Australians at War Film Archive

Alan Macfarlane (Mac) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:46 **So Alan, as I said earlier, I just want you to tell me the major dates, the significant dates in your life. When were you born?**

I was born September 13,

01:00 1918 in little place called Wallasey in England

And then you migrated to Australia?

Came to Australia with my mother, my father was killed when I was two and mother brought the family out in 1928 into Melbourne.

And you started school here?

Yes, we did. My sister went to school here, I've forgotten where, I have a younger brother

01:30 who is now deceased, he and I were sent out to Healesville, we were going to be trained as dairy farmers would you believe, he was two and half years younger than me, he was born after my father was killed.

And after Healesville?

And after Healesville we came back to Melbourne for a short time and mother was living in Maryborough at the time and she remarried to a gentleman who was establishing

02:00 a vineyard and citrus property up at a place called Coomealla.

So did you go to live there?

We went to live at a place call Merbein on the Victorian side of the Murray River at that stage because there wasn't a house on the property, later on we moved over there and I went to school in Merbein and I went to school in Wentworth. Used to ride a pony to school in those days.

Did you complete school?

I completed up as far as I could go at Wentworth High School and that was it

02:30 I was working on the property then.

What age were you then, you would have been 16?

I was 16 or 17, thereabouts. It was round about that period that I first got involved in the Army, I suppose, I joined the local militia unit which was known as the North West Murray Borderers, the 7th Militia Battalion. I'll never forget that mainly because we had a hat badge the size of, made like a vine leaf, huge thing it was, we thought it was magnificent but

03:00 today you'd laugh at it. That was my first introduction to the army

So when war broke out…

The family sold out and we moved to Melbourne at the end of 1937. And then I was in the militia down here in the 24/39th Battalion and war broke out and there were quite a number of us in our unit that were called up on duty virtually at the outbreak of war. We had various tasks to carry out and security things and

03:30 things like that you know.

And you decided then to transfer to the AIF?

Yes I transferred to the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] in March 1940. Another friend and I who

enlisted at the same time we were instructors at Headquarters down St Kilda Road, and we bumped into a Major Spowers who fortunately recognized us and said what are you two fellows doing here, we told him and he said I've just been told that I am to command and

04:00 form the new 2/24th Battalion, of course he was 24th Militia Battalion too up at Wangaratta, he said I'll have you two chaps transferred there as soon as possible, which thank goodness he did, because we were languishing there being used as instructors around the various racecourses, Caulfield and Broadmeadows and what not. So that's how I got in to the 2/24th Battalion.

Now the 2/24th was part of the 26th Brigade…

The 26th Brigade 7th Division then…

04:30 **And then they transferred to the 9th Division.**

We changed to the 9th Division when we went up north to the desert, up to Benghazi the whole thing.

So that was at the end of 1940 when you went overseas?

Yes. We sailed in November 1940 and we arrived in Palestine in December.

And it wasn't very long before you were into your first action was it?

No, well we were camped in Dimra at Palestine, I think it was

05:00 over Christmas and about middle of February it looked as though we were going to be moved because at time 6th Division were in action up in the desert and were expecting to go up and follow them, help them and take over whatever, and we were on our way end of February early March. And of course we got as far as Benghazi when Germans came into the act…

And that changed everything didn't it?

Yes it changed everything because,

05:30 and all that because we were going up to Benghazi and we were going to occupy the place, we were going to continue our training and so forth, there was only the [2/] 48th Battalion and ourselves and part of the [2/] 23rd Battalion were up there the others were still back at Tobruk.

So then you fought a retreat back to Tobruk didn't you?

Yes. The Benghazi Handicap it was called. It was a mad scramble because it wasn't a question of free for all, there was a lack of transport to get people back quickly.

06:00 And also to delay the Germans as much as possible on the way back. It was a rather a nerve wracking experience for people in their first action you might say and being strafed by planes, by German planes.

We'll talk about that in quite a bit of detail later. It's really important.

We moved back to Tobruk and there we were for the next eight and a half months. After that of course… do you want me to go on with it?

Yes.

