what I mean, that sort of discrimination, that happens from time to time in the system as well.

What about in terms of your Aboriginality and . . .

03:00 I don't discuss it. I don't, as far as I'm concerned it's got nothing to do with it. I never, everything that you see here I've bought out of my own blood, sweat and tears. Not blood, so much. But I've worked, the only thing I got, if you served overseas, you got a twenty-five thousand dollar home loan. But what can you buy with twenty-five thousand dollars, nothing. But I was lucky enough to buy a

03:30 home unit in Brisbane, on the advice of a friend, a Jewish guy, and took his advice, bought the unit, and got four times the price I paid for it, so, and that got me here. When I sold it, I still didn't have enough to buy the place outright. But I paid it off in five, ten years, six years to be exact. Piece of cake.

04:00 **It's interesting to hear . . .**

No, it doesn't matter. My mother said, 'As long as you do what you believe in, don't harp on the past'. You know, these people running around complaining they were taken, they lost their culture. It's so fashionable. Take my neighbour here. Her daughter went for Abstudy, did all her university studies, she's a school teacher now, she's up in Queensland, divorced,

04:30 married again, and she's married a part-Aboriginal bloke. He's on the Aboriginal Education or something up in Queensland, but people carry it like, you know, a banner. I want to be treated as, normal. OK, I'm dark. Big deal, you know. I've got my built-in suntan, but I don't worry about it at all. It's never been a thing with me. I've known people,

05:00 and they're, 'Oh, you've got to do this, do that'. They had this March for Freedom or something, across the Harbour Bridge a few years ago, and a couple of people from work: 'Oh, you going to go?'- I said, 'What for?'. They said, 'Oh, you're raving on'. I said, 'Have you ever been an Aboriginal? I don't mean the half-breeds who live in Redfern, or the . . .' - there's an interest group of Aboriginals now. You've got the educated, right, you've got the poor buggers who are still living in humpies on the reserve.

05:30 You see, in Alice Springs, Alice Springs is disgusting. I don't care what anybody says. It's been like that for twenty or thirty years. It hasn't improved. To an extent. You still see drunken women fighting in the streets. Have you been to Alice, it's pathetic. You go to Moree, same thing. But everybody, they've got the mentality that they, the white community done these things to them, now, they've got to pay them back. Stupid idea.

06:00 You get out and make your own life.

Because obviously you have a mindset where you're completely comfortable with who you and everything . . .

Of course I am. I don't run around saying, 'I'm an Abo, I'm an Abo'. No way. Why should I do that?

But I'm just wondering whether or not, particularly during this training period, where you were removed from your community and in a different institution like the army, if there was any basis . . .

No, I never really found, people are a bit stand-offish,

06:30 it doesn't matter what type of job you go to, what colour. I've seen, I mean, ordinary white people, people won't have anything to do with them, are very stand-offish. But one of my best mates, I couldn't stand him when I first met him, I just didn't like him, but we're great mates. Talk about anything. But it's people. You are what you are. You know, where I work at the moment, I don't know if you've heard of it, Phillip Fox the lawyers, in Elizabeth Street, and they're very, lawyers are,

07:00 I call them the blood suckers of society, but very nice people there, but, everyone, if they've got a university, university degrees these days mean nothing, unless you've got in science and that, because they've got environmental this, got all these young kids coming into work, and you know, degrees you've never ever heard of. And they look down on everybody else. And it's these same people that are protesting about everything else. But it's these same people that are on really fat wages.

07:30 I'm just an ordinary Joe Blow, you know, I go to work, I don't, I had a career in the army, right. I could have stayed on the nursing side of it, but I didn't want to, I wanted to get out of that, so I just sort of went and did something in security, where I thought it would be more like a change, but the mentality's still there, oh, you're only security, you're only this, but if anything goes wrong, who get the blame? Security or cleaners. That's everything with them. But the Aboriginal thing, it doesn't worry me. Doesn't worry me at all.

08:00 The people bring it up, so well, you lack English. No issue with me.

Yeah.

I don't walk around with a banner saying, 'I am an Aboriginal/Italian'. What's the big deal? That's the way I look at it.

Well, thank you, because it's really interesting to hear that side, where often we've heard the other side.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But it's always they've done, but there's a lot of people like myself. We get on with life, you know. We're none of us great, my mother never had any money or anything,

08:30 but she got on with life. She got on with everyone. But people, if you don't want to talk to me you don't have to talk to me, sort of thing. Never been an issue with Mum. Mum used to always say, 'Walk tall, head high. You've got nothing to be ashamed of'. It's never been an issue with me. Sometimes I get irritated when people say, 'You should do this. You should do that'. Or they ask you, 'Where do you come from? What's your background?'.

09:00 And I say, 'Is it any of your business?'. And the worst ones, I found it's always Indians and Pakistanis ask you, 'Where do you come from?'. And I've got no time for Pakistanis, none whatsoever. My boss is a Pakistani, but that's beside the point. But you know I can live with that.

Well, getting back to the training you mentioned that although you were quite good with the guns, but you never actually like it. Why was that?

No, I never liked it. Guns, oh, I just don't like killing. You read in the people of the slaughter in Israel and

09:30 places like that, the guys that are getting killed in the Middle East, and in Iraq, and you think the people, the families, what are the families going through, it's such a waste. Middle Eastern people will never live in peace with anybody. They can't live in peace with themselves, because they've got the different divisions. Religion's the root of all evil, as far as I'm concerned.

10:00 Whether it's Muslims or whatever they like to call themselves. You might have read in the paper about some Jewish people, they don't want to cross the road, because on certain days, they can't touch the - did you see that in the paper, the pedestrian crossing, the Orthodox Jews or something. You know, Australia, it's becoming a country full of little ethnic groups. Little ethnic groups here, you see Paki's [Pakistanis] there, Lebanese here, Muslims there, you know.

10:30 It's really bad. You go down to the shops there, some of the rudest people you see there are Middle Eastern people. They'll just barge in front of you, rude, and you'll see them serving, the girls at the counter, and that, they don't say thank you. They demand, never 'please'. I said, 'That's not the culture I was brought up in'. I was always taught to be pleasant to people. Even though some of the girls at the counter, you could wring their necks. They're talking about what they're going to do the next day, sort of thing. But it's sort of, 'You're a racist'.

11:00 'Everybody's a racist'. We're no more racist than the Muslims are.

Well, just with, you know, you talked about guns in terms of not liking what's going on in the world in terms of all the killing, but back with your training what was it then about the guns that you didn't like?

Put it this way. I suppose you're in a position where you had to do it, you do it. Because you're a fool if you wouldn't. You'd be dead.

11:30 But I was fortunate never to be put in that position, but I've known people who were in the grunts and the armoured side of things, where they had to pull the trigger. And for some of them, it's very traumatic. Taking somebody else's life. But I don't know, if it were between me and somebody else, for survival, I don't know. It would have to one of the spontaneous things. Instant reactions.

12:00 Well, you're trained to respond instantaneously. You know, you've got a contact, that's when the enemy attacks you. You've got to find the high ground, you know. And you shoot back. And different times in Vietnam people have been killed. Because they went to the toilet and he didn't tell somebody, and because of the tension of the people and they opened fire and killed their own guys. One of the SAS [Special Air Service] guys that got killed in Vietnam. He was killed by his own guys. And that happened a couple of times in Vietnam,

12:30 while I was there. So, people they go to the toilet. You know there's certain things in life. You do want a bit of privacy when you go to the toilet, or something like that, and they don't say anything, and everybody's on tenterhooks, and every bit of noise, you know, somebody walks out, bingo, you're dead.And those weapons do, if you get shot and if you survive, you're lucky. Otherwise you're going to be pretty well mutilated anyhow.

13:00 **Now during your training, at this point, were you starting to train in your medical area?**

No, the first basic part of your basic training, it's all military, you know. All weapons, whether it's the different types of weapons you've got, grenades, claymore mines, and how to set up camouflage and contacts, and all military type staff,

13:30 and how, bayonet charges and things like that. We all used to have to go through that as well, which was rather traumatic.

What was a bayonet charge?

Just sort of, they had these dummies shaped like people, and you just run at them, and you dig it in and you twist it, you know, make sure you do the damage. I used to feel sick in the stomach and I'd say, 'Oh, God, I hate this'. I used to do it and say, 'I hope to God I don't have to do this'. But you'd just have to go through the motions. Just couldn't imagine doing this.

14:00 Still sends shivers up my spine, but, close contact.

What, I mean obviously that was something . . .

That was something, I didn't like that.

But what did you enjoy about the training?

What the weapons training? The army training in general? Companionship, you get some people are just born to do this sort of stuff. Some people battle. I was working to capacity.

14:30 I did what I had to do and that was that, but it was, yeah, you respect the other people you work with. But some people it doesn't even sink in. They're still stupid, they still think of themselves only. Share. Comradeship between people. You become very attached. Because you're all in the same sort of situation,

15:00 where you're relying on him or her. Survival. If I don't do my part properly, if I hesitate, you could be dead. And in a battle situation, you know. The thing is survival. Even now, strangely enough, I come home on the train late at night. I get the train in Sydney and I don't get here till about half past one, so I walk home from the station. And I've got in my mind all the time what

15:30 my ways out, if something comes, because you never know, because there have been a couple of attacks. Because that's always at the back of my mind. And then, I know my mate says, 'Well, you didn't come home till late last night. I was going to come down'. And I say, 'No, don't do that'. He said, 'Well, ring me next time', because he won't be satisfied until he hears me come in the door. Because he knows I'm walking home. But I usually drive in, but sometimes it gets a bit expensive, driving into the city every day.

16:00 **Now you mentioned on the last tape, that there were psych [psychological] tests that you had to do . . .**

Oh, yes, this is to, towards after you do all your recruit training, usually in the last week, no, it's usually in the first week, and they figure out where they're going to send you. And each corps has a nominated, say there might be five hundred in your platoon, three hundred and fifty of those might be automatically

16:30 put to army corps, or artillery or infantry. And then the other people go into service corps, like medical corps, catering, psych corps, dental corps, things like that. And then you get a choice of what you want to do, and they just take out on the assessment, where to put you. I was the only one in our group that went to medical. The rest all went to different corps.

17:00 **Well, we might just stop there and I'll adjust your microphone. OK. So you mentioned that you went into the medivac.**

Medical.

Medicare. What choice did you have in that?

Well, you had three choices you could go for. I went for, the first choice was medical, second was service corps, as it used to be called, and third was transport. But I got medical. Because at the time they were, there was a shortage of medics, and in my intake, there was two hundred, a hundred and fifty medics for training, because they were, it was one of the biggest intakes, There was such a shortage of medics. But I've always been interested in the more compassionate side of things. You know people down in the dumps, sort of thing. I don't know, I've always had a soft spot for old people, and people who are a bit downtrodden.

18:00 Maybe I got that from Mum. I don't know, but I don't tolerate fools, or bitten once, twice shy, you know. Taken for a ride, been caught that way a couple of times.

So, when did you begin you training for . . .

Oh, after we finished recruit training we left on a miserable July day, no, August, September, raining cats and dogs and the buses took us to Healesville, which is in Victoria, that's where the School of Army Health was.

18:30 That's a beautiful spot. The Aboriginals have got it now. Land Rights. What a load of crap. It was an old lodge, and they had all the tents set up, and we lived in tentage accommodation because there was too many, we had about one hundred and fifty people. Medics coming in for training. And they had it set up like a real hospital, and you did your training, lectures, all that sort of stuff. And demonstrations.

19:00 It was good. And I thrived on it, and I was quite proud of myself, because out of a hundred and fifty, by the time the course finished, it might have been down to a hundred and thirty because some people were selected to go into education and things like that. Because some were teachers and we had lawyers, and stuff like that. They branched into other things and I came, sort of out of the whole class, about tenth, so I was quite proud of that. Proud of my achievement. That was good. I enjoyed it. I had, I just felt it was what I wanted to do,

19:30 and it reverts back, strangely enough, back to Simpson and his donkey. As I said, it always goes back to

helping somebody. Service people, basically. And so, then I was. Once I did that, finished the course, and thoroughly enjoyed the course, then we all went on leave, went back to WA which was great, and we all came back together, and went to Queensland.

20:00 **Look, just before you go to Queensland, we'd like to hear more about the training. The training you did.**

Well, there was only a lot of the theory stuff. They didn't give us any access, like they do now, in public hospitals, trauma departments, so a lot of it was, oh, stacks and stacks, they didn't have videos in those days. Tapes on it, movies on it. And different types of trauma. Horrific some of it.

20:30 But when you see, after what they can do, there's nothing, you can never get away from the smell of burn, that's something I could, one part of the medical side I absolutely hated, burns. They were horrific burns. And especially if the full thickness burns, and the poor people, usually, all the nerves have been destroyed. But that's, I saw some horrible ones in Vietnam.

21:00 **So, with these films that you were shown, what sort of things were you shown?**

Well, I was shown casualties had been evacuated in, and they'd go through triage [sorting and allocating aid on the basis of need] to find if they were salvageable, from the ones that you put to one side, and they die. And then they, the ones that have got the better chance of surviving, they go to work on them. Some of the claymore mines; it's incredible how some people survive,

21:30 absolutely incredible.

What sort of injuries did you see, wounds, on these films?

On these films, total legs blown off, stomachs hanging out. It's awful. To actually see it, and smell it, because there's a smell as well. Like you've got somebody's who's shot in the stomach, a blast in the stomach, and the stomach's hanging out,

22:00 and the contents of the bowel, and that, the colour, and somebody's looking at you, 'God help me. God help me. Am I gunna be all right? Am I gunna be all right?'

22:30 Pretty traumatic. When you get into the actual situation, Like I did in Vietnam, you forget that, you are there to do your utmost to make that guy survive. Some of the surgeons we had were just absolutely brilliant. That's the only way to describe them.

We'll go into more detail when we get to Vietnam. I'm interested to know, when you were doing your training, and you were watching these films . . .

You didn't think it was real. That's the problem. It's OK seeing it on the movie. When you're actually there, it's completely different. You're sitting there for half an hour watching a movie. They're telling you what they're doing, they're telling this is going to, this is great, but when you actually see it, and actually see a live person, if you're fortunate,

23:00 if he's not lucky enough to be unconscious, or have him pleading with you, you know, 'Am I going to be all right? Have I got my legs? Have I got this?' You see, it's not realistic enough. This is why, I reckon, I think they do it now, Medics who are going overseas, they make sure they do work experience, Liverpool Hospital is a good place to work, because they get a lot of trauma there, or Prince of Wales would be another good place.

23:30 Also good places for seeing druggies too.

So, in terms of your training, like how far into your training did you start working with actual casualties?

Oh, we finished there, and I didn't, got to December, I didn't go to Vietnam until about August, so about six months, I didn't. Once that was finished there, we got to Queensland, and we went on then what they call a BE [Battle Efficiency]course, a couple of weeks down at Holsworthy,

24:00 where they had a really intensified course, in defence, and weapons, and survival, that stuff, you know, on the real thing, and it was a really hard course. Go, go, go, you go all the time.

I'd like to find out about that course as well, but just getting back to the medicare bit, how much contact did you have with actual casualties?

None. Absolutely none. None. At that time, none.

24:30 The first time I saw casualties was I was in the RAP [Regimental Aid Post], with 7th Squadron, we had a guy who rolled a Land rover and he had his legs broken. That was the first one I really had. A real live person. That was up a Shoalwater Bay. Then we had a couple of guys had choofers, you know choofers? They're a forty four gallon drum and they've got a petrol heater, that drips and heats the water up. And you just pour cold water in

25:00 and a control wand for your bush showers. We had one guy and got, put too much petrol in and it exploded and went up the side of his back. Thirty five percent burns and that is pretty traumatic. Because they were only superficial burns, but they were quite nasty. Quite nasty.

So those two men were the only casualties that you saw?

No. otherwise, you'd get people; you'd get lacerated hands and a broken leg.

25:30 That happened a couple of times. But that was the only experience I had. I had medical experience at the medical hospital at Ingleburn, ah, Liverpool, no at Yeronga. But that wasn't, that was just ordinary wounds. There wasn't a position where I had to make a decision, but when I was at 7th Field Squadron up at Shoalwater Bay, I had to make a decision, but my training came back. No problems there.

26:00 **So how prepared do you think you were?**

No, not. We weren't prepared. No matter what anyone says, we weren't prepared. And I think you'll find the big boys will say that, too. We weren't really prepared for what, they're more prepared now because they do get a chance go into civilian hospitals. They mightn't be actually; sometimes it depends on what trauma departments you work in. Sometimes the nursing staff rebel.

26:30 It's pathetic. But some places, the army used to have a very good relationship with Liverpool. Although I never worked at Liverpool, but the medics used to do part of their training there, which was good. And they all enjoyed it. I worked at Concord. I did some training there, but that was after Vietnam. But at the time we were inadequately trained.

27:00 **So can you just define for me just what a medivac was as well?**

A medivac was, this is relating to Vietnam. All right? You get injured in the field, right. They call a helicopter in and they'll go in and pick you up. As a rule they used to use the Americans, and they'd have a medic on it, and the medic on the ground would get the guy ready, and they'd, the helicopter would go in and pick you up, get you on the chopper and back to us.

27:30 Most Aussie patients I knew, if they were hit, shot, their chances of survival were pretty good. Because it was very quick. Then they had the annual, going back to Vietnam, about a month, they used to get the medivacs back to Australia, these are the injured guys that we stabilised at the field hospital. And they'd fly them back to Australia, via Penang.

28:00 That was done by the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]. And they flew them back home.

So what would you actually be doing?

We, that was usually, once they left our care, left the wards, that became the RAAF's responsibility. So we sort of said goodbye at the door, and then you'd never see them again. Oh, sometimes we got letters back from different people. But not usually, it's like emergency, nobody bothers.

28:30 **But what was your actual role as a medivac to do?**

Well, we got them ready, all right. We stabilised them and when the doctors decided that they were fit enough to travel, they were prepared for travel. And there was this big bus, that was fitted out and the RAAF people would take over and they'd install them and fly them home on the Hercs [Hercules aircraft]. Via Butterworth. And the RAAF were good too.

29:00 They were really good. But once they left us, they were no longer in our care, they were in the air force's care. Which was kind of good. But different times, a lot of patients, I met when I came home years later. They'd say, 'Oh, they wanted to have a look'. Doctors are sticky beaks. So they might leave a thing, 'Do not touch this dressing until such and such a day', but they'd want to check it you know, and that can cause a few hiccoughs. A number of people dying, I nursed,

29:30 we were evacuated, didn't come home until after a couple of months, because of infections they got. The catch is to get them out as quick as possible to a sterile environment, although our hospital was as good as any in Australia. But doctors being doctors, they like to stick around, jab here, jab there, to see what's what.

Well, we'll go into more detail about that when we get to Vietnam.

30:00 **But just going back to your medicare training. It was called medicare?**

Medical. Medical training.

What else did you train in there?

Well, just the normal, we did the admin. [Administration] side. Of course, there's always an admin. side to it. Basically, ABC.

Could you tell us what ABC is?

Yes, Airways, Breathing and Circulation. That's a good way to put it. You know, what to do in an emergency.

30:30 Basically, how to get someone stabilised. Because you've got to remember, a lot of these people were the only medical people with these grunts, a platoon might have one medic, or a couple of medics, but they'd be working as the sole medic, and the medic, actually, he doesn't get the credit he deserves,

really. Some of the bush medics, some of them are really brilliant. We lost a couple, too, unfortunately. Falling from helicopters,

31:00 which was quite tragic.

Can I just get you to clarify, this is probably just something that hasn't come up, was it a medivac, or a medic?

A medivac is the evacuation of the patient, right. A medical, basically a medic, is a medical assistant. Like a nurse. Basically what it is, put it in layman's terms, a nurse, you do more than what a nurse would do, but we trained by the system, because in a war situation,

31:30 you do far more things than you'd do if I was working as a civilian, in a civilian hospital, because you'd have the unions on your back and the nurses' registration, and they feel that you're not qualified enough because you haven't done the three years' training. But that's (UNCLEAR) it's such a political field.

Thanks for that clarification because it was . . .

Yes, a medivac is actually the evacuation of the patient, whether it's from a, what they call a 'dust-off'.

32:00 A dust-off is when say a platoon has been hit by the enemy, by the nong, right? So that's called a dust-off. The helicopter will fly in and pick up the casualty, and then he'll fly him to the hospital, and our call sign was Vampire, that was the hospital. Appropriate, blood. The helipad was right next to the hospital. So we just, within maybe twenty five yards or more, you're in triage. Have I got that clear?

32:30 **Thank you, yes that . . .**

I should say medical assistant.

Thank you, yes. So medical assistant, so in your role you're referring to yourself as a medic.

That's the short term for medic, yeah.

A medic, yes. I've got that now, so I won't keep on calling you a medivac.

Not a medivac, that's when they get shipped off.

33:00 **Yes, thank you for that. So, what happened after your initial medic training?**

After that, we're all budding to go, wanting to be there. Once you do that, oh, getting anxious, it's getting close, going to Vietnam, and there was a whole group of us called out, and they're all going on these BE courses. You had to do this BE course before you went overseas, anyhow.

What did BE stand for?

Battle Efficiency.

33:30 All military, you know, climbing ropes, evacuating people, lugging people over your shoulder, working with contacts, weapon training - lot of emphasis on weapon training - survival. And that sort of thing. It's good fun. Yeah. Totally exhausted. You sleep like a log, at night. A lot of people still play up, but it's good. And you're super-fit when you're finished, you can take on anything. Not even a bullet, well, some people.

34:00 **And where did you do this training?**

Over at Holsworthy.

And how long was it for?

Six weeks, I think. It was quite a long while, But we were super-fit when we came back. But the silly part about it, we went back the ambulance, Ennogera, not, in Queensland, in, what is it, what is it called, back in Queensland, to Wacol, and that sort of the holding base for people that are going to Vietnam.

34:30 But you do nothing. You sit around and painting rocks again. That's stupid. Oh, you might get a field attachment to the military hospital at Ingleburn. Not at Ingleburn. At Yeronga. But some people went and worked at the Mater Hospital, but some just worked with the medicare at 7th Field Squadron. Worked at various medicare sites, I worked with 7th Field Squadron which was an engineering mob. The we went to Shoalwater Bay, which was, there was two of us,

35:00 and it was really interesting working up there. Had a couple of incidents, like the guy with the broken leg from the car accident, and the guy had an epileptic fit while driving a truck, yeah, that was a hard decision because we had to say, 'No, no, you can't drive', and that caused a lot of animosity between the person and me, because you can't afford to have an epileptic driving a truck.

35:30 Because, if you've got troops in the back and you crash, you kill the guys. So I was Mister Bad Guy, for a little while, but it was a hard decision, particularly because I knew him really well, he was a good bloke. But he became an enemy but later accepted it, but it's hard. He didn't realise he was an epileptic, but

that’s life. You came across some hard decisions at sometimes, and I think I would have let him go and he’d crashed a truck

36:00 with a load of troops on it and killed somebody, he would have even felt worse, I think. But I made the decision. Got nobody else to do it. You’re it. You’ve got to make the decision. Whether it’s the right decision or not. I felt it was the right decision myself.

So this is at Shell Bay,

Shoalwater Bay.

Shoalwater Bay, and this is in Queensland.

In Queensland. North Queensland, it’s the army training camp outside of Yeppoon, middle of Woop Woop.

And where,

36:30 **when you were in Queensland, did you have an interaction with returned soldiers from Vietnam?**

Oh, yes, a lot, because there was quite a few people in the corps at Wacol who had already been to Vietnam. You know, gee, it’s great. Some of them were just ordinary Q [Quartermaster] staff, like working in kitchens and things, support people. I was at the base, so I wasn’t at the rough end of the stick, as they say. Nui Dat. That’s where they were.

37:00 We were at a secure area, because the hospitals always are. So, but a lot of people spoke of it, you know, as a big bludge, big booze up. People encouraged them to drink a lot. That’s the system, though, if you don’t drink, you’re not man enough. I used to get into a bit of strife a bit, I’m a, if I don’t want to drink I don’t drink. But to shut them up, I used to walk around with a glass of coke.

37:30 And if they asked me, I’d just say, ‘Bourbon and coke’. Just to shut them up. Otherwise you’re pestered, ‘Why aren’t you drinking? Why aren’t you smoking? Why?’ But peer pressure never worries me. I’ve been on the outer many a time, for not following what you’re supposed to do. I don’t believe in it. If I don’t want to drink, I don’t drink. If I don’t want to smoke, I don’t smoke. I tolerate it, but that’s about it.

38:00 **So just getting back to, was it a hospital that you were at in Shoalwater Bay?**

No, no. No hospital there. It was just about one hundred and ten guys and two medics, and we looked after the welfare of their health. Well, we’d deal with, STD [Sexually Transmitted Diseases] was a problem, then we, like minor injuries, like the broken leg, and tummy upsets and take people to the doctor and things like that. Just the medical side of it.

What sort of STDs were a problem?

Venereal disease.

38:30 You often get people come back from Vietnam, well people would come back, and they’d just say they go a load. Were getting married in a coupled of months and they’re panicking about getting married, what do they need? And you send them off to the doctors. That happens a lot.

What sort of venereal disease?

Well, standard gonorrhoea mainly. We very rarely saw syphilis. I think I saw it twice in Vietnam.

39:00 But Gonorrhoea was common. Not, I’m not saying common but out of the STD problems that was common. But on all ranks. But if you were an officer it was sort of hush hush. ‘Officers don’t get STD.’ Don’t get things like that. That’s the mentality of the system.

Tape 4

00:30 **So, we were talking about some of the returned soldiers that you met during your time in Queensland, were there any other psychological or physical attributes that you noticed that these men had?**

Some of them liked their booze. That was obviously a problem with some of them.

01:00 A couple of them, that were actually bush grunts, bush medics as they call it, they took it pretty, wouldn’t say much about it. But there’s others, people are always inclined to exaggerate what they did in Vietnam. That’s one of the frustrating things I find. Like, her father raves on what he did, and I know very well he didn’t do it. But he raves,

01:30 but he’s on a full TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated] pension which I think is quite wrong. There are genuine people who definitely need it, who should be on these pensions, and should be

getting every benefit, but he's putting his girls through Chevalier College, and that's not cheap. That's how I look at it. I resent him for that, but he carries on a bit sometimes. 'You should do this,' no. I always go by how I feel.

Would the other medics from Vietnam talk about their experiences?

02:00 Yes, some of them would talk quite openly. Some of them were in similar units as I was, because when they got there, the place was all tentage. Then when I got there the place had all been converted to huts. When I say huts, some of the wards were medical and surgical, they were air conditioned wards, so they were there, and they were very pleasant to work in.

02:30 But all the facilities. There was a hundred beds, and we had a ten bed IC [Intensive Care] unit, and four high dependency, which was quite often full, and that was hard work. But very, very rewarding work.

So you're now describing Vietnam?

Yes, yes. Sorry, I'm getting off the track.

No, that's OK. We'll get there, because it would be good to get a description.

No, some of the guys would talk about some of the silly things.

03:00 Like, the kitchens were over here, and on this side they had these planks. And where the hospital was situated was on a beach on a sandy hill, and if you haven't got these planks to push the meal trolleys on, there's no way to get the meals to the wards, and quite often they'd lose a trolley and about fifty meals would scatter over the ground, you know, before they put all the concrete pathways in,

03:30 and little funny things like that. But it was very dusty; there was a constant fight with dust. It was similar here, like when you go on exercises, like we went to Charleville, we took a hundred bed hospital up there, and to places like that, where the entire hospital was under canvas. And you have all sorts of problems with that, it can be very frustrating, trying to keep a dust-free environment, but you know, pretty well, Theatre and ICU [Intensive Care Unit] were pretty well,

04:00 we wouldn't say a hundred percent clean, but dust-free, anyhow. We had a special air-conditioning and that sort of stuff so it blows out. Keeps the dust out of it. But the other things they complained about was, because they didn't have very many facilities at the place originally, then they got the Peter Badcoe Club [a soldiers' club in Vietnam], he was a guy that was killed in Vietnam, a major, I think he got a VC [Victoria Cross] or something from memory,

04:30 they had a special, like a club where they had a swimming pool, shops and a rest and recreation area. They used to come down from Nui Dat, and it was right on the beach, and, sort of a relief for the guys up north. We didn't have to worry about it, because we lived at the beach all the time, basically.

So just, while, you know, getting back to Queensland and your time there,

05:00 **what had you heard about Vietnam and what was going on?**

I followed the papers. Every time, I used to buy the Victorian Mail, and the Australian. Every opportunity I got, I'd read, see what was happening, what the casualties were, and the various seasons, like the Tet season, that's when all the mosquitos come out. Because you didn't know who the enemy was in Vietnam. That's the problem. They're in their black pyjamas. They're nice, smiling,

05:30 'Ah sung, Ah sung', next thing you've got a knife, or stabbed to death or shot of something. So you didn't know who the enemy was. A bit like the Middle East, I suppose. Fortunately enough, I missed most of that, but when I used to go into, after six months I used to go in Vung Tau, into the town itself. I wasalways aware. There was guns around, people always had guns, and you'd hear a bit of noise, and think 'Oh, God, what's that? What am I going to do?'

06:00 The war, that was constantly in the back of your mind, that something goes wrong, but you move around town reasonably well, they used to have organised tours and things. Got to the various attractions around town, but the property was pretty shocking.

Before you did go to Vietnam, what was your understanding of communism?

It's got its good points, I suppose. It's got its good points. But there are, it's like the western system.

06:30 The hierarchy benefit better, you know, they have the run of the mill. Like Russia, you know. All right, everybody had a stomach full of food, and care and that, but look at them now. So it didn't work there, did it? No, at a very early age, even at school, what did they call it? Some sort of a church thing,

07:00 that Riama or something it used to be called. I remember going to a few rallies as a kid and they were talking about communism. Oh, there was quite a strong feeling amongst the general public at the time. Sort of died, died in the backside, as they say. That's when it really started to come up. But Korea, at school I did Korea, so basically knew about Korea and China. I got that through reading at school,

07:30 and in the library at school, I used to get up and read about these places, and probably Vietnam, too, at high school I started to read about it because I was really starting to get interested in newspapers, and reading about what was happening. To find out a bit of the background of Vietnam and the Vietnamese

had been fighting for centuries with the Chinese or somebody, and every invasion there'd been fighting

08:00 and I knew roughly what was happening. I could never understand why the Yanks got involved, and the French, and then we got involved. It was sort of pointless, really, but deep down I always thought it was a waste of time. For every Australian life, 583 or whatever it was that died there, what a waste of Aussies. For a stupid ideology that was doomed to fail, anyhow, it was doomed to fail.

08:30 Unfortunately, people die. Decent kids die, so that upsets me.

During this training period before you went off to Vietnam, what was the public opinion of the Vietnam War?

Oh, well the Labor government was jumping up and down. I thought, myself, that it was the right thing to do. But maybe I was a bit naïve to think they could stop communism. I think we've got to be more worried about the ratbag

09:00 Middle Eastern people, than communism, get on with people. It's sort of envy I think too. But I suppose communism sort of had its purpose. A lot of people, now, look at Russia there, they were sort of freedoms were restricted, in what they could and couldn't do, but they had stability.

09:30 **But what was, I mean, you mentioned that Labor was jumping up and down, what was the opinion of the people?**

What, the army people?

Just regular civilians?

It seemed to me that some were against it, some were for it. They, you've got to do something, you just can't, you know, it's a world-wide problem, do you want to live under communism? It was sort of mixed, some were for it, some weren't. I think that people who were for it,

10:00 were basically people who had family involved. I think it affected more who had family involved. Because a lot of kids who were due for national service, even the Poms, the Greeks, different ones, their sons went back there, you know Italy, Greece, whatever, they all shot through. They all shot through until the time was up, and that's something I resented. And a lot of nashos resented that, too. Because they got out of it. Well, look at Bill Clinton,

10:30 he got out of it, he shot through to England. He's a classic one. But a lot of people did resent that. I knew guys that were utterly opposed to it, and they fought tooth and nail not to go to Vietnam and they got off. They sent somebody else. 'I'm more important than you, you better go'. You know, things like that. I worked with a guy called Brian Drewe and he said the same thing, 'I don't want to go there. I don't want to get killed. Only fools go there'.

11:00 But that was just a nasho, but the regs [Regular Army], there was a bit of resentment from the regs, but then more and more nashos were going. But I knew some regs who never even went, and they really resented the fact. I know I had a couple of guys who really resented the fact that I was going to Vietnam. I know when I got my orders to come through, I was at Shoalwater Bay, and I got back to my unit there, and one of them, he was the adjutant, no, he was a Q store whacker, and he said, 'How come you're going to Vietnam?'

11:30 you know. I said, 'I don't know". And he was quite blunt about it, some of his work colleagues that he worked with, they were the same way. I mean, it had nothing to do with me it just came up. Maybe my CO pushed a bit, I don't know.

I wonder why the nashos were sent, more than the regulars?

Because there's more of them. More nashos: cannon fodder, that's what they were.

OK. We might just have to stop there.

12:00 **I think we've got a sound issue. So, did you actually volunteer for Vietnam, or were you . . .**

Well, basically, we finished the course in February and then I got transferred and my CO, of the squadron I was with, he said 'What are you going to do?' I said, 'I've done my course'.

12:30 So he must have put the application in again, that's what I reckon, this Major Shields. Fair enough. A couple of months later it came through. There was one confusion, I would have gone earlier, but there was someone else with the same name, 'Dean', which was quite coincidental and the same initial, but mine's RB and he's RJ, so he went, so it didn't make any difference. I went about two months after him. But yeah, I was quite happy to go, because two years of painting rocks, because that's what a lot of guys did.

13:00 Just paint rocks. Borderlines. White rocks, just paint rocks. Over at Ingleburn, there's nothing there now. Ingleburn Army Camp. It used to be a standard joke. 'What are you doing?' 'Just painting rocks'. You know they never utilised the army the way they should. I believe, some engineering groups now, they're building places up at Palm Island, Fraser Island. That's what they should be doing. I did a couple of trachoma exercises with Professor Hollows.

13:30 Took a field hospital out to Utopia, which is in the middle of Woop Woop, and we were out there with the Aboriginals, with the trachoma, and that was quite an experience. Brilliant man.

This is before you went to Vietnam?

This is after.

After, yeah. Oh, that's really interesting.

Brilliant man.

We'll go into that, when we get to that.

Such a human being. He was a fabulous person.

14:00 **So what did you do in your time in Queensland and going to Vietnam?**

I was in the 7th Field Squadron, officially their medic, and there was three of us, there was myself, Ziggy and Brian. The three of us, and they went to Vietnam before I did, then Brian, his nasho's time was up and I was by myself for about three weeks, and then my posting came through. I went to Vietnam. I went back to Perth for r&r [rest and recuperation], they used to send you back on leave,

14:30 pre-embarkation leave they used to call it, and I get there, and five days to get back to Sydney, and I stayed at Watson's Bay for a week, where I went for, nearly every day we had briefings on Vietnam, the day before we were due to fly out we had a final briefing, about when you got into war zones, you do this, you do that, you'll be court martialled and the rest of it, and then we sort of hung around and then,

15:00 under cover of darkness, we flew off to Vietnam.

You mentioned the briefings? What did they involve?

Oh, traditions, respect, and what to do and what not to do.

Sorry, traditions of the local people?

The local people. We weren't given any language training, but we got a phrase book, a few words. You pick it up anyhow. Phrases , you know, get by. I speak English.

15:30 If they want to understand me, they speak English. That's my motto. Yeah. But it wasn't too bad. It was, most of the mornings, final medicals and then about two o'clock in the afternoon they give you your final briefing, and you've got a couple of hours off, for people who had to say goodbye to their families, and go straight to the airport to see them off, and then under cover of darkness,

16:00 we took off about ten o'clock and more or less straight through and then on the plane, and goodbye Australia.

So did you have anyone special in your life at this time?

Oh, a casual girlfriend. She was OK, yeah, she was all right. But she was always wanting to get married, but not interested. I'm too young. Now I'm too old. But she died last year, yeah, she was a nurse, she went into a hospital for a hysterectomy

16:30 and she got Golden Staph. She was dead in three months. It was quite sad, but, that's life. Life goes on. But she was, everyone thought we were going to get married, but I've seen far too many broken marriages. Too many times, both men and women playing up on their husbands. I didn't want to get into a situation like that, but when I came back from Vietnam I was even more worried about it,

17:00 because quite a few people I knew had children, who had abnormalities from Agent Orange [a herbicide used in Vietnam], problems with children born blind and things like that. Absolutely petrified me. And I used to, when any relationship started to get too serious, I'd get cold feet, call it off. I couldn't bear the thought of bringing up handicapped children. But, Ziggy, the guy I worked with, his son was born blind. He copes,

17:30 but that's not the point. I couldn't bear that. One other reason why I never bothered getting married, or cut short my relationships once I get too clucky. Once I'm getting clucky. Maybe I missed something. I've got my dogs.

And it sounds like you've got some lovely nieces . . .

Oh, yeah. The kids are great, Tracey's a gorgeous kid, she's a sweetheart. And young Yasmin, she's a gorgeous kid. It's always, 'Uncle Ron'. They're kind of spoilt. I would have liked to have had kids.

18:00 **Now, how did you feel on the flight from Australia to Vietnam . . .**

Exciting, Exciting. Because on my first flight on a big 707, you know, a hundred and thirty seven people or something. It was exciting. And the crew were absolutely fantastic, and they did it voluntary, too, all the crew. But it was good, there was one or two people returning back to Vietnam, They came back to Australia after deaths in the family or something, but they were returning back and they were telling us about it.

18:30 But it was exciting, it was an adventure, you know. But I was, I rang my Mum up and she was, I knew she was upset, and I sort of, tried to keep it short and sweet, but she was upset. You could always tell when Mum was upset.

What did you say to her when you told her you were leaving?

Well, she knew for about six months before I left, so

19:00 it's really personal, but she was really upset, poor old soul. But, that's life. But she never had anybody else to look after her, that's the problem. I thought, 'Oh, boy'. But it was a great big adventure.

19:30 You don't realise the danger, until you get there. I don't think that hit me until I got to Vietnam. We parked, the Qantas was only on the ground for an hour, off-load one lot and on-load the other. And we were parked near a big Starlifter, one of those big cargo planes, and we saw all these silver boxes, and we wondered what they were, and they were all coffins going back to the States. Then it hit me: 'Boing!'.

20:00 I don't want to go home in one of those. You know I was determined not to go home in one of those. Somebody looked after me. You know, it was pretty tragic. Something like two hundred coffins were being loaded onto this big aircraft. That's two hundred and fifty people, loved ones going home in bits. Quite spooky. That's when it sunk in and when we were coming in to Ton San Nhut, that's Saigon airport,

20:30 we looked out and we could see all the craters, and thought, 'Have I done the right thing?' But one of the guys who was sitting next to me, he must have saw, he'd been up at Nui Dat, he was an older bloke, and he said, 'Oh, you'll be quite OK. You'll be right. Just keep your head low. Play it by the rules, don't do anything stupid, and you'll be. .' that sort of gave me a boost, I don't know who he was. Jeff, I think his name was.

21:00 You realise you're going into, 'I don't really have to be here, but why am I here?'

What was the mood like on board the air craft?

The mood, after we left, some guys in tears, but they settled down. As I said the Qantas crew were good, and then we just settled back and it was just a big adventure. I think. But everybody was very quiet when it landed. Some of the ones that had been to Vietnam: 'You'll be sorry'. And as we're all trying to get off the plane, and the other mob were trying to get on the plane,

21:30 and 'You'll be sorry!' That sort of crap. And you think, and it started sinking in then, especially when I saw all the coffins being unloaded off the plane. I thought, 'Why do they have to park here?' And after a while, oh well, then we flew down to Vungers and they had a dust-off coming in

22:00 so they dragged us off to help carry stretchers in. But that was my introduction. But I was exhausted. I slept like a log. Because we didn't get much chance to get acclimatised. We were into it next day. Others raved on, old Bill Watson, he's still kicking. 'Do this, do that.' Got allocated to our jobs

22:30 and it was hunkydory and away we went. Didn't take long to get over it.

So, just backtracking a bit. Where did you arrive?

Ton San Nhut, which is Saigon airport.

OK, Saigon. You mentioned the coffins . . .

Saw all the military aircraft everywhere, military aircraft, and there was an Air Vietnam jet parked there, a 737, and the Vietnamese wear those pyjama things, with the flaps in front.