06:30 **So Blamey insisted that the troops be pulled out of Tobruk, that the Australians in Tobruk were to be relieved didn't he?**

Yes. He thought we should be relieved because somebody said we were walking scarecrows or something I don't think that was true but none of us were putting on any weight.

Of course not.

Of course not and I think it was a bit of a battle strain. My own battalion, we suffered badly, we lost more than half the battalion when the Germans

07:00 launched their major attack on the perimeter on the 31st April and 1st and 2nd May and we suffered badly, and what was left of us we had to rebuild. But apart from that the strain on everybody was enormous. We saved Tobruk really by occupying no-man's land with daily and nightly patrols, fighting patrols and all that sort of thing.

So you got pulled out of Tobruk in early October or so…

We started to come out

07:30 August, September into October as the shipping was available to get us out and bring up relieving troops and so forth and then we went to Palestine where we drew breath for a while and then we moved up to the Syrian border to continue training and so forth, but mainly as we all realized then the Turks didn't know whether they were coming in with Germany or not, so we were occupying the Syrian Turkish border.

Just in case…

Along with what was called the Tenth Army I think up there then.

08:00 So there we were for the next couple of months until the crisis appeared or arose I should say in 1940 [actually 1942] in July, well the Eighth Army was back at, pushed right back right towards Alexandria in Egypt, and we were rushed down there and thrown into the fray on 10th July which we always think is the major battle that we won on 10th July and the 9th Division was used and particularly our brigade and

08:30 the 2/48th Battalion attacked on the 10th to capture Point 33 which was a bit of a hill, we called it the Hill of Jesus, we actually nicknamed it. A very vital spot.

So that was El Alamein?

That was at Tel el Eisa which is east [actually about ten miles west] of Alamein. We always maintained that was a major battle that saved that whole area.

Well I'll be really interested to ask a lot more about that later.

And then after

09:00 that the battle went on with the whole area, I think the Eighth Army 'til it built up to the main battle at Alamein in October and after October of course when we came out, there were 58 of us on our feet and over 700 casualties. Then back to Palestine, refitting, chaps coming back from hospital and so forth, divisional parade which was our pride and joy, we

09:30 were very thrilled with that and then we came home. Had a fortnight's leave staging in Seymour, I should say, and we did a march through Melbourne and we went up to the tablelands to start jungle training. From there we went, we landed in Milne Bay in New Guinea and then we prepared for the landing up at Lae and Finschhafen.

And then you got sick didn't you?

I got scrub typhus in New Guinea. I was lucky,

10:00 well I'll qualify that but as I recall there six of us evacuated, I don't know if they were all from my battalion or not because I was out like a light then. The other five died on their way back and I recovered.

So the scrub typhus saved your life in a funny way?

Well it saved my life in the sense that I was a Company Commander then and another officer took over my company

10:30 and he was killed doing perhaps what I would have been doing later on, we adopted a sort of a jungle drill which we used for various situations in the jungle, fighting. And he was doing what I would probably have been doing and he was killed. So that's why I say I was lucky. Everybody said I was lucky to survive scrub typhus, which I was, anyway we got over that and later on rejoined the battalion.

So you must

11:00 **have been home for quite a while were you, with the typhus, because I'm just looking at my history of the 9th Battalion [9th Division] and your next battle was Tarakan wasn't it?**

Yes, that's right.

1st May '45.

Yeah that's right. We were very unhappy with that period after we got back from New Guinea, we rebuilt the battalion, of course a lot of fellows didn't come back, with malaria and things like that. We built up

11:30 the battalion and so forth, we were doing amphibious training down off the Queensland coast and back into the jungle, we were fed up with it to be honest. And it was at this stage when the Yanks were preparing to go and do the landing in the Philippines at Leyte and MacArthur wanted us to be used, our division, all he was interested in was having his photo taken with the famous 9th Division to be honest. This isn't recorded is it?

We're on camera, yes.

12:00 But you're not recording it?

Yes this is recording, sorry I thought you were aware of that.