23:00 You know the traditional costume, they looked quite nice, the hostesses were pretty girls, and somebody said, 'Oh, they're probably Viet Cong'. Thought, 'Oh, God, yes'. But you know, it was stinking hot. After getting out of the air-conditioning in the aircraft, and they directed us under a couple of aeroplanes and we were just sitting under the shade on the tarmac, and the heat's so hot on the tarmac, and they gave us sandwiches and refreshments

23:30 and we had to wait a couple of hours to get the connecting flight down to Vung Tau. Oh, one group went off to Nui Dat and we went down to Vung Tau. On this funny old, broken-down aircraft, oh, it was in a shocking state, I was wondering if it could get off the ground. We had a twenty minute flight and then we were there. Got down to Vungers, and it was quite a busy little airport. A lot of military aircraft, choppers flying everywhere, and I kept thinking,

24:00 'I'm here, I'm in Vietnam, I'm here!' then it started sinking in a bit and people were, I didn't have time to get homesick because we were put straight into work, I suppose. But I used to often go out the back and sit, and a mate of mine, we got to know one another, and gaze across the bay, back to Australia, started counting the days till we got home.

What were your first impressions of Vung Tau?

24:30 Big. Where the base was it was quite large. Sand, there was sand everywhere. Sand and dust,

everywhere you went. But, that's about it. Sand, it was very hot. By the time we got there, it was about five o'clock in the afternoon, and it was still quite warm.. And everybody was rushing around, and 'Oh, they need someone down at the helipad',

25:00 and we just walked in, rushed down to the helipad, and a couple of choppers came in, and they were bringing litters in and putting them into triage, and then we went back and got allocated our accommodation.

So you were put to work straight away?

Well, they needed some extra bods. Well, what happened, every time there was a dust-off came in, there was a spontaneous, every came in. You could hear the choppers coming, every time they came along the beach, you could hear the thud, thud, thud, thud, and they used to swoop around as they came to the hospital.

25:30 You know, like radar, you could hear it before you could see it. And people just automatically went straight there, depending on how many, they'd give you a warning, 'Medivac coming in', and everybody's there, because we were there for the guys.

So, even if you weren't on duty, you'd all turn up?

Oh, yeah. Well, I worked in ICU

26:00 so I used to, I'd have a couple of hours before I got them, because sometimes they could be in theatre, it might be four, five, six, hours. I think the longest time they worked in theatre, I think they worked for twenty-four hours up. It went so quick, but the state of the theatre was stuff everywhere, you forget hygiene after a while. They used to have three tables going. I can work as a team,

26:30 they were fantastic. They were a fantastic team to work with.

What was your accommodation like in Vung Tau?

Ah, just a typical army hut. No windows, just a sort of, windows, but wooden windows. Concrete floor which was always covered in sand, wood, you had your bed space, a locker, and that was that. It was basic,

27:00 and you had your mosquito net, of course, and the ablutions were pretty primitive. A shower block, had twelve showers. At least, there was running water. But the worst aspect of it were the toilets. They had the shed, and you had all the thunder boxes, you know what the thunder boxes were, the seats, I could never use them,

27:30 if things are right, and one of the private things I always think. The toilets your privacy, you don't want to have to go into a room where there's twelve thunder boxes that side, and twelve this side, sort of thing, and you're basically looking at you, these guys reading magazines. Oh, I just couldn't hack it. That was the ablutions.

So what did you do?

I used to go down at the hospital. I couldn't hack those toilets.

28:00 The showers no problems. Been to boarding school, that made no difference, but the toilets, you know. That's the only sore point about the army. Got no privacy, but you lose that in the army.

So what do you recall of your first patient that you treated?

The first one I had, he was a psych., I worked in the medical isolation ward for the first couple of weeks,

28:30 months actually, and he was a guy, he had a mental breakdown. And anyhow, I came on and he kept telling me the rabbits were coming. The rabbits. he was seeing rabbits all the time, and apparently one night, during the night he grabbed one of the guys by the foot, and he was trying to strangle the rabbit, he was trying to strangle his foot. He was a nut case. Whether he was genuine or not, I don't know.

29:00 He was quite funny. He was quite a nice bloke, when he wasn't acting strange. And the other ones, we had STD patients. Some of the horrible ulcers they developed, some of them were quite awful. And you had to irrigate those. You know. Double gloves and all this sort of stuff. You'd get paranoid about it, then we had people with ulcers and some other patients. We had the officers' ward next door and they had a range of things,

29:30 like ulcers, tiredness, things like that. Tummy upsets. Malaria. Then we had a very bad bout of malaria, and we just had people coming out of our ears. We had them everywhere, and I don't know if you've ever treated anyone with it. One minute they're cold, next minute they're hot, oh, it's just a full time job. You've got to keep them cool, and next, you've got to keep them warm, and well we had a really bad bout of it at one stage.

30:00 The poor medics never got much sleep, you've got to keep them on, and once it was over it was all right. It was really bad.

What were the preventative medicines?

Oh, you had, I think it was Chloroquin Palaquin we used to have. They used to spray the place every night, every day,

30:30 I don't think it was Agent Orange, but they did spray near the place a couple of times, but the disinfectant they used for the blowflies, that's what they used to call the hygiene. Blowflies, they'd come around just on dusk and, oh, the stuff they used. It was putrid smelling stuff. I'm sure that's what caused some of the rashes we used to get. And just at sunset, they'd do it.

31:00 **And what did they use to spray?**

I don't know. Nobody asked.

But what was the physical, was it a spray can?

Oh, it was a smoke, they just chucked all this stuff out. But we never really had much trouble with it, you know, you rolled your sleeves down at night, and we had to sleep under mosquito nets at night, but it was very interesting looking after someone with malaria.

31:30 They go up and down and their spleen blows right up that you can actually feel the spleen. But it can be deadly for some people. We had some really sick boys there. And everybody got in, it was really good, they even had cooks, to keep their temperatures down on these guys. They were brilliant. But that's what I liked about the place. Everybody worked as a team; it was a pleasure to work with them.

32:00 But when it was quiet it was a bit of a pain. Everybody wanted to do their own thing.

How would you get the temperature down of someone with malaria?

Well, temperate sponges, get the temperature down. Keep the fluids up. We'd be bathing people in ice, the real bad ones; they'd get really high temperatures. You get all sorts of problems you know, you might have three people to look after. You're going one to the other, one to the other. And 'I'm cold, I'm hot!' and you've got the fans going.

32:30 And we got the ice van from 36th Medivac, because it only lasted a week, or ten days, or something. That was really good. But the people worked as a team, plus you've got to do your normal thing so you can't neglect your other patients as well. Because they had people in surgical wards. They had two surgical wards, ICU, they had people there, but as soon as they were well enough, they used to put them back in the normal ward.

33:00 **How well resourced was the hospital?**

They had everything we wanted. If we wanted it, we got it. You know, American supply, no problem. The stuff they just left in Vietnam, they just walked out, left everything there. People that I worked with, they brought a lot of stuff back. Some of the more sophisticated, different types of instruments. They collected them, things like that. Beautiful stuff.

33:30 But the system's got so much gear out there, it was pathetic but they left a lot of stuff there. But the nongs never used it. The 'nongs' are the Vietnamese. They used to call us 'Otalies'.

They used to call you . . .

'Otalies'. We were going back to Otalie (Australia).

Now, you mentioned before that in Vietnam, some of the men had quite horrific symptoms from venereal diseases . . .

34:00 Yes, like they had, they'd get these ulcers and you had to irrigate them with U-salt and put the catheter right down, you see, it's got to heal, work up this way, but the pollies, they wouldn't let them home unless they were healed. Some people were kept for longer than normal. But most times it was pretty normal stuff, ward stuff. But you did get the occasional more exotic type of bug,

34:30 because people had their mamma-sans about the place, you know, to do their washing. Not that I let anybody wash my clothes.

The mamma-sans. Could you explain that?

Oh, a lot of people used to have girlfriends I suppose. Some people had their laundry done. The local women there would do the washing. Some of them were nice people, don't get me wrong, but their attitude was, 'We're here. We're the top dogs. You're the peasants'.

35:00 But you come, different people where my mate works, we went to a couple of places, they're Vietnamese, and we went to one of the kids' christenings, and they said he was so anti-Australian. And I said, 'What did you come here for?' and he said, 'I'm going to get everything I can out of this country'. I didn't, he was a nasty streak of a person.

Just getting back to venereal disease amongst the men, how common was it to visit brothels?

35:30 Oh, it was common. Wherever service people are it's a common thing.

And were there particular establishments at Vung Tau?

Oh, well, they had a clinic that they used to run in town, and the girls, they'd be checked on a regular basis. But it was quite common for people to get venereal disease, especially if you wanted to play around with fire.

36:00 **Was the clinic run by the army?**

No, I think it was, basically, a civilian type of place. I never ever went there, but I knew one of the guys who used to worked there, and he used to say who was clean and who wasn't. As they say, but some people, you know, it's just a part of life, wherever you go, wherever service people go, whether the army, the police, or whatever.

36:30 They always go visit these places. It's just a part of life. Even when I was in Shoalwater Bay, the girls from the local town used to come out and park the station wagon on the outskirts, and people used to go down and visit. But even in the army they used to come around and visit, you know. 'Do you want a girl?'. 'You can get lost'. But you know, it's a living. There's a demand for it. But, that's life. You're not going to change that.

37:00 **And, I mean obviously, this may or may not be the case, but men who had serious girlfriends, as opposed to visiting prostitutes.**

Well, there were actually a number of guys did have caring relationships, and actually, a couple of guys did marry Vietnamese women, and brought them home, and it was a no no. they were treated like, you're sleeping with the enemy.

37:30 One of two people I knew, well, I didn't know them personally, but they were marrying and bringing home Vietnamese women. But it's like the Filipinos, her grandfather, he's 78, got a Filipino girlfriend, she bled him dry for his money, got over four hundred, five hundred thousand dollars for his house, sold it, he bought one up at Port Stephens,

38:00 another one, and she's drained him of his money, and he sold the place up there, because all the money he got for this one was gone. Fortunately, he paid this one off, but he got another half a million dollars for his house, top of the range four-wheel drive, huge caravan. Never drove a four-wheel drive in his life. They're in Geraldton, Western Australia. Been on the road for seven months now. But she's just exploiting him, but it's a free meal ticket.

38:30 But I've been to the Philippines, well, a friend of mine married a Filipino girl, but she was an educated girl, very educated. And they've got two little girls. Actually, his youngest daughter's my goddaughter. Got a couple of goddaughters. And , but she came from sort of, upper class, but even so I don't trust them. Well, where my mate works, Bill, one of the women came up to him and said, 'Do you want to make fifty thousand dollars?'

39:00 He said, 'Why?' she said, 'We'll give you fifty thousand dollars, you marry this woman'. He said, 'You know what you can do?' So I told Bill, 'Next time you go in to the Immigration Department'. So, but when you see how some of these people live overseas, you can understand why they'd want to do that. It's crazy.

Tape 5

00:30 **What I was going to say, was, how long did it take some of these soldiers to get better from the STDs?**

Sometimes took months. They used to have a policy where they wouldn't send them home till they were clear. Sometimes they'd send them to Butterworth. There were a couple of guys they used to spend some time in Butterworth, but they had quite nasty infections. There's different types of STDs you can get. These were quite the nasty type.

01:00 Like a guy had a sinus in his leg, and they put this tube right down, but they could probably heal it quicker, by incising it and stitching it up, and doing it that way. Doing it primary to delay closure, sort of thing, but they'd rather do it to heal from the bottom and work out. That's what it was doing, it was healing from the top and going down and you've still got this part here where it can't drain, so consequently it repeats and repeats getting infected all the time.

01:30 That's why, they eventually clear up, but it can be quite psychologically damaging to the guy. They try to be very blasé about it. I never criticise people, what they do in their private lives, that's their business. And I used to be sort of a sympathetic ear, 'You'll be all right, but don't do it again!' But some people, just an ordinary type of gonorrhoea, constant repeats, but the doctors used to get quite annoyed about that.

02:00 **Quite annoyed?**

Because they're re-occurring. You know, they clear them up and they go out and do the same thing again. And sometimes, guys go out, a first night out for a bit of a fling, and bingo! And then they've got all sort of problems. It can cause a lot of problems but it was well treated by the system.

You talk about the psychological damage, what form would that take?

You know, they've got wives back home, girlfriends, you know. Worrying about going back and the girlfriends wondering why they're coming back so soon.

02:30 It would be terrible, going home and giving some sort of infection to your wife or girlfriend. It would take them really bad, but you know, that's life.

And when you saw them, what sort of things would they talk about to you?

'What will I do?', 'Will my children be abnormal?' I says, 'Well, you're getting excellent medical treatment. Do what you're told to do and you shouldn't have any problems at all'. But with syphilis, it's one of these things, and it lies dormant and springs up years later. But I only saw one case of syphilis when I was up there,

03:00 and it was a what's-a-name guy, he was a Kiwi. That's the only one I saw. But people are inclined to treat people like lepers. Like when I was working at the Prince of Wales and we had people come in with AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome], and we had people, aagh, you know. AIDS, you're going to get AIDSby just talking to someone. It never used to worry me. I'd be careful of course. But the times I've been pricked in theatre by needles

03:30 and accidentally cut by knives, and I thought, 'oh, my God'. Just hope nothing happens, but that's life.

I guess you get accustomed to it.

Well, once upon a time, before AIDScame around, you never worried about it. You just went and got a tetanus shot, and that was that, and hepatitis, but see, hepatitis kills more people than AIDS. That's the frightening thing. I don't want to get either one to be perfectly, but I don't want . . .

I think there's less awareness of hepatitis anyway.

04:00 That's it. When I was working at the Prince of Wales, one of the doctors, he was a brilliant guy and he got hepatitis and he was dead in three months. Young guy, 37, dead. Hepatitis. Tragic.

Absolutely. Yes.

But the hospitals, they're full of tragedy. There's just so much tragedy in hospitals.

Now, according to the research material, you wanted to get your ribbon. What was the ribbon?

Oh, that was the National Service Ribbon. Any member

04:30 of the Service who served as a National Serviceman, like, there's a special ribbon. I just got a few ribbons, few medals. That's all. Nothing exciting. It looks good.

But you were aware that you would be entitled at that time?

Oh, yeah. It was in the paper, but you write in and they send it out. I've got one, there's another one to come. It just looks good. I don't wear them. I don't go to Anzac Day parades or things like that, but I'm going to get them mounted once and I'll leave it to one of the kids.

05:00 **But when you were in Vietnam, were you aware that you would be eligible for a ribbon?**

No, the Australia Campaign one, and we got the Vietnam Campaign one, which is a red, green and white. You get those after six months. You get the Australian one straight away. You only have to be in the country twenty four hours. But then you get, I think they called it Free World Forces, and then you get the other medal, but on top of that one I got the long service medal. And this other medal that came out, all the bits and pieces.

When you were first up there in Vietnam, what sort of things did you do for recreation?

05:30 Down to the beach, surfing, we had a surf beach, but there were certain times of the year when you couldn't swim on account of sea snakes.

Sea snakes?

Yes, sea snakes. Lots of them.

Venomous?

Venomous sea snakes. But they only can bite you in the grooves of your fingers, or something like that. They can't bite you like that, they've got to get you in the groove.

What, I presume we're talking about small sea snakes?

Oh, they're only small, I saw them in New Guinea too. I was in this lagoon

06:00 going like this in a lakatoi, it's a little canoe, and this snake came over my arm and I nearly had a heart attack. That's life. But surfing, the facilities were pretty good. They had the Peter Badcoe Club, it was named after Peter Badcoe, he was a major that was killed by the Viet Cong. Quite a brave man, actually. Got a VC for it. But like a lot of people he did some foolish things too, but when your colleagues are in danger,

06:30 you do some foolish things I suppose. He was quite a distinguished gentleman. I never knew him but the club was named after him. They had a really nice pool, coffee shop, souvenir shop, and accommodation. And the guys used to come down from Nui Dat for r&r, r&c [rest in country] I think they called it. That was the leave that you got, holidays, drink and play merry hell. And they used to have entertainers come out.

07:00 Like, who was it? Judy Stone and a couple of others. Bob Hope once, when he was visiting the Yanks. We saw a speck sort of thing, in the distance. So many people and Ann Margret. Know we saw a few, and the entertaining crowd, they were really appreciated. They always had attractive girls.

I think Australian entertainers were regularly a part of . . .

Oh, they were very much a part of the scene and I don't think that they got the

07:30 credit that they did, and they uplifted you, and there's nothing like being, if you're in a foreign country, you probably experienced this, and there is nothing like seeing an Australian. Like, I lived in London for a bit and I used to get so homesick. I went to Australia House to read the newspapers, or Western Australia House, and when I got really homesick I used to go out to Heathrow Airport just to see an Australian jet. And I used to say, 'Oh, I'll be glad to go home'.

08:00 The weather was so depressing, that's what was so bad in England. But the Army had, there were tours. We used to go across to the American base where they had a PX [canteens of American units], where they could buy anything duty free. We had our own duty free shop on the premises as well. Liquor was dirt cheap. Cigarettes were very cheap, I didn't smoke so it didn't affect, but ten cents, or twenty cents for a can of beer. So a lot of people did drink. I knew quite a few guys who became I would say near alcoholics from all the drinking.

08:30 Not so much the people I worked with, like the support people, the Q store people, they've got nothing else to do but stack blankets and supplies and all that. Most of the medical people who dealt with patients, they weren't so much that way inclined. OK, they would booze up, they'd have theme nights, that sort of thing, we had one guy who'd walk around with a piece of rope and they used to call it the dog. Used to walk around,

09:00 like a leash, and he used to walk around with this dog, and he'd hand it to the next bloke, and you'd think, these guys are nuts. When I first saw it, I thought, these guys are queer, but it helped to pass the time away. Oh, the padres were good, they looked after that side of life. The (UNCLEAR) people were good. The Red Cross people were good, but sometimes they used to be a little bit annoying, particularly if someone comes in as a casualty and they bring out their hygiene stuff,

09:30 their toiletry stuff and the girl would be saying, 'Do you know who it's from?' and this poor guy would be going, 'Ah, ah, ah'. In a state of, pretty crook. I don't think they meant to do it, but they really used to push the barrel, and that used to annoy me at times. 'Why are you telling him he's all right, the poor guy's just come in and he's had a traumatic experience, and you're telling him you're from the Red Cross and you're giving him something.' You know. 'I don't think he cares where it comes from at this stage, you know.'

10:00 But I used to go and get stuff for some guys at times, they couldn't talk to the girls and they'd ask you to do it, or write letters for them, but the girls basically the Red Cross girls, they were sweethearts. But some were party-time girls, but that's typical.

Party type of girls?

Party-time, you know, when's the next party, the officers' mess was always having functions, and the sergeants' mess, we were junior ranks, you know.

So the party-time girls were basically . . .

10:30 Oh, and the nursing staff. Some of the nursing staff used to enjoy their parties, too, but you know, it's like MASH [US TV serial set during the Korean War]. Sometimes parts of MASH, it reminds me of MASH. Parts of it. Not to the same extent, people were shacking up with each other, and they were all prim and proper. You know, we don't do this. But a number of relationships developed up there with people.

11:00 Everybody knew about it but it was, if it happened with somebody else it would have been a no no. But that's life, you get that everywhere.

Relationships developing with people in the same area?

Same area, yes. It's basically, it's a no no. I knew one guy, I think he ended up marrying her. He was an OR and she was an officer. I think they got married eventually. We didn't have much to do with them, but it's frowned upon, ORs and Commanding Officers,

11:30 you've got to keep your rank structure. You're down here and we're down here, as up the ladder you go, sort of thing. But that's life, you find that everywhere.

Just to get back to the notion of drinking and heavy drinking. To what extent do you think that the drinking culture was . . .

Ah.

But to what extent was it a reaction to what was going on in Vietnam in terms of warfare?

I think some people are just born drunks, personally. Even when I came back home, it's sort of,

12:00 I don't drink, I'll have a beer, I'll drink when I feel like it and not when I'm told to drink. They'll have compulsory functions and you'll be told 'You'll be in the mess at such and such a time and you'll remain there all night, and he'll expect you to stay there until he's finished. And he'll might be the unit drunk, sort of thing, and you can't leave, or otherwise you'll find that you've got extra duties, sort of thing. I got caught a couple of times, sort of think,

12:30 but I got by. Conned my way out of it.

Just returning to this point you made about Australian entertainers. Can you amplify the point you were making about how important it was to see Australian entertainers?

Oh, it was very much, because it's bringing back home. There's a song about that used to go, We Want to Get out of this Place, I can't remember who, and that was always the last song they'd sing, and everybody would sing, I want to get out of this place ,if it's the last thing I ever do and you know, everyone would join in the chorus.

13:00 Sometimes they were pretty mediocre. But like Judy Stone and that, they were pretty good, and what's, I think Patsy, Bert Newton, came up a few times.

Oh, Patty Boyd.

But it was to see an Australian, because you didn't see very many European women in Vietnam. There were the nursing sisters, and they were, you know, up there. The Americans were more down to earth,

13:30 they didn't have these false airs like in the army but that's the structure

Getting back to the nursing sisters, you say they were up there. What do you mean by up there?

Well, they're not supposed to associate with the people, you're not supposed to associate with the lower ranks, because you're only an OR and they're like an officer, a commissioned rank. We had ten sisters, eight Australian, and two Kiwis. One of the Kiwi women was all right, Big Murphy, she was all right. But the other one, Alexandra, she was just anti-Australian.

14:00 She was a bitch and that was the only way to describe her. We'd get an Australian guy come in she was, all right, basically ignore them. You know. But if it was a Kiwi she'd be over them like a sore toe. You know, fuss around and get them this, get them that. At different times, she'd be, nobody liked her. That's including the sisters I think.

Did anyone ever find out what she had against Australians?

14:30 Like of lot of people do, just don't like Australians. Sometimes it can be brought on, but Australians can be loud. But you know, in that situation they'd talk about the Anzacs, but that's a part of them, the Australians and New Zealanders, but this particular one was a pain, Alexandra, her name was, I couldn't stand her. She never liked Australians; you couldn't do anything in her eyes. It was always wrong. But there were no Kiwi ORs, Ordinary Ranks, it was all ordinary ranks, but this Alexandra, she's one woman I hope I never see her again.

15:00 I just did not like her at all.

So as a medic, were you allowed to, or were you able to associate with Australian nurses?

Not officially. All right, you have regular unit barbecues, where if they come down you can mingle there, but like most people you stay in your own little group. Like at most functions, you stay with the little group that you know. You're not going to circulate with the person, the foreman over there, or the security over there. It's just normal. A fact of life.

15:30 Like at work, where I work, they're all lawyers you know, most times you're lucky to get a hello, but if they want something, nice as pie. All right, mate, while I'm parked here, yeah yeah. They're all over you. But then there's other people, it just depends, it's just a way of life. Way of life, People think that the fact that they go to university they know everything. I went to the university of hard knocks. I survived.

16:00 **So it seems.**

Fancy piece of paper. Mmmm.

Now, just, we talked about the arrival of the first patient and the fact that he was a man with psychological problems. I believe that the experience of seeing the first stretcher containing a body . . .

A body.

Yeah. Could you tell us about that?

Oh, well, we sort of, it was,

16:30 you know, they get all their priorities wrong, and I didn't realise, I don't think anyone realised. We just saw all this bedding, and it was the remains of a body, and he'd been, apparently, blown up, and that was a bit of a shock. When the hand fell out, then we realised what it was, and somebody said, 'Oh, yeah, you saw your first stiff". And we said, 'Yeah, we saw our first stiff'.

Could we just sort of go through that story and tell it as if, like I half know it from the research, but could you just sort of walk us through that story as it actually happened,

17:00 **otherwise we could be getting about half the version of the story.**

Well, a chopper came in right. It was a dust-off, and they get rid of the casualties first, they wheeled them into the Triage, that was a sorting area, and anyone that was KIA [Killed in Action], well, they usually just go into a little side room, on the side, and we just sort of, see inside, you guys grab that stretcher, it was pretty light,

17:30 and we just thought it was bedding and apparently, it was the remains of a guy. A bit upsetting. But I didn't dwell on it, and after a few days you get over it, and you talk to other people, and they say, 'Oh, don't worry about it. I saw this good one!' And I say, 'No, I don't want to know about it'. I don't want to know about it, you know, that's someone's loved one there, and you know, survived it.

Did you feel at the time that someone should have prepared you for that kind of thing?

18:00 I suppose so. I think we all did. We were all a bit shaken up about it. But when you work in casualty, after, years later, working in casualty, you've got to be prepared for the unexpected. But it did, it upset me a little bit, because really that was the first dead person, remains. I didn't see. Thank God, I didn't see, I just saw a hand and a ring,

18:30 and I thought, 'Oh God, this is somebody's loved one. A ring, a wedding band, oh, that poor woman'. And just things that pass through your mind, that's all. Thought about the family. But you can't dwell on it, people say, 'Never dwell on it, don't get too involved'. And I found that in nursing. Never get too involved with patients, because, sometimes it's very difficult, someone's going through a rough time and you don't know if you're doing the right thing. But sometimes people let out all their problems to you,

19:00 and you know, you're not trained for that. I found that, working in the wards, and in ICU, and the different guys and patients that come through, and the sisters used to be pretty good, because I had a pretty good boss, can't remember her first name, she was having it off with one of the doctors. He was a pig. But she was too nice for him, but that's beside the point.

19:30 But she was really good. Tiny little girl. Very efficient. Very rarely smiled. But she was a good nurse.

In what way was she a good nurse?

Some people are just born to be nurses. She was a bit starchy. A lot of people used to think she was a bit starchy. Bit stuffy. But to work with her. She was great to work with.

What do you think makes a good nurse?

What makes a good nurse? Someone who cares about how the patient feels.

20:00 A lot of people, I think now, they go to university, it's all theory, they know it all, they think they know it all. And they forget a patient's an individual, he's got needs, he's got emotional stresses and all sorts of things. And they're scared. The people I dealt with were all young people. People around my age. I could probably relate to them better than a lot of other people.

20:30 But this particular girl, she had a knack, but she always used to slot one notch above, sort of thing. Didn't want to get too involved. She'd say, 'Try not to get involved'. But sometimes you can't help getting too involved. You just, you know, people talk. I used to go back after work and sit and talk to patients, and she said, "I thought I told you to go home' and I said, 'Well, I've got nothing to do'. But, you give comfort obviously to the patients.

21:00 **Can you think of one particular incident where you thought you were giving valuable support in a situation like that?**

Yeah, we had one young guy. He came from Tasmania, and he had horrific head injuries. And he was just a screaming heap. What happened, they used to send them to twenty-four for evacuation. That's where all the head injuries went, because we didn't have a neuro-surgeon. They sent him back to us, because he got an infection,

21:30 and he'd just keep shouting, 'Aaaah'. Then I got talking to him and it was always 'Bruno'. He used to call me Bruno. And Hallam was his name, I think he died, too, poor kid, but he would have been a vegetable anyhow. He couldn't talk. I could talk to him, if he knew I was there holding his hand, he'd quieten down. And they'd say, 'Can you come down?' I can't think of his first name.

22:00 I know it's Hallam, because I got a really nice letter from his mum. 'Could you come down and quieten him down a bit, because he's still disturbing everyone else'. Because he'd be going like this, and I'd go down, and he'd be: 'Oh, Bruno, Bruno, Bruno, Bruno'. So I'd stay with him until he went to sleep and then I'd leave him, but every time, 'Bruno, Bruno, Bruno, Bruno'. That was, but when he was evacuated to home,

22:30 he had a bad turn and he was in Butterworth for a month or so. Then they got him back to Tasmania, and he wasn't really one hundred percent, and he was in some sort of hospital in Tassie, and I felt I had to cut the cord because I was getting too involved, so I just, I got a very nice letter of 'Thank you', you occasionally got. But that was that. I never followed through.

23:00 **When you say you had to cut the cord, what do you mean by that?**

Because it started affecting me because I was worried about him all the time. I was worried about him. What was going to happen to him? I sort of got too involved, because I used to feed him and do everything for him, and then we had him for about three weeks before they evacuated him home, and I was worried about him, and I used to go, 'I don't know what's going to happen to him, is he going to be all right?'.

23:30 And then I had a good talk to Joan McLeod, she was a sister, one of my bosses, and I was talking to her about it and she said, 'You've got to let go'. So you've just got to let go, so unfortunately she died a couple of years ago. She was involved in a car accident, somewhere in Africa. She was working in a charity organisation. Nice girl. She had horrific scars on her face.

24:00 She was in a car accident at a very young age. And she was, oh, she was a perfect nurse. But to look at she was quite awful, because of these horrible scars, and they used to call her 'Scarface', and that used to really get up my nose. But she had this horrific car accident and it left her a paraplegic, and she died a couple of years ago. I saw it in a newsletter that we get.

So she advised . . .

24:30 Yes, I could talk to her, and she could understand what I was going through. A brilliant sister, she really was. People used to say 'Scarface' and all these things, and that used to get really under my nose. She had the compassion and she cared, and if somebody wanted a bedpan, she wouldn't worry, would call someone else, like some of the other sisters, oh, get the medic, she'd go and do it. You get one of your university sisters to get a bedpan now.

25:00 They'll look around to get the nurse's assistant, sort of thing. All this to go and get a bedpan, and in the meantime the poor patient messes the bed. That's the sort of system that happens now, unfortunately, and they blame it on the shortage of nurses, but they're tied down with paperwork unfortunately.

What was the category of ward that you first worked in?

Oh, I was in Isolation and Medical Ward, and the officers were next door.

25:30 And we dealt with other areas, STD. Medical type conditions. Hepatitis. Things like that. And snake bits. We had a couple of snake bits. Various rashes that people got. Some of them got hideous rashes that people just couldn't get rid of.

How did they get those rashes?

Oh, well, it's not sexually oriented, some of them just heat rash type of thing, and they just get infected and,

26:00 the Vietnamese people aren't clean people. They're not very clean.

Not very clean?

No, I'd never eat in a Vietnamese restaurant while I was there. At the PX, the American place, at least you knew the food was clean, at least you knew you weren't going to get sick.

What sort of stories did you hear?

Well, sort of, a lot of people would just eat off the streets. The guys with their girlfriends, they'd go out with their local girlfriends,

26:30 and their hygiene standards are nowhere near ours, and of course, our system's completely different. Where their systems would be used to that sort of food, uncooked food and things like that, you get diseases fairly quickly, if you're not careful what you're eating. Even now, even if you go to Bali. I know people who stay at five-star hotels and get Bali Belly [dysentery]. You don't expect that to happen in Bali.

When you say eating off the street, what do you mean?

27:00 You know, street vendors. Anybody who eats off street vendors is crazy, oh, Singapore's all right. Singapore's so clean. But in the Philippines, no way would I eat off the street. Every time we go away, never eat off the street. That's one policy. With the exception of Singapore.

You say that the Vietnamese people were not clean. In what sort of aspects do you mean?

Well, you'd see them scratching themselves, and then they're preparing food, you know. It used to happen in the mess sometimes, the catering people would get annoyed with them.

27:30 You know, you can't be there scratching yourself and then handle food.

Scratching what part of themselves?

Various parts of your body. You know, your crutch, under the arm pit, and BOs [Body Odour] there was well. But then, you don't have to go to Vietnam. You can see that here as well. You know, people go into these takeaway shops. She might have rubber gloves on, she's preparing the food, then she goes to a cash register and goes back to serving food.

28:00 **That happens virtually every day.**

Every single day of the week. But it becomes very expensive, changing gloves. In theory, they should just have someone who looks after the cash. And in the better places they do, they just look after the cash. But when preparing food, you've got to be very careful.

So just getting back to the Isolation Ward, what was the most common type of complaint that came in there?

We had pneumonia, that was, we had some alkos [alcoholics] too.

28:30 People were treated for alcohol, food poisoning, haemorrhoids, malaria of course, hepatitis. People with psychological problems.

And what were those psychological problems the result of?

Oh, some of them were people; oh we had a guy who shot himself in the foot, because he didn't want to go out into the bush. But you know, shoots a toe off or something so he doesn't have to go out on patrol.

29:00 You know, people would do. You're going out on patrol, you don't blame people. You don't know what's going to happen. You've got the Viet Cong outside. You're an easy target. Some people don't want to die. Do you want to die? No, I don't want to die, not at the hands of a Viet Cong. And people walk on pungi sticks and get all sorts of infections, that go into . . .

Could you explain that?

29:30 They build pits and they fill them up with bamboo spikes and they put faeces and everything else into it. Goes through your boot, before they had the leather, because the GP [General Purpose] boots used to have a leather, not a leather, metal plate in the bottom of it, depending on what angle you go in, it still can go through your boot and you get all sorts of infections. Quite nasty infections. And if it doesn't kill you, the infection, the idea is, puts you out of action.

30:00 For every one person that's out, that's one less person to shoot at. And that's the way they seemed to work. Pungi sticks. And people would have these sort of traps where they swing at you. Walking though the jungle, although this didn't happen to me personally, I've known people were telling us, they go through the jungle and they'd just swing out at you, you know, bamboo spikes, and you're pinned to the wall, not dead, not so much to our people, but to the Americans, used to get that quite a bit.

30:30 And they used to go down the tunnels where they set up these sharp objects, which caused damage, mightn't kill you outright, but it would put you out of action. We never saw that. We saw a few pungi sticks, where people trod on pungi sticks. Nothing like that.

And what sort of condition would those people be in?

31:00 Oh, physically they're great, but they worried, because in the tropics, because tropical infections were quick, it was very rapid in the tropics. Anyway. They could end up with a nasty sort of infection on the foot or leg or wherever they were wounded. Some nasty ulcers, too. Some people had skin irritations that could turn out to be quite nasty. Doesn't matter what they do, it takes a while to clear it up.

Getting back to the psychological problems. Was there any common factor among those psychological problems?

31:30 I suppose there was, the ones that I dealt with, sometimes are working under extreme difficult conditions. Lot of stress, lot of responsibility. The old system just gives way. There was some genuine ones, and I think some of them just wanted a cheap flight back home. Not everybody's brave. If there's a way out.

32:00 I've known people who have conned their way out, and he was, on the rotation, they used to send the

medics out, and he was their medic and he was determined not to go so he went and complained that he had haemorrhoids. And he did have haemorrhoids, they weren't anything to worry about, but he didn't go out on the bushes exercise. And they sent him into hospital to have them surgically treated.

32:30 But, things like that. I don't think I would have wanted to go out.

So, as far as you were concerned, what were the symptoms of these psychological problems.

Well, maybe the stress of the place. Some people had been there eight or nine months. Where we were, we were pretty secure. I suppose if I was up at the front, like at Nui Dat, where they were quite frequently fired upon, because it was a rubber plantation, and it was pretty stressful there, for the medics in particular.

33:00 They had a rotational service where they were often allocated to go out with some particular grunt group or artillery group or whatever, and it, you know, you're only twenty, you're only a kid, and you've got to put your life on the line.

In the ward, what would the outward and physical signs of this mental psychosis be?

Well, some of them were quite normal.

33:30 Some of them, were just like talking to you, but then you take them off their medication, if they're on medication, and they start talking, asking stupid and dumb questions, things like that. Like we had some epileptics that I discovered and the fact that they had epilepsy that was the thing that shattered them more than anything else. Once was a Flying Doctor pilot and he got a nasty bash on the head.

34:00 And then he developed epilepsy. It was really tragic, because he was a really nice kid. He'd never fly again, and he just lived for flying. So, I saw him when I came back to Brisbane, and he, I'm not too sure whatever happened to him but he wasn't the same, but he used to throw these epileptic fits all the time. You can't be a pilot if you're having epileptic fits.

34:30 And it was quite sad, because he was such a nice person. And you think how lucky you are, you know, that you come out of it unscathed. In a fashion, I suppose. You have your hiccoughs.

I imagine. Now, just getting back to the Vietnamese people. Did you have much chance to interact with the Vietnamese?

No.

Why was that?

35:00 No, I used to sort of say hello to them. They were quite pleasant. Oh, a couple of times I went with the medicap, they used to call it, the theatre staff would go out to one of the orphanages, and you'd just treat patients. That was really nice, you know. Nice is not the word. You thought you were doing something. Treating sores and the doctors would check them out, and they often found children with holes in the heart and things like that.

35:30 There was really nothing they could do for them, unless they sent them back to wherever, America, but they didn't have the resources to do them. We went to an orphanage, they were run by nuns, and they were lovely, because one of my mates, Peter, he had a friend who was a nun in Singapore. She was in one of these destitute houses where they take their old to die. Nobody wants them. They just wait around.

36:00 And he had contact, she had contact with an orphanage in Vung Tau, Vinh Lai, I can't remember, and we used to take little things with us, you know, if we got extra T-shirts out for the kids and all that. But we used to enjoy, it used to be an outing for them, outing from the base as well, out in the field. But you always had in the back of your mind that you've got to be wary, because you could never trust them. We were always back before dark and things like that.

36:30 **You always had to be back before dark?**

Before dark. Because the Viet Cong, you wouldn't know the difference between, during the day they might be nice as pie, but during the night they were up to no good. So that was sort of always at the back of your mind.

I heard there were Viet Cong mingling quite openly with other people, or with, you know, non-Viet Cong people in places like Vung Tau.

Well, you know, Ooooh!.

37:00 **Have you got a cramp have you? Are you all right? Do you want to get up and stretch?**

Well, they say that they were. But just the way they look, but sometimes I think I should have learnt a bit of Vietnamese, but I always had the policy, don't become too native.

What was your view of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army as an enemy?

37:30 Smart. Guerrilla warfare. It's very smart. No winners.

Why no winners?

Because they show no mercy to who they attack. Look at what's happening in the Middle East. Who suffers? The people. There the ones I feel sorry for them. You see, it is real, there's families blown up There's people in Palestine, the same position.

38:00 And you know, it's such a waste.

But bringing it back to the Vietnamese people. Did you fear the Viet Cong? Did you fear the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]?

I don't think I had any, didn't think about fear really. Having too much of a good time. It was still a great big adventure, as far as I . . . But I was always busy. I didn't have much time to worry about.

38:30 My Mum said if something's going to happen it's going to happen any way. You've got no control over it anyhow.

What was your day-to-day activity at the time?

We used to start, we used to do twelve-hour shifts. Six to six. Just your normal routine work. In the surgical/medical wards it used to be quite busy. In the intensive care, where I spent most of my time, and we only worked when we had people in intensive care, and you worked your butt off. You didn't mind it because you were helping somebody.

39:00 You know, you've got observations on people every fifteen minutes, and what you say, and what you don't say, could jeopardise somebody's life, so in your humble little hands, somebody's life. And sometimes while the sister, she had her break or something, and you were in charge, and you had that person's life in your hands. But the nursing staff were very supportive. They were very good. I was really lucky I worked for some very top ladies, top women.

Tape 6

00:30 **Ron, we were talking about your daily routine in the ward, and I think we got up to sort of about mid to late morning or an average day.**

Oh, yes. You had your meal breaks and that, when you wasn't busy. We weren't always busy. Don't get me wrong. We had some quiet times, but every time there was a major offensive on, the hospital would always be put on alert,

01:00 so we'd be prepared, and it always used to happen. We'd be having a unit barbecue, and you'd get a report that would say, 'Field Hospital staff report', or 'Theatre staff report, back to the hospital, dust-off coming in'. But everybody, it didn't matter what they were doing, they'd just drop what they're doing and head straight back to the what's-a-name. And then you've got all the support people, like the X-ray and pathology people, and the padres, Padres fighting over what religion he is.

01:30 There was one guy, Father Timker, He was RC [Roman Catholic] padre, he was very much a man's man. I don't agree with priests that smoke and drink, you know, but he was very, very popular. And I remember once, in casualty, in triage, they brought some guy in, and there was one of the Protestant padres there. And everyone,

02:00 got a casualty, there's a certain procedure, what people do, whether he has to be incubated or whatever, and people check him for wounds, or whatever, and this padre is, 'What religion is he? What religion is he?' 'He's one of yours. He's one of yours, mate'. And I thought, you casual buggers. It just irritated me. You know, here's this guy, he's unconscious, and there's this stupid priest worrying about what religion he was.

02:30 That, it wasn't done without concern. Just a reaction I suppose. And I was really annoyed. I felt like saying something.

It must have been very annoying.

It was, because the guy, was in a critical condition, and all the padre was worried about was getting the purple band around his neck to give him the last rites. And the guy wasn't even a Catholic. But the padres did a lot of good, don't get me wrong. But that used to irritate me.