No it's all right. We were told, I was an officer then, a few of us were in the know they wanted us to help them in the Philippines thing to do a diversionary attack on Mindanao Island, the big island to the south, which was full of head hunters and Japanese and

12:30 anyhow that was knocked on the head thank goodness, because we were only going to have couple of

cruisers and a destroyer to support us, the Americans were having two battle fleets to support their landings. I say that, that's how we felt about it. Anyway that was canned and we were still disgusted and we thought are we going to be used or aren't we going to be used. Then they came up with this business, the aim was from our point of

13:00 view, and Blamey, was to go and get up to Singapore and recover what we could of the 8th Division they were still tied up there. That was a thing. MacArthur wanted us to go and re-capture all the islands around the place for the Dutch people. Anyhow the long and short of it was it was decided that the 9th Division would do

13:30 the Tarakan job and Labuan and the 7th Division would go Balikpapan and our brigade was the ones that drew the unlucky straw to do the Tarakan business, they should have had two brigades there, it was a bit of a shocker.

And you went in there as Company Commander didn't you?

Yes

And so you were quite responsible?

Yes, yes

I mean it's a very responsible position…

Very responsible. A lot of pride and joy amongst the fellows

14:00 who were with you, there weren't many of the originals that were there, but there were quite a number of fellows that you got to know and so forth. It was nice to have that responsibility in the Company.

So you did take Tarakan?

Yes. Tarakan was captured eventually.

But then you got sick again didn't you?

I was again lucky, as it turned out, I had never recovered from scrub typhus even over that period of 12 months or so forth, and I

14:30 wasn't to know, I was classified at Ballarat that I shouldn't go back to front line service, but I argued the pitch and toss and there was a doctor there, I won't mention anybody's name but, he saw to it that I remained on A1 but the idea was that I went back to the battalion and the battalion was sent overseas again and I had to sign a form to say that I was going beyond

15:00 a certain limit, there was an area there that if you went north of that … we used to call it the AIF line which was a bit ridiculous anyway because militia forces weren't supposed to go beyond there and we were, we could be sent anywhere but anyhow that was all a bit of a mystery to me and I forgot all about it and so the medical officer, Frank Haymanson said that's a lot of nonsense and that was it. Anyway when we landed at Tarakan I was covered with boils, I had one on the lip I couldn't

15:30 talk and had them on me legs and had good fun going down scrambling nets and so forth and my Batman Ernie Diffey used to do all the talking for me on the radio and telephone because I was like this. And then after a few days anyway the strain got at me anyway and while I was having a conference with my commanding officer the following morning on this particular bridge that we were trying to capture, Frank

16:00 Haymanson, the doctor said to the CO [Commanding Officer], I'm evacuating Captain Macfarlane out forthwith. Half an hour later I was on my way down to the ship on the wharf.

So you were in Morotai when the war ended, was that right?

Yes. In hospital at Morotai. All those things they were a bit of a job I'll tell you now but as again, I was lucky.

Well hopefully we'll be able to go in and

16:30 **out the jumble a bit later on…**

If you can sort out the jumble then congratulations…

Well we'll have a go.

It's was all over a long, long period five and half years I think and there was so much that happened you know and so many things that we had to do, and there were so many wonderful blokes and fellows who you could really get beaten up about today, things you recall

17:00 you know, like things that you'll never forget, like in Tobruk. My Sergeant and my batman who were with me there, were both killed alongside me and Corporal Tex Alleyne on the other side he got badly wounded and so forth and we were being pulled out, and while they were lying there badly wounded, when I crawled over to see if they were all right the Germans,

17:30 I suspect it was the Germans, it wasn't the Italians, by the sound of the machine gun, opened up and fired on them while they were on the ground and killed them there, and they hit the other bloke but for some miraculous reason they didn't hit me. Later on when we finally pulled out of that particular area I brought Tex Alleyne back with me, I carried him out, and this is something that you can delete, but I will tell you my CO

18:00 said "Macfarlane why didn't you come out with the rest of your platoon?" after I'd gone through that and I'm afraid I said something that I've regretted for the rest of my life, I had to suffer seniority and he made me pay for that because I spoke back to my CO. He was an officer and he'd been in the First World War.

What did you tell him?

Pardon?

What did you say to him?