What good do you think the padres did do?

03:00 I think, some people could talk to padres. Depends who it is. It's like a lot of things in life. There are people that are born to talk to. You know, you don't mind baring the soul, but there's others, there's just something about them. But Father Timker was very, very popular and a very nice man, actually. You wouldn't think he was a priest. If he didn't have his collar on, you wouldn't think he was a priest. But he was a great guy.

03:30 The thing that sort of dampened my enthusiasm for him was the incident a couple of times, just a sort of

throw away, ‘Oh, he’s one of yours’. I thought, ‘Why don’t you get out?’

Now just talking about the dust-off, you were starting to talk about the routine that would happen in the hospital.

Yes, if someone’s on exercise you see if there’s a major offensive with the Viet Cong, the hospital’s notified. To expect casualty, they estimate how many people are going to be injured, or the size.

04:00 Sometimes our guys would have been outnumbered. It’s just a miracle how they got through it. But a couple of KIAs (killed in action), or wounded. Now, not all of them came to us. If they were head injuries or eye injuries they usually went straight to the 24 Evacuation.

They normally went to where?

24 Evacuation. It was American. They had everything there. All the specialists. But with the Americans, they were inclined to patch up and shoot through. Where with our guys, if a leg could be saved, our surgeons would do everything in their power to save that leg. And I know a couple of guys, surgeons we had, and this American guy, he was in theatre at the time, said, ‘We won’t bother, we’ll just chop it off’, and our guys said, ‘We don’t chop things off here. If we can save it, we’ll save it’. And this guy’s still got his leg today.

05:00 But I suppose in a situation with a lot of casualties coming in, you can’t be too choosy. Like we had one guy, he was in APC [Armoured Personnel Carrier] and ran over a mine, and he had his backside all terribly mutilated. And all he was interested in was, ‘Can I have kids, can I have kids?’ that’s all he said, because he was pretty rattled. Fortunately, there was no major damage, although there was a lot of superficial lacerations and everything else. I believe he did eventually have kids, but that’s all he was worried about, ‘Can I have kids, can I have kids?’

05:30 and at the time, everyone would say, ‘Oh, she’s right mate’, but to him that was the most important thing. To be able to have children. When he recovered, he turned out to be a really bonzer guy. But then we had another guy, he had to come in for a routine laparotomy. That’s an investigation to see what was wrong with him. And he came in, and they had the operation

06:00 and he was really down in the dumps. And this is one that really shook me up a bit and another mate of mine, Nielsen, can’t think of his first name, came from Dapto, was it Dapto? Wingdang down near Newcastle, no, that’s Wollongong way, Wingdang. And we were talking and he had some mail and he said, ‘Oh, can you read some of my letters for me?’

06:30 so I go, ‘OK. No problem’. And one was a Dear John [letter informing recipient that a relationship is over]. And what do you do? And I said, ‘I don’t think I’ll read this one to you’. And he said, ‘Oh, no, read it’. And it was really upsetting, I was upset, he was upset, the sister was upset. We were all so upset. This girl just dumped him, and he died that night. Now we often used to talk about it, whether it was the shock of being dumped,

07:00 or whether he just gave up hope. But he was a nice kid, a twenty year old kid, came in for an operation, and during the night he had a bad turn, whether it was the result of the operation. Whether it was the fact we read the letter or not. It was quite. Every so often we went to work in the morning and they said, ‘Oh, John died’. ‘What do you mean he died? He only had a laparotomy’.

07:30 ‘He died during the night’. That blew the sister, myself and the other guy, that just blew us away. And the padre, we spoke to the padre about it, the padre went and saw him the same evening, and he said, ‘You’ve got nothing to worry about’. It’s sort of, we shouldn’t have read him the letter, but he wanted us to read it. We didn’t read the rest of the letters.

That sounds as if that made quite an impact on you though.

Oh, it did. The three of us were talking about it,

08:00 and we had a talk to the padre about it, and he said, ‘No, no’. And the doctor said he’d just had a reaction to the anaesthetic. And what about the letters that we read, this is about a day and half after the operation, and he said, ‘Doubt it very much.’. But to us it was pretty upsetting. And Nielsen, the other guy,

08:30 because he was churchy, he was devastated. But in the end there’s nothing much to do about it. If it’s happened it’s happened. We never blamed ourselves for it, but maybe we shouldn’t have read the letters.

How long would a situation like that remain in your minds?

Oh, it’s always there, it’s just been brought out again. And it’s just one of those things. You never like losing your patient.

09:00 Like the guy with the burns. He knew he was dying and he said, ‘How long have I got to go?’ And you tell a kid, your age, you didn’t recognise him as a person, and he had a tracheotomy, at least he could talk. I said, ‘Are you in any pain?’ And he says, ‘No, but I’m ratshit, aren’t I?’, but they did everything for him but they knew he wasn’t going to last.

09:30 **How had he sustained the burns?**

His tent caught on fire. They used to live in tents up on Nui Dat. And he got caught inside. Most times people would just sleep in their undies, and he got hundred percent burns, except for the soles of his feet. We had nowhere to put drips, and so much fluid came out of his body, we had him for two days. We worked on him for two days, and Spud Murphy, she was the other Kiwi sister, big fat girl she was, but gee, she was brilliant.

10:00 Changed my whole outlook towards her. She was great, out of the Kiwi sisters. Didn't like Alexandra, still didn't like her. But she was really good. And she was so good to work with.

In what way was she good?

Oh, she was just there, for this guy. We were all there for the guy. Nobody wanted to leave him, we'd take a break to get a coffee or something. Nobody ever left him. In ICU

10:30 there was always somebody there, either holding his hands, or just talking to him. And sometimes I saw people, some guys, you get these big, muscular, built like brick toilets. And you know they'd break down, worry about it, ah, and you've got to try and contain your composure. And you're not trained to do that.

11:00 **You were trying to maintain your own composure?**

Yeah, you know, and he's up, and another one is when people lose limbs, they have phantom legs. And they'll wake up, screaming they're dying. 'My legs, my legs are gone!' And that advert. you see, the nurse on the wall. And the nurse says, 'Where's my legs?' You see them trying to get out of bed. I said, 'What are you doing?' He said,

11:30 'I thought I had my legs'. And some of them are so totally devastated when they lose a limb or an eye.

What effect would this have on you?

Good question. I just think, 'Thank God, it's you and not me'. That's all. 'Thank God, it's you and not me.' And then you think, 'How are they going to survive?' When they lose them from the hip, that's a real bad one. That's shocking. From below the knee, that's not too bad, I suppose, it's bad enough. But with the prosthesis and what they do now, they can do some brilliant things,

12:00 but that's beside the point, but if they lose it from the hip, it causes all sorts of problems.

So you're saying you weren't trained to handle these sorts of things?

No, not really.

How could they have trained you to handle them?

Maybe we could have been introduced to them privately, like working in triages and casualty and emergency departments in Australia before we left. Maybe they could have helped us there. But we never saw a psychologist. Most of them were half sloshed anyhow. They live in a world of their own.

You mean there were psychologists up there?

Oh, no. There were none there, but when I came back

12:30 I went to see a psychologist, and all she was worried about was my twinge in my left eye. She asked some real dumb questions. So I thought, 'I'm wasting my time here'. I really did. And then recently, I get a small pension from the War Veterans [Department of Veterans' Affairs], it's only a pittance,

13:00 and I went in to have it reviewed, and I get a questionnaire: 'Fill in a questionnaire send it back in'. And I get: 'Your what's-a-name has not been approved. Resubmit in two years time'. And I didn't even see anybody. And how can some pen pusher in Canberra, reads it and 'Oh, he hasn't ticked the appropriate ticks', sort of thing. But that's not what I want, if that's the way they think,

13:30 get knotted. I don't need your money, I got my own.

So looking back at these events, these sights and sounds had on you, how were you debriefing at that time?

We were never debriefed.

Were you talking to each other?

Oh, to each other. From talking between mates and I used to quite often talk to the two sisters I worked with, 'What do you reckon, what do you do, and how do you feel?'. They were, some of the sisters were very, very supportive, they were great. Because they were going through the same trauma as we were. But the horrific injuries that they saw, they would never see them in civvies' life anyhow. But the girls were fantastic. They were always someone to talk to if you really wanted to. And the old local padre, but sometimes the padre would start to push a bit of religion down your neck. Sometimes.

When you say the girls, the sisters?

14:30 The sisters. We only had female sisters up there. They were really good. Actually if you ever go and look at the War Museum in Canberra, there's a girl named Barbara Black, on one of the monuments, a pal. She was a party girl. Don't get me wrong, she was a very good nurse, she was a lovely girl, but a party girl. She was always in strife, going to parties and getting caught out. She died of leukaemia eventually, I believe.

15:00 And she used to say, 'I'm only here to supervise'. That's what she'd say: 'I'm only here to supervise', and she'd never get off her bum to give you a hand. Oh, if there was a bit of a rush, she would. But 'I'm only here to supervise'. Her only interest was the next party. She was a nice lady, don't get me wrong, but she was only a young woman, you know. Mid-twenties, thirty. She wouldn't be thirty, I don't think. But that used to be a source of annoyance.

15:30 I used to say, 'We're here to help these guys'. And one day she said, 'I'm quite sure our patients come first'. 'Do they?' 'Don't be impertinent to me'. But that's how it goes. That's life.

Yes, Many personalities in life.

Yes, I suppose it affected different people differently. Some people were just up there for a good time. I sometimes take my job too seriously. That's a lot of my problem.

16:00 **Well, it sounds like you invest a lot of yourself in it.**

Too much, I feel sometimes. But then I've got the satisfaction of doing it. I felt comfortable, what I did for people, and I know within myself, I gave a hundred and ten percent effort to what I did. Particularly looking after patients. Naughty to some of my superiors,

16:30 that's questionable because some of them are idiots. I mean, we never really got much credit.

Why were your superiors idiots? In what way?

Oh, you know, like these petty little things, more worried about having inspection. No dust here, no dust there. Because it was, Vung Tau, the hospital was always a bit like a zoo, because we always had these visitors coming in. Gough Whitlam, [Prime Minister]when I was up there, and they all booed him.

17:00 It was brilliant: 'Booooo!' I was rapt. Because I couldn't stand the man. And then John Gorton [Prime Minister], and then someone accidentally fired a rifle. That caused all sorts of problems.

While John Gorton was walking through?

It was in the evening there. That caused a bit of a hassle. The archbishop came up, he just walked around. But Gough walked in and didn't even speak to any of the guys. And they had the senior nursing sister, come up.

17:30 Army people there was no problem. They knew the position. It was the civilian bureaucrats that used to come up. They were the irritating ones. They were very irritating.

Now, you started off in the Isolation Ward, was it?

Yeah, I was there about two months, and then I spent the rest of my time in ICU. I went to ICU, to relieve in ICU and then I ended up staying there.

Can you define what the ICU was?

Intensive Care. We had ten beds, four high dependency, that's usually one on one, per patient. Usually one sister and four medics,

18:00 depending how many patients. And if they were all high dependency, you might have two sisters and two medics. And you look after them. It's constantly observation and relieve people to go to take their breaks, and on the other side you've got the other people, less serious. But still serious, that you've got to look after them.

18:30 **So what were the main issues being dealt with in the Intensive Care Unit?**

We had burns, we had shrapnel. Shrapnel can do terrible things to one's body. Amputations. Head injuries were the frightening ones, because the patients were usually unconscious. And so their vital signs are so important. You've got to get them right, and sometimes you can't get a pulse. And they're barely breathing.

19:00 And if they're on a respirator, you've got to watch that. The change in the temperature of the skin, you know, if they're haemorrhaging, or if they're not, if they're internally bleeding. So you really had to be on the ball to know what was what, and if you do quarter hourly obs [observations], you can pick it up within fifteen minutes, because fifteen minutes is a long time when someone is critical. They can change so quickly, because we had one guy, he was perfectly OK,

19:30 and we had finished one set of observations, and we turned around, oh, it couldn't have been more than a minute, minute and a half, and the bed was covered in blood. One of the vessels in his leg, the ligature had come off, and it was bleeding, and we had to rip everything off and physically hold the vessel until they got into theatre. Otherwise he would have bled to death. And then they put on the femoral, you

know, the various parts, the pressure points to stop the bleeding.

20:00 But that was frightening, we were all, when it was all over, she said, 'You're as white as a ghost'. I said, 'I can feel it'. Because it was so quick. I'd just left him, not more than a minute ago. And there was blood everywhere, just bucketed out of him.

So the situation was that this was a wound which had been stitched up?

And then something went wrong and it slipped and out it came. And the whole bed was just full of blood. Fortunately, we had pressure on it, and we were all, well I was petrified,

20:30 you know. I thought, I don't want this guy to die, and within seconds, within two minutes, three minutes at the most, the surgeon was there, he was in theatre, gave him a couple of units, about five units of blood. But they were always blood-sucking us, because I'm O Negative, and it's a universal donor, so they were draining everything, draining blood.

So you were a regular blood donor?

I was a regular. You know, getting drained all the time,

21:00 I thought at times, 'Gee, I wish I was getting paid for this'. So I don't give blood any more, but they used to get it from the staff because 'O' was a universal donor. We only could receive our own blood, but we could give it to other people, so I've got a lot of blood around, but it was OK, you felt good about it. I used to say, 'We're related now mate'.

Now, you were talking before,

21:30 **we were substantially through the story of how everyone was fighting to save the life and keep company of that very badly burned . . .**

Mmmm.

So people stayed with him every moment . . .

He was never left alone.

Asleep or awake?

Someone was with him all the time. Most of the time he was awake. He'd doze off.

So, for how long did he linger on?

We had him for twenty four hours. We were evacuating him to Japan. He got to Japan, he lived one day, and he was gone.

22:00 About fifty six hours and he was dead. But everyone knew that. But we all were pretty upset about it. People do survive one hundred percent burns. And it was so tragic, he was such a . . . Oh, burns are terrible. Don't want to go through that again. That was one that really shook me up. And the guy that called me 'Mr Hallam', called me 'Bruno'. I was very attached to him.

22:30 And there were a couple of other guys that I got very attached to. Blokes who got shot in the arm, and whether they'd have the full use of their arm again, McLean was one, got very attached to him . He was just shot in the arm, made a hell of a mess of his arm.

Did you ever hear what happened to any of these people afterwards?

I tried not to. On the grapevine you hear things. And you often got a letter to say

23:00 they were progressing well, or something like that. The thing is, once they left, that's all we could do, but you might hear down the track but after a while you lose track of them. You just assume they got on with their lives. But waste, such a waste of lives.

What was your view, as you worked on, especially in the ICU, what was your view of the justification of the Vietnam War?

I never had time to think about it,

23:30 I was more concentrating on the care of the patient. We used to talk about it ourselves. A lot of us, we used to go down the boozer, have a coke or beer or something, and often talk about it. We used to try not to talk about it too much, but sometimes you had to talk, and the guys I was, the hut we shared, we all got on so well together, you know. Peter worked in theatre and I worked in ICU,

24:00 so we knew what was coming in and what wasn't, and the doctors were good, you could ask them anything, and June Renshaw she was theatre sister, and she was brilliant. Really down to earth. Michael Norman he was great.

And who were the mates you felt closest to at that time?

Oh, probably Bob, came from Tassie, can't even think of his name again. Then there was Nielsen. Mal Shreeves, he came from Western Australia,

24:30 he was very churchy. Him and Nielson were very churchy, they were great guys. Then there was Peter, he come from Glenrowan. He was a great guy, really magic bloke. And then there was Andy, he's still floating around, see him occasionally. Nicko, oh, there's a stack of others. So many of them. They were the immediate ones. We were living under the same roof, most of the time, together.

25:00 There's a couple of other people that I still keep in contact with. Yasmine's dad, I didn't know him in Vietnam. Only knew him since I come home. But there's a couple in Brisbane that I know. We sort of keep on, Christmas time call or get a phone call. A couple who'll call in, stay the night, move on. But . . .

25:30 **Sounds like there was a good sense of mateship there.**

Yes, there was. Nashos are inclined to stick together.

So you were all Nashos were you?

Well, most of them were. Andy was a reg. He was ambulance service. He's a card. Top guy, always in strife. He had four sisters, and he was the only son, too. We were both the same age, our birthdays were the same day, so we had something in common.

So why did the nashos tend to stick together?

26:00 I think we were all, that's the only lottery we ever won. I mean, when you look at it that way, it's the only time my lottery number ever came up, was as a nasho. Because you're basically the same age, a lot of guys were at uni., Peter did vet science, he's a vet in Queensland now. And Dave Laird, he's a policeman in Queensland.

26:30 And don't know what Mal did. He was doing physiotherapy. And I don't know what Bob did, Bob Randall that was his name, from Tassie, he was going back to the Public Service, Fergie, he went back to Western Australia as well. But, I really never had much to do with them since, the old school. Most of these people that I know now, the people that I keep in contact with, are people that have been to Vietnam, but at different times. I was in '68, '69. That's sort of the height of the problems that they had in Vietnam.

27:00 **Now, just looking at the kinds of patients that were coming into the wards, the various wards you were associated with, did you have any Vietnamese patients?**

If any of the Vietnamese staff got hurt at work, they'd be treated and taken to the local hospital. They did have a Viet Cong brought in once.

27:30 The CO was not impressed. They just gave him the barest initial treatment and palmed him off to the Koreans. He died.

Is there a likelihood he would have survived if he had remained with you lot?

Hard to say, hard to say. Koreans had a policy, no survivors.

28:00 If you're the enemy, that was well known. Well, it was sort of, that was the sort of attitude as well.

But to what extent did that apply to medical practice as well?

Well, I don't know. That's what we heard. The guy came in. He wasn't critically injured, he was pretty well in a bad way, our surgeons patched him up and they evacuated him to the Korean hospital and I believe he died the next day. Whether it was a result of the injury, I don't know.

28:30 They used to say, if they go to the Korean's hospital, 'Oh, he'll be dead'. There was no love between the Koreans and the Vietnamese either. But that's not the point, the guy was still human. My motto is, you're still a human being. Whether he died of his injuries, I don't know.

When you say the CO was not impressed, what was the CO's attitude to the Vietnamese?

I don't think he liked them. He's dead now, Ray Hurley. He was a funny man. I threw a pot of tea over him, accidentally,

29:00 I came out of the ICU, and I just got the, it was a cold pot of tea, and I just threw it, and who should be coming around the corner? But we used to call him Snoopy because he walked with a limp, and I drowned him in tea leaves. I don't think he was impressed. I got a few extra duties for that. Funny, him and the adjutant. I don't know. He was a funny man, Ray Hurley. He seemed to me to be more interested in having the place

29:30 spick and span for all the hordes of visitors that used to come through. One nursing sister, she's a Kiwi, I can't think of her name, but she stood up to him. She said her patients came first. You know, wasn't worried about how much dust was on the floor. And the floors, actually it was very clean, considering. But he used to come around and touch the lights. Nothing better to do.

30:00 The staff were working their butt off, you know, and he came, 'Oh, this is dusty'. And he'd complain to the RSM the chain of command, and it comes back to the Sister.

So would Ray Hurley have an objection to the Vietnamese generally, or simply to the Viet Cong?

It's hard to say, he was strange. I didn't like him. He was quite complimentary for the work we did in theatre and the ICU,

30:30 but a lot of people were anti-Vietnam, anti-Vietnamese: 'One Vietnamese is just as bad as the Viet Cong'. Because you didn't know who the enemy was, that's the biggest problem.

So, other than this one Viet Cong, did you ever see any other Vietnamese?

Oh, yeah, American hospital, 36 Evacuation, and they had a ward where they had Viet Cong. So they treated them as well.

31:00 But they had a completely different set-up as well, plus they had massive casualties. I remember seeing the morgue at 24, that's the most depressing place I've ever seen.

Which was?

24 Evacuation. The American hospital, There was this huge American Base Hospital, and they've got a special corps that just deals with the dead. They had these big tables,

31:30 and like barber's chairs, and they bring the bodies, and they just patch them up, wash them, get them ready to go home. But it was so depressing, and there were so many, and these big guys, cigarettes, the big Yanks carrying on. Life was so cheap.

How many bodies were being dealt with at the time?

Oh, well, the day we were there, there must have been about fifty bodies ready to be processed. They had about five of these table type things, where they try to make them look presentable,

32:00 and they'll have spare bits, oh this might go here, go there. It was quite . . .

Spare bits?

Yes. At sometimes, there might be a couple of guys in a vehicle, some that have been blown up, and they had to sort the bodies out, sort of thing, you know. It's pretty grim. I wouldn't like to be a mortician, the guys, you've got to be sick to be one. And you know, the Yanks there carrying on, oh, this one. And whether they were doing it for our benefit,

32:30 I think you'd go berserk having to work there, because some bodies were perfect. There was nothing wrong, just bullet wound, or exit wound or something. But some were totally mangled, they were the depressing ones. I don't know how they ever identified them. But I'd been ten minutes in there, and that was enough for me. The other guys stayed, but I said, 'I'm getting out of here'.

It seemed a completely surreal, bizarre environment?

Oh, it was horrible. It would make you shudder. At least, we treated our people with respect.

33:00 **Now, did it ever get to the point where you were personally, through what you had seen or experienced during the war, that you were moved to tears?**

Oh, many a time, but you can't do it in the presence of a patient, you sort of make a quick exit, or you know,

33:30 blow your nose or something, but I mean, it's a different thing with people who have been very ill and they haven't got much chance, actually, and they ask you, say, 'Tell me the truth'. What do you tell them? I used to say, 'Well, it doesn't look good. You're young, you've got your age on you, you're fit, and I'd say you've got a pretty good chance of pulling through'.

34:00 Most of them pulled through. Because most of the guys, they knew, if they got hit, and they got through to us, their chances of survival were pretty high. Which was true, we had a pretty good record, but sometimes there's some injuries, no matter what you do, there's nothing you can do anyhow.

So you would be in a position of having to tell them?

Well, no I wouldn't tell them directly. They'd ask the doctor, but the doctor would go and you're sitting there on night duty and sometimes people want to talk,

34:30 and you just sit with them until they go to sleep. Well, I always used to try and get them off the subject of how they were, and talk about their animals and pets and different things back home, and they sometimes, usually called us 'Doc', and they'd ask 'What do you think of my chances?' I said, 'What did the doctor tell you?' and they'd repeat it back, and he'd say, 'Well, you've been around. Have you seen the results?' And I'd say,

35:00 'Oh, well, some people I've seen have done very well, considering the injuries they've had, and they've pulled through'. But then you can't tell them too much. If it used to get too complicated, I used to get the sister to come. And she could tell them what I said. But if some of them were really wanting to know the sister would get the doctor to come and have a talk to them. That wouldn't satisfy them. They'd

come back,

35:30 ‘Hey, Doc. Is this legit., what he was saying.’ ‘Well, he’s the doctor, he should know. And this particular guy is a pretty switched on bloke, he knows what he’s talking about. If he says that, you can have every confidence’. And some of them would come back, ‘Oh, I feel better about that.’. But the guy that nearly lost the family jewels, he was the one that was so concerned about everything,

36:00 he took a bit of convincing. A lot of convincing. But they did a beautiful job on him, the reconstruction of his backside. It was brilliant. He had to have a colostomy put on, which he hated, until he healed up. That’s when they used the bag. Once that came off, he was good as gold. But, and a lot of these wounds, when they do debridements, they do a primary closure, and then they leave it so if there’s any infection, they can rectify it. Once that’s cleared up, then they’ll do the closure,

36:30 because if they do it straight away, getting infections was pretty high, because you get particles of dirt and material in the wound, and if you just stitch it up straight away, you can guarantee within twelve hours you’ve got an infection, and you’ve got to open it up again and start again, so they do a debridement. It’s good. And you look at it, and that’s great. You good if you have someone who’s not expected to walk,

37:00 and walks out of the hospital. Oh, it’s a fabulous feeling to know that you’ve helped someone to get on his feet and to walk out. It’s great.

A huge sense of achievement, I imagine.

Oh, well, a lot of people say that you don’t get any satisfaction, but if you see someone who’s critically ill, and you know you played a small part in his recovery, well, OK the surgeons do the hard yakka, but then the nursing

37:30 staff do the real yakka. All the basic things, feeding, changing, toiletries, all that. The times I’ve changed people and the normal thing, ‘Oh, get somebody else to do that’, but you don’t worry about it. Bathe people, or people are injured and they bring them in, and they have their first hair wash, after not having a shower for a week or something,

38:00 there’s that feeling of relief they get out of it, and they’re so happy about it. You know, they’re nice and clean again. But a lot of guys used to come in and they were totally filthy, so you’d give them a quick sponge, but you had to wait until they were in a state where the critical phase was over, but you still had to do the regular turns and twists, and that can be agonising for the pain, for the guy. If he’s in traction, and he’s got both legs broken, broken arm,

38:30 oh, they’re so difficult to nurse. And, you know, you almost, your heart bleeds for them, the agony that they’re going through.

Because I imagine that you’re dealing with the psychological side as well as the physical side.

Yeah, people handle it differently you know. But some guys are so tough. I’ve seen guys go through there, brilliant patients, critically ill patients, yet I’ve seen people with limps go through, and whinge and moan and groan and carry on like pork chops.

39:00 God, they make me sick. Like working in the civilian system, like you get people who have plastic surgery, you know. I have no sympathy for them. Because it’s self-inflicted to make themselves look beautiful. But now somebody, who’s been critically injured in an accident, and they have to have plastic surgery to make them look like a person again, they have my sympathy. Not these people who just do it for vanity, sort of thing. But, it’s,

39:30 I used to go a lot of satisfaction, so much, and I used to feel good about it. And I haven’t felt like that for a long time.

Tape 7

00:30 **So, we’ve touched on this briefly but I wonder how you would personally react to witnessing a traumatised patient?**

How would I react? First of all I would probably say, or think to myself, well thank God, it’s not me. But then I’d do everything in my power to make it less stressful for the person, I guess.

01:00 You got to remember, that when they bring people in like this, you’ve got a whole heap of people around. You’ve got your surgeon, you’ve got the anaesthetist, and in our situation in Vietnam, we’d have the path tech [pathology technician]. ready to take blood, and the x-ray tech [x-ray technician]ready to take x-rays and then beyond that, you’ve got the padres, and then you’ve got the immediate people ready to assist with the preparation of the patient, like removing the clothes, checking the wound, and things like that.

01:30 You might have two or three doctors working on him, and in the meantime, blood pressure, put your

blood pressure cuffs on him and things like that. If they're losing a lot of blood, they put these special suits on them to keep the blood within the system, otherwise it drains into their tissues and that, and causes all sorts of problems, like cardiac arrest, for lack of blood, and all that sort of stuff. But when you're working with a team like that, it's fantastic. Everybody knows what they have to do.

02:00 Just work as a team. You can't work as an individual. You've got to work as a team. It's usually an anaesthetist who makes the decision, and the big thing is you've got to get him stabilised first. You can't sort of start doing something, and you find he's got a wound somewhere else. Because what happens, when they do a complete check of the body, they find an exit wound as well and sometimes

02:30 there may be more than one exit wound, so the person is checked and you've got to roll him back and front to see if there's more than one wound. Basically, you incubate if you have to incubate, put the tube down and connect them to the oxygen.

Just getting back to that idea of the team, and working as a part of the mechanics of the team, what was your role in those particular incidents be?

In those particular incidents, we'd cut the gear from him, remove the

03:00 bandages, it's usually just a shell dressing, to find out what was what, and the surgeons would come, and while we were doing that the anaesthetist would be doing an assessment of the risk factor, and people would be taking blood automatically and we'd have blood pressure cuffs put on. But it just becomes automatic after a while. You do it so many times. Everybody in the team knows what they have to do.

03:30 Sort of thing. And everything's ready, the introversion tray's there, that's to put the invetracheal tube down and all that sort of stuff, if he has to have a tracheotomy, that's done then and there. Once that's done, they sort of assess the type of injuries he's got. But you don't think. You get to the stage where you just automatically do it, you know. You know what you have to do. And if it's really critical,

04:00 you've got people shouting, not shouting, but firmly requesting, 'Take this, do that'. And when that's sort of done, somebody's got the name tag, what religion he is. Depending on how bad he is, the old padre will pop on his purple band, what they call it, and away they'll go. It's really, it's you get so much satisfaction when something goes so smoothly,

04:30 and you really don't have much time to think about anything else. The whole focus is on that person, and that's all it is, that person, he is the most important person there. And you will do everything in your power to assist to make the transition to get him into a stable condition if possible, Most times they have a drip in them when they come in anyhow, so you're able to feed them the medication as required.

05:00 **How often would they be conscious?**

Most times they're conscious. Most times they're conscious. When they're unconscious, that's when you've got problems.

What kind of dialogue would you have with a patient during this time?

Oh, just reassuring. 'You'll be right. Everything's under control'. Some of them are moaning and groaning, especially if they're compound fractures. They're very, very painful. It's when you can't see anything and the patient's as white as a ghost,

05:30 and he's got internal bleeding, that's bad, you know you've got to get in and assess them as quick, or the surgeon's got to get in and assess them as quickly as possible, because nine times out of ten, because while that's going on the people in theatre will have everything ready. So as soon as they've got him stabilised enough, that could take ten minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour, that depends how long, to get his blood pressure up. Once that's up to a safe level, the anaesthetist feels it's safe to go. Because he's the top dog, the anaesthetist.

06:00 We wheel him in, they cut him open. Once we've controlled the haemorrhage. The haemorrhage is very difficult and they split them up, and it's a matter of finding, sometimes it's a nightmare inside, and you wonder how they're going to ever find him, sometimes it's straight forward, and it might be like a stab wound, and it does a lot of damage. There's a lot of stuff that can be damaged, sort of thing. It's just, when it's all finished.

06:30 The satisfaction you get, oh, that was beaut. And you talk about the things that went wrong, and you always had a post-mortem type of thing after it, what happened and how everything went smooth. But when you lose somebody, oh, it's terrible. If somebody dies on the table, it's terrible. It's a horrible feeling. Everybody's just deflated and you sit down.

07:00 **Can you recall a particular time when you did have that happen to you?**

Not in Vietnam. Because I used to only go for the initial stage and then it was transferred on to the theatre techs, and they took over, and then I just went on with my normal job and waited for the guy to come out of theatre. But when I was in New Guinea we had a young native girl, the most beautiful girl that you could possible imagine, having her first baby,

07:30 and she arrested on the table. And she lost the baby. The baby was born dead. And then we lost the

mother as well, and she was eighteen. And that was most devastating. The thing that got me, they got the baby and they passed it across, because I was doing the instruments, passed the baby across to the other person there, and they just wrapped it up and took it outside, they did everything in their power to save that girl, but she died.

08:00 But she was such a beautiful woman. That was really traumatic. I've come in on the tail end of it, in Vietnam once, we went into, we were observing an operation, this is just after I started working in ICU and you just go in and watch, and assist where you can, and a guy died on the table. And I'd been watching for about half an hour, and everything was going fine, and then they just lost too much blood,

08:30 there was nothing they could do, and the whole atmosphere, everybody, you could actually pick breathing, it was so quiet. Because you don't like losing people. It's happened quite a number of times working in the civilian system. Older people, OK, you feel really sad about it, but it's when younger people die, and you look at them, and there's nothing there, so there's got to be an after life.

09:00 Just the shell of the person there, basically. It's a strange sensation to see some person die. Or sit with somebody who dies, it's not pleasant.

Well, what is it like to sit with someone who's dying?

I suppose you feel, a lot of people are scared when they die. And people say 'Don't leave me', and you just stay with them. I've done that a couple of times, working in the civilian system and I stayed with the person and

09:30 they're squeezing your hand and then they're gone, you know they're gone, and within yourself you feel very sad, but you also feel relieved for the fact the patient's gone now and there's no more suffering. And some of these patients, especially these cancer patients, it's so traumatic for them what they have to go through. And some people have nobody. This is the sad thing.

10:00 I'd hate to die by myself. See my mum died by herself. She, they got up in the morning and they had the first cup of tea and they said, 'Another cup of tea?' and Mum said, 'Yes'. And they were gone ten minutes, and when they came back, Mum was gone. And I always feel a little bit upset about it. Not being with Mum when she died. I got a little bit upset about my little dog, too. Because I wasn't there when she died. But you know, she died peacefully. I guess that's the main thing.

10:30 It's a sense of relief if they've been somebody who's really suffered, but it's still very sad. And if it's a younger person, it's really. I haven't experienced children, thank God, I don't want to. Experience a child dying. But young people, we had a fourteen year old kid, brought into Prince of Wales once, he was playing soccer, had a massive heart attack. Brought to the Prince of Wales, they did everything in their power to save him, but he was gone.

11:00 And every time they put the defibrillator on, you're praying, 'Oh, come on kid'. And that's pretty traumatic, too, when you see a fourteen year-old kid dropping dead. Fit as a mallee bull. Drops dead of a heart attack. It's hard to take.

What about, I mean, you must have seen this quite a bit in Vietnam,

11:30 **are there any times you can think of that you can tell to us, times of sitting with a dying soldier?**

Yes, I sat with one. The guy that had the laparotomy done and he died on us. But most of mine, we used to do three to eleven, I sat with him till my colleague took over. We just talked about all sorts of things. He wasn't, well, we didn't expect him to die.

12:00 He wasn't on the serious side. But when I think about it back, he said, 'Oh, there's no point in living'. I said, 'What do you mean, no point in living?' I said, 'You know, you don't think that way, there's other fish in the sea'. And then we sort of changed the subject away from it, but then when Nielsen came on, he told me the next day that he'd died, I said "How was he?' and he said, 'He was still pretty upset about what we'd discussed with him earlier on in the day'.

12:30 I said, 'Yeah, I know'. I said, 'I hoped he'd be all right'. He said, 'Yeah, I did to'. I said, 'Were you with him when he went?' He said, 'I was sitting with him, he was asleep, and then he just gave a big deep sigh of relief and I just checked him and he was gone'. He was with him all the time, but I don't know, it's just, unless you've been through it, it's different, it's strange.

13:00 People react differently to it. Some people get over emotional about it. I wouldn't say I got over-emotional about it, but I did get upset about it. And I was quite upset about it. We were all, I think it's just a natural reaction to get upset, you never get used to death. And if people say that, they're lying. Old people, you know, even though they're old, you still feel sad.

13:30 **So you were talking about death, and never getting used to it.**

No, it's a natural part of life, isn't it really. But I think, being in the army, when being a nurse, you belong to a, it's an organisation within itself. Do you know what I mean? A sense of belonging. In civvie street, I don't feel any affiliation to the organisation I work for.

14:00 You know, it's just a number, full stop. But you were part of a team and until you, I don't know, you sort of, I know death's a normal part of life, but unexpected death is a thing that really strikes you. And the reaction of the family. And I remember, relating back to the civvies' system,

14:30 when I was at Prince of Wales, we had a little old lady, who had an operation on her legs, and she battled on, and anyhow, we got her walking, and we were so proud of it, and she had a massive stroke and was totally paralysed. That was totally devastating. Because we'd worked on her for months to get her walking again, and she goes and has this massive stroke. She just looked at us, and tears in her eyes. I saw her once, I couldn't bear it.

15:00 And then she lived for about twelve months after that. And you know. All the hard work we did, and I remember Professor Huckstep saying, 'Oh, well. That's another one we've failed' and I thought, 'You callous old mongrel'. You know, she was such a beautiful lady. She had a bitch of a daughter, though, excuse the expression. We did everything in our power to get that lady walking and she goes and has a stroke.

15:30 And the daughter had the audacity to blame everybody else. One of these things that happen, you know. The husband was quite accepting, but the daughter didn't.

Getting back to Vietnam and your experience there, would the Army encourage an emotional response to death?

I think, not the army itself, the people that you worked with understood it. Your fellow technicians, and your medics, and the doctors, because they deal with it. Probably seen more death than I've ever seen. And we had doctors, you could talk to them about it. Some of them were very, didn't like talking about it. But some of them were quite open, you know. How your emotions were affected when somebody died.

16:30 But it's strange. Like when we lost Pop, we expected it, but we didn't expect it. We got the phone call about nine to say he was in a bad way, so I rang Bill's sister down at Sussex and told her they better get up ASAP [As Soon As Possible]. Bill was in town getting his registration, and then we get a phone call, 'You better come to the hospital straight away', so we raced in and we missed him by about fifteen minutes. He died. And as soon as we walked in we knew something was wrong.

17:00 But although we were expecting it and it was a blessing, it still blew the wind away. Because when I rang Bill's sister, we used to have a standard joke about, 'Pop's still on the perch'. And I rang Bill's older sister and said, 'Oh, Coral, Pop's fallen off the perch'. He died. And you know, they knew what I meant. And they were on their way up, they were up at Kyemagh at the time. But the way it was, I just said, 'Oh, Pop's fallen off the perch',

17:30 and when I look at that, I laugh about it now, but at the time I was pretty devastated because Bill's parents were fantastic. I'm like, I'm the seventh son, or the seventh kid. So I've been very close to them. But it was quite funny. It wasn't funny at the time, but when I look back at it, we all have a laugh now.

Was there ever a time in Vietnam when it got too much for you?

18:00 Oh, I guess so, it did sometimes.

How did you deal with that, how would you express it?

I used to go down to the beach, go to the quietest end of the beach and bawl my eyes out. When I'd come back I'd feel good. Especially if somebody, you'd got to know them reasonably well or when young Hallam was, with the brain damage,

18:30 and I wish I had the power just to touch, and make him well again. And the kid that lost his leg, I wish I had the power to be able to touch him and put his legs back again. And but I used to go down to the beach, kick the hell out of the sand, sand bank, and bawl my eyes out, and I was all right when I come home. I felt all right then. And I find,

19:00 when I really get depressed, I've got to go near water. And I remember when Mum died I went down to the river, and just sat just by the river. And bawled my eyes out. But although it was a blessing, you don't want them to go. When Mum died, that was the worst part, it was a blessing, but it was the only death I really dreaded was my Mother's death. I just dreaded it.

19:30 But when she went, I didn't cry at Mum's funeral, a lot of people say because I had my good, my old aunt, not my real aunt but Mum's dearest friend, so I stayed, I didn't stay with my sister, I stayed with her, because she was by herself. And it was at, I did my grieving there in private, because basically I tried to keep my grief to myself. While Bill, Bill's pretty strong,

20:00 when his dad died, that's the first time I've ever seen it, he broke down. But I can relate to that.

Yeah, thank you so much for your honesty in regards to death. Like it's actually been quite a profound . . .

I'm not scared of death, personally, but I wouldn't like to be in a bloody car accident. You know, on TV [Television] sometimes you see things

20:30 and you get so upset about it, and Bill says, ‘Don’t watch it, mate’. But no, it’s a fact of life. I think, being in the services, even now, I still get very upset when I read in the paper about these guys in the Middle East that are getting killed, you know, the Americans that are there. People say, ‘Oh, they’re only Yanks’. But that’s not the thing. Even when the British were getting killed by the IRA [Irish Republican Army], I used to get really upset.

21:00 I was in England when they had some really bad bombings, and it sort of shook me up, I thought I could have been at the Tower when that happened, but I wasn’t. And a number of people got killed, I think a couple of Kiwis got killed or something, and then I think, well if it happens it happens, as long as it’s quick. But it does so much damage.

Were the men that you were caring for in Vietnam fearful of death?

21:30 Some of them had the same attitude as I: ‘If it happens, it happens’. I always felt that, what’s the word, if it happened it happened, put it that way, but I never put myself in a situation where I could, well, you would hope, you were never in a situation where you had to face it.

22:00 You never know, I’ve been past car accidents, I saw one this year, just before I went back to work, on the M5. One car clipped another car that was going into the city, and missed me by a couple of feet. There’s a car was spinning around in the front of me basically. Had I been one minute earlier I would have collected it, but I dropped my coins at the toll gates and I had to get out of the car to put the coins in,

22:30 and I think somebody was looking after me up there. I really believe that. But I got home, and Bill says, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ and I said, (stammers) ‘An accident and it just missed me by that much’. And the car was spinning around, and I said, ‘Somebody was seriously hurt’, and I was just dumbfounded that nobody was killed. And I was shaking. I had to pull up on the side of the road to calm down. It just blew me away.

23:00 It was so close and that’s scary. Driving down the road and this happens.

You’ve mentioned this a couple of times, where you feel like someone up there is looking after you, and I wonder . . .

Well, I don’t know. Maybe luck.

It sounds like that, even though you’re not a terribly religious person, you do have faith.

Oh, God, yes. I do believe in something.

23:30 There’s got to be something. Oh, all right, the shell’s there, but there’s got to be something.

How did your faith help you during Vietnam?

A lot, I used to go to communion quite a few times. Not religiously. I’m not a really good Christian, but I used to go. I think, as a little kid it’s always played a part in my life. I did get turned off a bit,

24:00 one of my mates, he was a Methodist so I went to the Methodist church, and the old padre happened to find out about it, he: ‘Why should I go and worship at a different church?’, and I said, ‘Excuse me, what I believe in is my business, and God’s universal, he’s not solely Anglican, Catholic or Methodist, and what I choose in my beliefs, what I believe is my business,

24:30 it’s between me and my God’. And I said, ‘You’re not my God’. And that turned me off him, I wouldn’t have a bar of him, and he said, ‘I haven’t seen you at communion?’ and I said, ‘No, I’m becoming a Methodist’. Just to - but the audacity of the man telling me. That’s what irritates me about religion. There’s got to be something. I don’t know what. I’m not an atheist or anything like that, but there’s got to be something there.

25:00 **Were there any rituals that you would perform, or go through in your mind, to help you deal with the death that you were seeing?**

Yeah. I think while you’re standing there, and you see somebody that’s having a cardiac arrest, you say a prayer to yourself. In your mind. Just a nice prayer. And it’s very, I think it keeps me sane, in particular,

25:30 it used to keep me sane sometimes. And many a time even when I was at the funny farm, as I used to call it, Vietnam, you got someone desperately sick, and you say a prayer, either to take him, like the guy with the burns, and quite often the priest would come in and say a few prayers, and it used to uplift you, and I’m quite certain it used to uplift the patients too.

26:00 We had one, Father Timker came in a couple of times, and although one particular patient was unconscious, he died, I think it was, it doesn’t govern my life, but I do believe in something greater. Whether there is or not, we’ll only know when we die, don’t we?

So why do you call Vietnam the funny farm?

26:30 That was a common name for it, the funny farm. The Vietnamese used to call us ‘Otalies’, Australians.

You meet such a cross section of people. Because at the time, with national service, you had such a broad spectrum of people. You had professional people, kids who were school teachers, lawyers, just finished a degree and were just killing time. And you had kids, still a junior, sort of thing, deferred their studies to go to Vietnam.

27:00 There was a whole broad section of people, and they came from all different backgrounds. Some from the bushies, and city kids. Some people that, Italian kids, Greek kids, you know, the ones that didn't go back to Greece, and a lot of them did. To avoid conscription. And

27:30 we used to talk about it sort of thing. A lot of guys were just out of their apprenticeships, sort of thing. Some became quite religious, some become quite wild. There was a few guys there, they used to call him the Archbishop Jamie Emmett, that was his name, and he had the biggest set of rosaries I've ever seen, and he'd walk around with these rosaries,

28:00 but now I believe he's a bikie with the Hell's Angels, or something, but he's on a hundred percent war pension, so he's doing all right, I suppose. He was a bit of a ratbag.

How prevalent were drugs in Vietnam?

I never came across them. Not with our people. I never, I can honestly say I never came across with it, with the people I associated with. I heard, people used to smoke marijuana,

28:30 but that's nothing, I guess. The people I associated with and at the hospital, I very rarely heard about, oh, you used to hear a bit about it, but nothing like what it is now. It was just a no, you never did it. Oh, what about these people on these drugs now. What's the big thrill about taking a drug, beats me. I've been anti-drugs all my life. Well, tobacco's a drug.

29:00 Alcohol's a drug. Just legalised drugs. No, I've never been involved in it, but I've been to parties where you could smell the old grass. This is when I was working at the Prince of Wales, and these were people, you know interns and that, nurses, and you could smell it. It's got a distinctive smell, you can't miss it. But I'd never get into drugs, no way. I've seen the problems it causes. It's crazy.

29:30 **It would be good if you could describe the layout of the hospital where you were at, just so I can get a sense of where you were.**

Yes, you sort of came in the main gate, right, and it was all fenced off. The LSG [Logistics Support Group] area, and you've got on one side, from what I remember, there was the Pascoe canteen, it had duty free stuff, electrical, or whatever.

30:30 Then we had a lovely chapel, then there was a hill, where the officers' and sergeants' messes were, and then on another hill, that was where the ORs lived, then at the bottom there was the junior ranks' club, then there was the hospital complex, you had the kitchen, then there was two twenty-five bed wards.

31:00 Then you had the interconnecting, then on this other side there was the ICU and the theatre complex, and then there was a pathway leading out to the helipad, because we were only about twenty five yards from the helipad. Then going down the other way was the X-ray Department, the Pathology, the Orderly Room, the CO's office, the Adjutant's office,

31:30 then you've got the Matron's office, or Director of Nursing they call them these days, and that was it. Oh, and the ambulance bays. It was quite a good little set up actually. A good little hospital.

And how close was the beach?

Oh, about a five minute walk across the sand. You walked through the Transport Compound, and the engineers, then there was an outer road, that led down to the Peter Badcoe club,

31:50 then you've got all these tea-tree type trees then you've got the beach. It was a beautiful beach. Except for the sea snakes. And while on the point, there was an old cargo ship, an Italian had run aground in a storm. On the point. Then they had, from the Badcoe club, there was another area, where the civilians were, where they had a lot of bars and cafés and things, right on the beach. But I never went down there.

32:00 A lot of guys used to go there for entertainment. But we had movies and everything else on base. The Red Cross had a hut where they had crafts and magazines, and the Salvation Army had a place so we got a lot of local newspapers, they might have been a week old, and things like that, and movies every night, because I had to show them which I used to hate. And that sort of stuff.

What sort of movies?

All the latest things that were on at that time.

32:30 'The Weird Mob', 'Cowboy', 'The Green Berets' of all things, John Wayne, but that was an extra duty that one had to do. Not by choice. Then there was . . .

So you had to . . .

Well, I was nominated to show the movies. Yeah. I was only there a week and they sent me on a projectionist school. It used to be good fun, because if they used to give me a rough time, I used to

purposely stop the machine.

33:00 Tell them to shut up or I wouldn't go on. And I had this CO one night, and he said, 'If you do that again, you're going to find yourself doing it every night of the week'. But it was good fun.

So did you have to do special training as . .

I went and did a projectionist course for a week. Just operating a projector and splicing things, joining things, I used check it before I ran the move, because sometimes it wasn't spliced properly and it would break, and then

33:30 you're trying to fix it up. Trouble is, when everyone's booing you it's not much fun. It was good fun.

And where would the movies be shown?

They would be shown in one of the Highsat huts, it was a big hut, and they had sort of deck chairs, but everybody used to disappear. Nobody would give you a hand. Afterwards, they'd all just shoot through to the boozer. But we used to show them to the patients and that, it was good. That sort of helped to fill in the time when you're not working.

34:00 Because we used to do twelve hour shifts, so there was really not that much to do. When we were quiet in the ICU, we used to get a bit more time off in there. Because we weren't always busy, and when we were busy, we were busy.

Could you talk us through what the protocol was when the orders came through that a helicopter was arriving with injured?

Yeah, well as a rule the orderly room would get a despatch to say there was a chopper coming in,

34:30 they'd call them a dust-off. They'd make an announcement within five minutes of it landing that there was a medivac. And it doesn't matter where you were, you would just automatically end up at the helipad. It might be just, they used to have a regular one come in, and then it was a real one, and on that radar thing like I said, you could actually hear them, because they used to come in really low along the beach,

35:00 because Nui Dat was about twenty kilometres away, and you could hear, thud, thud, thud, thud, thud, and hear it comes, and it would come screaming around, and if somebody's really ill, they used to come, straight down, they were brilliant, those pilots. Aussies were a little bit more cautious, but the Yanks, they were just brilliant. They were just brilliant. And they used to get them in, get them out.

So what would happen when the helicopter landed?

35:30 Once it's landed, depending how many casualties, you'd be told. Sometimes you might get two or three helicopters coming in one after the other. When you got a lot of casualties, everybody's on, everything stops. Everything is solely on getting those guys out, getting them evaluated and treated straight away. They'd just come in, they'd have certain bays, the seriously injured ones are taken off the chopper straight away and take them straight in, and placed on the lifters, on the stands,

36:00 two or three, full teams of theatre staff, ICU staff, and in the background you've got your pathology people, and your x-ray people who come forward and do the appropriate what's-a-name. But the priority is getting them stabilised. You've got to stabilise them before you do anything else. You get somebody in and he's not stabilised, it used to fall on the anaesthetist.

36:30 People don't really appreciate the fact that it is the anaesthetist who is the top man. But people don't realise that, because he's the one that makes the decision. Then if it's basic trauma, orthopaedic, whatever it is, the various surgeons do whatever it is. Some of them are general surgeons, orthopaedic surgeons. There was not much work for plastic surgeons, because that was done back in Australia.

37:00 But the initial surgery. It's very important to do it properly in the first place. Do the debridements of the wound and all that, otherwise, just say you might get a shot in the leg there, but they'll still cut right down, remove all the dead tissue and then it's just bandaged up and they don't suture it until a few days later. A few days later they'll just sew it up, put a tube in it, and drain it. No problems. But what the Yanks used to do, they never used to do it, and they'd all these problems a few days after. It's easier to treat a wound straight away than try to deal with one

37:30 that gets infected a few days later, because you've got to remove more dead tissue, plus you've got to get more skin to bring it over to close the what's-a-name. And that's about it. Once that's done, once they're in theatre, you're great, and then the ICU staff would get everything ready, they'd be told what's coming in. and we used to just go into theatre and watch what's happening. Make sure everything's ready. And as soon as the guys finished, they wheel him into ICU and we take over.

38:00 Then the work starts. The turning, the lifting, the turning, the lifting Getting this, checking that, this drug, that drug. You get really into it after a while, and time goes so quick, before you know where you are it's gone. And then to see the satisfaction next day, how the guy's responding. It's really good.

38:30 But if someone is desperately sick, is touch and go, it also becomes a strain on the staff. They're doing everything in their power, yet he's not responding. Then they'll start to respond. Gee, it's a relief. He's

going to make it. But then your bouts of, you get cut up too. You think they're not going to make it, but when they pull through, oh, the satisfaction in that. You played a small part in the recovery of that guy's life. Fantastic.

Tape 8

00:30 **Now, how much interaction did you have with the Americans?**

Very, very little. You know, we used to go across and look at what they had. But our people, we ran circles around them. The care that our guys got. But the number of casualties they had, too. They had far greater casualties than we had. We might get three or four and they might get a hundred, two hundred people come in, and they'd be divided into the various hospitals,

01:00 and they had a huge complex. And the nurses were nice too, they were very, very nice. Some of them were a bit snotty, but a lot of people didn't know Australians were there actually, that's how dumb it was. I went to Hong Kong on r&r, and was sitting next to an American colonel. And he didn't know: 'Australia? I didn't know Australians were in Vietnam'. You know, just dumb Yank. But it was interesting.

01:30 Oh, we used to just go across to PX, and things like that. Didn't have much to do with them at all.

What was your attitude towards them?

Loud, boisterous, loud mouths, dope heads. You know, because they were definitely into the drugs. You see, I was never at Nui Dat and very few people I spoke to,

02:00 as far as we were concerned it was a non-event. We didn't smoke pot, not on base. They'd go into town and get some cheap Charlie from someone. But I never ever saw anyone. Oh, we had a couple of people come in from overdosing. 'Hari kari' (suicide). In a drunken stupor, sort of thing, feeling sorry for themselves, but there's always someone else worse off than you are.

02:30 **What was hari kari?**

You know, Japanese. Slice your stomach open, kill yourself, suicide. Some people used to react differently. Some of them I think were just looking for sympathy. But it struck me, the system just really didn't allow for people who were that way inclined. A bit like they were, what's the word, non-events type

03:00 of people if you know what I mean. Because some people, they were a bit mixed up. People get broken romances, that sends people to do dumb things too. And wives shoot through, and boy-friends shoot through, whatever, and that sends people crazy.

How common was hari kari?

Oh, it wasn't very common. You know, some people just take an overdose, I think, some people just like sympathy.

03:30 Some people can really con you, you think you're doing the right thing, and they're the biggest con merchants going. I've been conned. They got their kicks out of it, so what. And it always comes around to haunt them, anyhow.

So when you're talking about overdose . . .

Oh, you know just took an overdose of valium, or whatever, because you could buy drugs in town. Like Phenobarb, and stuff like that, if you want to. Because people get depressed

04:00 and when they get depressed they react differently. When I get depressed I've got to get near water. Not that I'm going to drown myself, I just like the effusion of water. I'm feeling down in the dumps now. The dogs seem to sense it and they'll come and nuzzle you. I had a rather traumatic time changing jobs, I was really frustrated and depressed,

04:30 after nine and a half years at one place, and we didn't get as much as a thank you, sort of thing, and I got a new job where I had to go back to rotational shifts, which I absolutely hate. And then I had to do some shifts, without doing some training experience first. And for a full week, I was really down in the dumps. It's only for the dogs. Oh, Bill's pretty good too. We just go for a long walk. And he said, 'Well, you really don't have to do these stupid shifts, you know.

05:00 You own everything. You've got no bills. Is it worth the extra money?' and I started to think, 'Is it worth the extra money? Doing all these ridiculous hours'. I don't owe anything. I've got a little bit tucked away, so I don't really have to work if I don't want to. I'm fifty-eight, so I'm a bit young to retire yet. Don't want to be put in the box yet.

05:30 So I thought, what do I do? Start a dog-wash business or something. Something I enjoy. I enjoy being with animals.

Well, that's sounds great. But getting back to the drug issue in Vietnam. What there much use of heavier drugs such as heroin?

Not in my circle, and there may have been outside my circle. When I say my circle, the people I associated with, I never heard it mentioned. But I did hear people were experimenting. Not necessarily, some of our people were experimenting,

06:00 when I say our people, the Australian group as a whole, whether it was in Vung Tau or Nui Dat, because the guys in Nui Dat would have been under far more pressure than I was. I was under a lot of emotion, because we just patched them up and that can be very, very draining.

06:30 But I never had any inclination to go into drugs. Some people used to drink a little bit more than they should. I didn't. All I wanted to do was sleep. That's what I wanted. My biggest priority was sleep. Because you'd be so exhausted, and we had an air conditioned hut where you could sleep, if you were on night duty, oh, you might get a valium or something. Five milligrams of valium to get you to sleep. But I did that a couple of times and you wake with a rotten headache. Or Mogodon.

07:00 Half a tablet of Mogodon, you wake up drugged, and then when you wake up you can't go back to sleep sort of thing. And they were prescribed drugs. But in the hot weather, it was very difficult to sleep during the day, so they had a specially air-conditioned hut for us. The guys on night duty you could go up there and sleep, but some guys used to snore, so the relief of having half a valium or something, then you could sleep like a log.

Who was your best mate in Vietnam?

07:30 Well there was Peter Coogan. Mal Shreve.

What was Peter like?

He came from Glenrowan. He was a fantastic guy, and really down, he was a good Mick, came from a big family. They owned property at Glen Rowan and none of the boys could get on with dad. And he had a sister who was a nun, and his older brother started a business in New Guinea,

08:00 trucking, mining something in New Guinea. Peter was a fantastic guy, and then there was Bobby Randall, he was from Tassie, he was a top guy. We went to Hong Kong together, and then Nielsen, what was his first name, can't think of his first name. He came from down at Wingdang, down near Wollongong.

08:30 And then there was Andy, he still lives in Sydney. He was a great mate. Then there's Nicko. They would have been my closest mates, then we had people that you associated with, they were more acquaintances. Like us, our little group, we used to all stick together, because we were all in the same hut together. We all had similar interests, we were all nashos,

09:00 oh, Andy was the only one who wasn't a nasho. But Andy was always in some scheme. He was like, he was the male version of Klinger [Maxwell Klinger, character in US TV series, MASH]. He was mad as a rabbit, a fantastic guy. He didn't dress in drag, but he was always in strife.

How important was humour during this time?

Andy's one of these guys, he's got such a, even now, we're both the same age, he can say the dumbest thing

09:30 and have you in fits of laughter. He's got two sons and he idolises his sons. One's about sixteen and I think the other's about fourteen, but he works as an ambulance officer. Then, so we became very close, we used to do things together, go out together. And that sort of thing. Went to, Bob and I, and Nielson, went to Hong Kong together. We got five days in-country leave, which was fantastic.

10:00 To sleep in a real bed, privacy, and a proper toilet. Sheer heaven. And the Yanks had that down to a fine art. We left and got there in Hong Kong, and everything was there, and got to our respective hotels, and they're all five star hotels, and everything was done for you. Put a big welcoming party on for you,

10:30 and then we had five or six days of utter pleasure, go mad spending, and we were living in luxury. It was fantastic.

So what did you get up to in Hong Kong?

Oh, well. They had the night we arrived, we got in about nine o'clock at night, and they had a welcome party. And we stayed at the President Hotel; I think it's the Hyatt now in Hong Kong. Beautiful. The staff were fantastic and everything was done for you. Big bowl of fruit and drinks and we thought you had to pay for it; it was all complimentary, which was fantastic.

11:00 And the first night we went out and we went to the Angus Steak House and it had the most beautiful steak, because in Vietnam you never ever got decent steak. You know, a lot of turkey and ice cream and cranberry sauce, and we had this steak, and we went out with another couple of American guys we met, and we went to a couple of clubs and did the normal thing, carrying on like yahoos,

11:30 dancing and things, to real women. It was really nice, and had some really great fun. And then Bob and

I went back to the pub and went to bed, and I got a knock on the door, I slept from midnight right through to twelve o'clock next day and didn't realise how exhausted and I went to get Bob and he was dead to the world and then we went down and just did some sightseeing of Hong Kong, going here, spending there,

12:00 doing all the normal sightseeing things. It was really good fun,

How important to you was it to have that time off?

It was, I needed it because I'd been there seven months, and I just needed to get away. You know, with the emotional trauma, I call it trauma, that you go through, you need to recharge your batteries. And it, going into a civilian environment again, was absolutely fantastic.

12:30 It was funny at first, because you felt people looking at you. Because Hong Kong was full of service people, everywhere you went. The club you went to. We went to the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club. We went to a do there, which was a fabulous night. Fabulous entertainment and really nice people. The ladies were absolutely gorgeous. It was just, doing normal things again,

13:00 because you live in uniform from day in to day out, and the sisters, they're in uniform, they're the only women on base, so they were sort of special, and you're working with them, and they're in their horrible grey uniform, that you're used to, or green. And it's nice to be with real people again and to feel human again. To have a decent shower and sit in the tub for ages, and get all the grime off you. Then it was time to come back.

What memories do you have of the Tet Offensive?

13:30 Very tense. We were expecting the worst.

Where were you?

I was at Vungers. At Vung Tau. It was a bit of a fizzer really. I remember once, I climbed on the roof and we were watching the airbase getting fired upon. We got extra duties for that, because we're sitting on the roof, and everybody else was running around with helmets on and flak jackets on, and we're sitting on the roof, six of us, sitting on the roof watching,

14:00 and taking photos. You could see the tracers coming down, and they did a bit of damage. A couple of times rounds landed on the hospital, well, not on the hospital grounds, in the compound, but did no damage. It was a little bit spooky, because all the lights were out. And my fear was, how would we get our patients out? It was like, we had a couple, we were full in ICU and we had a plan what to do if the place was attacked,

14:30 fortunately we were never attacked, thank God. Because they were only in tin and wooden buildings, and it would have just demolished the place. We had to take our patients and the critically injured ones. We had a plan, what to do if something happened. In a way, during that period I was really, not so concerned about myself, I was concerned of how we were going to look after our patients.

15:00 And at one stage they were going to send the sisters back to Butterworth, and they said, 'No'. And the CO agreed that they'd stay, they needed them. Because after Singapore, there was sort of a priority to get the nursing staff out. Which I thought was a bit ridiculous. Not that the sisters wanted to go, it was just a policy they had, after the fall of Singapore.

Why did you think that was ridiculous?

15:30 Because they're putting a higher price on the nursing staff, and as far as I was concerned, it was the care we give our patients. Because the Japanese, they just slaughtered people, just for the sake of slaughtering people, and after reading, at school at different times, what the Japanese people did. And Asiatic people are very cruel, not only to the enemy, their so-called enemy,

16:00 but to the local people. Like this nun that I was telling you about, her entire family was slaughtered in front of her. And several generations just wiped out by the Viet Cong. Because they were sympathetic towards the Americans, and, but the sisters, you know, they felt the same way as we did, we'll stay with our patients.

16:30 But the bureaucrats you know what they're like. They make the decisions. But in a way, I thought that was a bit of an insult , they're putting a higher priority on saving the females, and what about the patients? My priority to myself was that if everything, to do whatever in my power to look after my patients.

17:00 And this was sort of the attitude of most of the people I worked with. And the sisters were exactly the same, but anyhow, they didn't evacuate, which was good. Because although we were pretty good at what we did, we still needed that expertise, but most of the sisters had five, or ten, a lot of years experience in nursing, so you can learn a lot from a good nursing sister.

Just getting back to the Tet Offensive, when you were sitting up on the roof watching the airbase being bombed,

17:30 **what did you actually see?**

Well, it was about three or four kilometres away, and you could see flares going up, and a bit of booming, and you could hear gun-fire going off and things like that. But we were on a bit of a hill so you could look straight across. In the distance you could see it, but it was quite funny, seeing people racing around with the what's-a-names on, helmets, all that sort of stuff.

18:00 And then when it really got serious, we thought it was a side-show at first, but then when it got serious, we started running around with our little guns, we had M16s, stupid little guns. I used to carry mine around in a plastic bag because of the sand, because you were forever cleaning it, and if you get dirt in it it's very difficult to clean, but they used to have a stupid system, they used to leave all your weapons there, when you went into the ICU, yet we used to have Vietnamese staff. And you always had, one of the magazines was full of rounds and the other one wasn't.

18:30 So you just inverted it sort of thing as you wanted. And I used to say, 'This is crazy. They could just pick up a weapon, and open fire and wipe out a few people'. But it never happened thank God. But the Tet itself, I think we all thought it was a bit of a fizzer, but deep down I was relieved. Because at the back of my mind, I just thought about what the Japanese and what they did to the nurses and a lot of the patients.

19:00 Like when the Centaur got sunk, there was some innocent people died on that. And fortunately, they didn't have too many patients on at the time. But innocent people died there, and I just think, these people have been through so much, why should they have to go through this. And it was a blessing when it was all over. It was really good, a relief. I must admit, I said a few silent prayers.

19:30 **So how did you hear that the Tet Offensive was over?**

Oh, just as normal, sort of thing. Died down. It was a bit of a fizzer, which was good sort of thing, in one sense. I suppose as an individual, by the end, if we didn't have people to look after. My concern, the concern which was discussed with the guys,

20:00 was what we would take out, especially for our patients, because that could kill them, having to move them, to be on sand-bags, although the hospital was reasonably sand-bagged.

So what was the plan, if it did come to that?

Well, the plan was to get them under beds, and we had sort of torches and things, just in case. If they attacked the hospital, it wasn't likely that they would, but with the types of modern sophistication of weapons

20:30 they've got these days, they could have wiped us out, no problems. But I don't think that was really a threat. But they also had, just after I got there, a typhoon warning, where they evacuated everyone to higher ground. That included some fairly critical patients. They were expecting a typhoon to come through. It turned out to be a fizzer too, which was good.

21:00 That was before I got there. Back of mind, and my colleagues' minds, were, especially in the ICU, how would we look after our patients. And that was a concern. I thought, 'Oh, God, let's hope nothing happens'. We never said anything to the patients, but you can't, you know, patients have got that sixth sense. They know something's wrong. See things getting prepared. And you've got to be very careful around patients, because if someone's unconscious, you mightn't think they can hear you.

21:30 And one of the last things, when you die, or when you're going under anaesthetic, is your hearing. Because you've got to be careful what you say. Because I've had patients come back, and say, 'You said this and he said that' and you go, 'Oh God'. So as a rule, if you ever go to hospital and they inject you with Pentathol, or whatever they use these days, they always ask you to be quiet. Some surgeons,

22:00 they have music in the background, but I always think that's too permanent, because I don't know if you saw a movie called 'Soylent Green'. But, in years to come, and it was like euthanasia, and you go in to this room, there's all this beautiful scenery, and they put you to sleep, and they use your body as fodder to feed people. Have you seen that movie? 'Soylent Green'.

'Soylent Green'

'Soylent Green'. Yeah, it was a weird movie. It was good though.

22:30 **When was that?**

Oh, that's going back years ago.

Yeah. I'll have to check it out.

It's a long time ago. And 'Coma'. Did you ever see 'Coma'? That was a good one. Yeah, but, when you sort of work in that field well, the strange things people do.

So how long was your tour in Vietnam?

Oh, I did about ten and a half months, all told. Because I was a nasho then I came back earlier, I had to be back by July. I think I left in the June to come back from memory.

23:00 **So how did you know that you were coming back?**

I knew, because all nashos, all 9th intake, because you used to get discharge with intake. And I was 9th intake, and ours was coming up, unless you wanted to extend. Sometimes people did, a couple of mates of mine actually transferred to the regulars to do the twelve months. But at that time, I just wanted to get away

23:30 from that environment.

Why?

Because I don't like seeing people suffer, but I didn't expect to get the negative reaction when I got home. That was a bit of an eye-opener.

What do you recall of your journey home to Australia?

It was sad, because we had a number of patients still in ICU. Sad saying goodbye to them and quite a few of the nursing sisters

24:00 I got to know really well. Sad saying goodbye to them. I was excited. It was a great adventure. I had that two inches of glory now, this is going to be fantastic. Then got home, we had a good flight back. The crew were absolutely fantastic coming back. We were yelling out to the people that were arriving, 'Suckers! How many weeks have you got to go', sort of thing, and yahooing around a bit. And it was over so quick.

24:30 We were off and within an hour, we were heading back, and we got to Sydney just after eleven thirty, I think, and we were all bussed off to our various hotels.

What do you recall of your arrival in Sydney?

Crowded. A lot of guys had families to meet them. I didn't have anybody to meet when I came back from overseas. I was always bit resentful about that. But not to worry. And about that time a lot of thieves used to mingle with the army guys coming home, and you know, people buy electrical gear and all that. The customs were fantastic.

25:00 They let us bring a lot of stuff back that we didn't have to pay customs on. I remember I picked up my mate a tape deck, because tape decks were the thing in those days, and waited outside for him. And he was in a sheer panic. He thought somebody had nicked it. Anyhow, he sort of, we eventually sorted it out. But they had these thieves that used to go around

25:30 dressed as army fellows. But quite tearful. It got a bit emotional, to myself, I felt quite sad because we were all going to be, you know, scattered to the four winds. We were all going to be separated again. And checked at the hotel. The people at the hotel were really nice.

How aware were you of all the political, the negative environment.

The political. We were very aware of it, because we were told about it all the time. It was in the papers,

26:00 and family would send newspapers up, and you would read it in the newspapers, and people, about every second week when we got new people coming in, coming back from Australia, we had a newspaper going around. Telling us what's happening. And it was very negative. And you'd see the demonstrations on newsreels, sort of thing, it was negative. And one of the battalions came home and people were throwing red paint around. And you know, we were treated like lepers.

26:30 Which wasn't very Australian at all.

How were you treated like lepers?

Well. You know, comments like 'Baby killers'. I remember when I was at the coffee shop at the hotel, and someone made, 'Oh, more baby killers'. We sort of just let it go and didn't take much notice of it. But it popped up from time to time. The taxi driver

27:00 when I got home to Perth, I was going back to my sister's place, because I didn't tell them I was coming, I didn't tell Mum, and this guy come over, and 'You guys are still killing babies over there, eh?' I said, 'I beg your pardon', and I just ignored it, and job interviews, different places I went for job interviews, and the first two, that comment was made. 'Get lost.'

27:30 Then the third job, I got the job, but I got asked a lot of questions Mr Ogden was the boss, and he asked a lot of questions, and there was a couple of young guys working there, and they wanted to know what was it like killing people, and I thought, what rock did these people come under, and different times, if people know you've been to Vietnam, they make comments, and that's when I packed my bongoes and thought, I'll shoot through for a while. Completely different in Europe. Didn't have that. Hardly anything in the newspapers about it, which was good.

28:00 **How hard was it for you to settle back down?**

I was very restless when I got back. But I was confused, I was frustrated. I thought I'd put my life on the

line for the last two years, I guess, and you're treated like lepers. It was a very negative reaction from the political parties in power at the time, but we went to the Employment Office, when they send you down to see them, and even the people, they were very negative, didn't seem interested.

28:30 Even the psychiatrist I saw, she was more worried about the twitch in the eye. Twitch in the eye?

Why were you sent to a psychiatrist?

Oh, everybody went for an assessment. Oh, not everybody went for assessment. They put it down as anxiety neurosis. That's a nice way of saying, you're partly a nut, I suppose.

29:00 But we were never ever really debriefed as an individual. I just went as part of the job evaluation, because I was going to do nursing. I was very keen, I was all set to do it, but I just got so tired of the negative remarks I got about Vietnam, I said, 'I'll go away for a couple of years'. And I was already booked to start a course at the Royal Perth Hospital. The staff, the director of nursing there, she was absolutely fantastic.

29:30 She was an army nurse as well, and the deputy, they were very supportive, but at that time I wasn't, I suppose I wasn't debriefed at all. Because you don't get a debriefing, you just go and sign a piece of paper, and they say, 'That's it. Get your ID card, and that's it'. No 'Thank you, job well done' and I walked out the door and to Karrakatta and I thought,

30:00 'Is that all there is?', not even. You know I felt completely empty. 'All right, you're by yourself mate. Sort it out yourself. Ring this person up and make an appointment', and the guy was so negative, so I thought, 'What am I getting myself into?' It was a bit unsettling there. When I went home for a couple of weeks, got smothered by Mum. I said, 'I have to get away,otherwise I'll go mad'. You know what it's like.

30:30 You know what mothers are like, they ask you, 'Do you want something?' 'No thanks, Mum'. 'Are you sure, I can cook something for you'. And it just sends you insane. "No, I don't want anything!' But . . .

Just getting back to the anxiety neurosis. What are the symptoms of that?

31:00 Oh, very restless. I'd get a bit upset. I wouldn't show it directly to anyone, obviously. Like I used to get a bit upset when people called us baby killers, that gets a bit, and I really had no one to turn to really. And I think a lot of people were in that situation. You know, you've done your thing. 'See you later mate'. They've just stuffed your life up for the next twenty years.

31:30 You've given two years of your prime of your life to the service of your country and then you're treated a bit like a leper. It was sort of very negative, the whole thing you know, and even when I went into the Repatriation place in the city, the guy behind the counter was a World War I, and just the comment he made, 'Oh, that's not a real war', you know, I thought, 'What, where are you coming from?' you know.

32:00 We were just doing what we were told to do. It was just this negativity about the whole thing, and that's when I decided to pack my bongoes and shoot through for a while.

Was it, I mean . . .

We were never really debriefed. Nobody sort of sat down with you and went through it with you.

What about now, like, what about later?

Even now. I get very depressed. You think, 'Was it really worth the effort?' But then,

32:30 I went back into the army after two years. So eighteen years I really had a pretty good time, so the only I really came back into the army, was because I was so unsettled, and I really enjoyed the army I must admit, it's basically after you've finished your basic training, it's just like a routine job. Except you're answerable to every man and his dog and you can't speak your mind. Unless you're

33:00 reprimanded or insubordinate. Popular word that, insubordinate. Speaking your mind, Pauline Hanson type of stuff, and you're sort of, I still go through phases, but I become very quiet. I won't say anything. And things that have happened in the past. People that, I've never really been debriefed. Whether it would have made any difference,

33:30 I don't know. And sometimes I get, when I'm really down in the dumps, I usually go down to the beach and go out and sit out on the point at Wanda, and think what I should do. Think it would be nice to get off the planet sometimes. Not that I'd ever do it. For anyone to commit suicide you've got to be really desperate. I'd never get to that stage,

34:00 too many close people around to get to that stage, but you just get so frustrated with everything around and what you read in the papers, and even after Vietnam, you come back, and even to this day at times, the comments that are made. Like even at the RSL [Returned and Services League] that was a bit irritating, like this old half-shot digger, 'Oh, that's was, you shouldn't be here'. But now they're crying out for people to join the RSL. I won't join the RSL. We weren't good enough before and now that the numbers are down,

34:30 they want to be goody shoes. But now one of my bosses, Digger Jones, he was a big wig for the RSL. He was a brilliant man, he was a doctor, one that lost a leg in Korea and half a foot. Fantastic guy. But more

and more people are sort of joining it, but it's like an afterthought. I think they made us feel, it was an unpopular war, in the first place everybody knows that now.

35:00 It was an unwinnable war. Even Blind Freddy knows that. But the politicians, they just go along, 'all the way with LBJ' [Lyndon B. Johnson, President of the USA 1963-69], and all that sort of stuff.

What are your memories of the Welcome Home Parade in '84?

Bloody hypocrites. I was forced to go, I was still in the army. I was told to go, otherwise I'd get the next month of duties. I was a Senior NCO at the time though, I'd had a gut, I was told to go. And you got all these people cheering and carrying on, and I said, 'Why didn't we get this support before?'

35:30 Previously we did a royal guard for the Queen, and we had Aboriginal protestors and people saying baby killers and all that, and this was the first royal guard we had for the Queen in Canberra, and I sort of resented that as well. But the Homecoming,

36:00 I only went because I was told to go, I had no choice, and you get a lot of guys, they rave about what they did and what they didn't do and some of them did absolutely nothing. You know, they were just blanket folders and cooks. And didn't do nothing. I suppose they made a contribution, in all fairness, they did make a contribution in the sense they helped as a support group, but the homecoming thing,

36:30 it didn't make it, it didn't legitimise it, the fact that we were rejected when we first come back from Vietnam.

Now what did you do in those eighteen years with the army?

Ah, came back and then I went and did a theatre course, which I really enjoyed, and I did that for the bulk of my time in the army, I was fortunate to go on a trip with Professor Hollows on a trachoma exercise, I thought, pointless really,

37:00 because all their patients were really old people, they'd be dead in a year or so, but at least it gave them the pleasure of sight. And the expression on these old Aboriginal people who'd had cataracts for years, and all of a sudden they could see. It was very uplifting. He was a brilliant man that guy; he was just a brilliant man. There's no way to describe the guy.

37:30 He was fantastic. And he, and the crew, he had another doctor working with him, he was great. And Liz, she was the theatre nurse, we used to do two at a time. But we stayed at a place called Utopia, it was an Aboriginal settlement area, it was a non-alcoholic area, but unfortunately, it's a big, big problem in the Northern Territory, and there was beer bottles

38:00 all over the place, and old bombs of cars, and from there I went to New Zealand, had eight weeks in New Zealand. That was a great holiday. Went with young Yasmine's dad, she was with us, and the boss and there was about ten of us went and we had a ball. We travelled more than half of New Zealand, the northern half of New Zealand, we went for about two weeks, so that was a good holiday.

38:30 Than I came back, then I went to New Guinea for twelve months, on Manus Island. The navy. That was very, very interesting, we basically catered for naval personnel and staff, but we had the best hospital on the island at Longburn, and I was fortunate enough to deliver about nine, ten babies.

39:00 Local babies. Which was absolutely fascinating, absolutely fascinating, to see little pink babies come out then he goes black. Oh, it was brilliant. It was fantastic. There was another navy guy, we used to bribe the local women who were pregnant, to come in on our shift, because we used to assist in the deliveries, and we had Tony Barr, he was one of the doctors, and he was absolutely fantastic, fantastic guy.

39:30 And Peter Carter and Graham Cameron, they were the other doctors, and they had three RAAF nursing sisters, Rosemary Carron, and I can't think of the other name.

Tape 9

00:30 **So, Ron, if you could continue with your summary of your eighteen years.**

Yes, well I spent about twelve months in Manus up there. Had a fabulous time up there. Very interesting. Saw leprosy for the second time. We actually treated it, which was interesting. Saw a lot of exotic diseases that you don't normally see. It was very rewarding. Then I came back to Australia. Did the normal things, did promotion courses,

01:00 things like that. I went back to Perth for a while on an exchange, and then came back, and I went to New Guinea again for six weeks to Port Moresby, which I absolutely hated. Because you lived in a compound with security guards. And then once you got into your flat you had metal doors and metal shutters and it was like being in prison. You never went out at night by yourself.

01:30 Never. But it was interesting. We did a training course with the local theatre techs. They were good. They'd take me here, take me there. But I was very fussy with what I'd eat. I think I let them down. I'd

eat the fruit, but I wouldn't eat anything else. Oh, the crabs. But if I didn't see it being cooked, otherwise I wouldn't eat it. Then I came back. And just the normal routine exercises throughout Australia, the Kangaroo, the Skippy exercises,

02:00 Charleville, Rockhampton. South Australia, then I thought I'd had enough. A couple of promotional disappointments, promoting people with no experience. So I thought, I've had enough. I decided to call it quits, and the last six months of my time in the army, I just switched off. And once they know you're getting out of the army, you're treated like a leper anyhow.

02:30 Then I got discharged and walked into the Personnel Depot in Randwick and signed a few papers, and handed over my ID card, and 'See you later', and walked out the door. That's it. So it was a bit of a downer. I wasn't too upset I was just glad to get out of it. Because the whole system's geared to equal rights now,

03:00 and you can't do this, and you can't do that. And you've got to treat the women, women were getting promoted with no experience to senior positions, and then you were expected to carry them, and if you didn't do it you wore it, and I thought this is a load of, I've had enough of this, and then I said goodbye. I don't regret it. But I had a really good eighteen months, or six months, they weren't too bad.

03:30 But it wasn't the way I would have liked it to end. But life goes on. Just another number, so I got discharged. I got the job in the security racket. And I was only planning to work three days a week, and I ended up working full time. And I've been doing it for the past fourteen years. I don't have any regrets. The only regret is that as a kid I didn't really work hard enough to achieve a profession.

04:00 I didn't have top qualifications, I sometimes regret, because I would have liked to have been a history or geography teacher. I was always interested in that. I was always interested in travel. But I've got no regrets. I don't think I would change anything. I'd go through it again. I don't think I'd change the Vietnam bit. I'd like to think the kids that come back from the Middle East now, would get a better deal than we ever got. But you get politicians, and bureaucrats

04:30 that are out there to destroy what benefits you've got. You know, they give it with one hand and take it with the other. But I've got no regrets. Sometimes, I often think of the people that didn't come home. I still get a bit upset about that. But, I'm quite sure they're at peace wherever they are. That's about it.

05:00 **Well, Ron, we're probably coming towards the end of the interview now, but before we do, do you have anything else that you want to say in summary?**

No, but I just hope that they give the kids that come back from the Middle East, get them a better deal than we ever got, and I guess you feel,

05:30 not regrets, but let down, but then I often think about Simpson and the donkey, and I think I've done my part. And that's it.

Ron, thank you so much.

Sorry.

We'll finish it there if you like.

Oh, no problem. He was just a bit of a rebel, and he didn't get the recognition he deserved. And he thought he'd do something that he shouldn't do, which he did.

06:30 And I wish they'd just look after the kids that come home from the Middle East. And don't put so many obstructions in front of them and give the kids a decent debriefing and a chance to get on with life. But I've got no regrets. What happened to be and I just hope that somebody in the high echelons of power don't let it happen again.

07:00 Because you do the right thing. In myself I know I've done the right thing and I'm proud of what I've done, but as I say I always think of Simpson, he never ever really got the recognition in life that he should have got and the people that didn't come home.

Well, Ron, thank you so much for your time today. It's been a very interesting and moving account of your time in Vietnam.

You go to see people and it's still there. And you go to see people and it's the same boring, 'Oh, you should be over it'. But you don't really, but I don't feel any regrets.

08:00 Basically I feel it's frustration and it happens time and time again, and it's the first time I've really had the chance to talk to anybody about it. And it's what '69, thirty years. And I thank you both for it. And that's all I can say. It's been a pleasure. You know, I've done a few things. I'm pretty happy with my health. I was a bit apprehensive about it.

09:00 Mentally I'm drained at some times.

Ron, it's been a real privilege for us to sit here and listen to your story.

But I feel privileged to sit here and talk to you guys about it. A lady, I keep forgetting, but I go through

these phases from time to time. They say time heals but it doesn't. But the best part about it, when it's time to get off the planet it's time to get off the planet. That's why I've got my little dog. And we'll get scattered to the four winds together.

That sounds like a great idea.