I'd rather not. Oh

18:30 it was something like, I reacted, and said "What was I supposed to do form them up in groups of four and march them down Cromer Road?" which was just a dirt sandy track. He heard me and just stamped off in a rage and took it out on me, and also some very good friends of mine at the time and even some closer friends after the war, a fellow named Bob Searle who only died a few years ago;

19:00 he was the I [Intelligence] officer and then the was the Adjutant a fellow named John Brock, Captain Brock both told me in latter years that I and my platoon were being recommended for recognition for that situation and also something had happened the week before, and he refused to sign it. Because of my indiscretion I had to live with that for the rest of my life. It's a

19:30 reflection on those fellows who were with me, the ones that were killed and those that survived and a lot of those fellows in that particular platoon were wounded later on in different actions and so forth. And only a few months ago a fellow named Carmen, Spud Carmen died, he and I were the last members of that original platoon, so now I'm on my own. Something I will live

20:00 with that for the rest of my life, I should have known better.

But it was a very human reaction I'm sure the other members of your platoon knew this.

I think what set me off was these fellows who turned round and machine gunned and these two fellows lying down beside me already wounded, probably already dead. But those things happened to everybody but that's probably, but there you are. This could be deleted too, another

20:30 experience I had at the end of the war, obviously I shouldn't have gone to Tarakan, medically.

You were too sick.

I disagreed with the CO again and I had responsibility to my troops, I though it was the right thing to do, and I was there putting forward my case at a conference with him about what we should do and he said "No I want it done that way." and so forth and etcetera. "Oh well that's that." And in the middle of that conversation Frank Haymanson,

21:00 I often say when I'm talking to fellow today about Frank Haymanson's, I can still feel his arm on my wrist or my shoulder, pushing me down, he said to the CO, "I'm evacuating Captain Macfarlane forthwith." Otherwise there probably would have been court martials though I'd had it. I was ready to… a lot of us didn't like him anyway, he came from another unit and took over our battalion and this happened

21:30 all the time.

Alan, we're just going to go back to where you were at the end of the war, you were at Morotai in the hospital, did you come straight home from Morotai?

I can't remember the date, yes I came straight home.

So from Morotai you came straight home?

Yes

Home to Melbourne?

I can't remember. I came home in stages. I wasn't a battle

22:00 casualty so I wasn't held up in any hospital. I think I came through Townsville where there was a hospital there I came back and I was at Royal Park I think, it used to be a recruiting place and it became a clearing place. I think I came through Royal Park but being an officer I was just sent home and then I was told that I was placed on the reserved officers, medically downgraded

22:30 and things like that you see.

So you stayed on the officer reserve for some time?

I was on the officer reserve for some time until in 1948 they were calling for officers who were prepared to help re-establish the CMF [Citizen Military Forces] which was called the militia before the war and CMF after the war. While having been in the Militia before I thought it was a damned good thing that we should still have it so I put my name forward and offered to help

23:00 and this fellow Bob Searle and I both, we were both accepted and we went and joined with the battalion or we formed a battalion called the Melbourne Rifles which was out Brunswick, Pascoevale, Essendon areas, 58/32nd Militia Battalion I think it was, and I was promoted to Major there during the course of my 4 years service there and I enjoyed it but I was still trying to get myself established in life and it took up an awful lot of time, the higher

23:30 you got up the more you had to put into it so I had to give it away. I spent 4 years at it.

And then you went back to school or you just got a job?

After the war I didn't know what to do, my only background was in the vines and the citrus up at Coomealla as I mentioned earlier, I didn't have any other formal of training whatsoever. I was married, my wife was a Canadian,

24:00 we had married before I went away, she wasn't too keen on going up where there was no roads, no electricity, no telephone and the place was full of flies and things, but I wanted to get a soldier settlement block. I applied for one to see how I went and I was to be allotted one so I had to decide yes or no, so I decided in favour of the wife and wouldn't do it, so took on a

24:30 part time course at the university which was available. I used to go once or twice a week, the rest was all by correspondence, on marketing and salesmanship and general management of the business like that which I did and then a chap who was in my battalion, a chap named Gus Oakley, said "Why don't you come and join me with dad?" Dad had had the business that'd been running from 1916 or something or other

25:00 in textiles, importing and exporting textiles. I said OK, so I joined him and there I was. That was great for a while going overseas and things, learning all the time, one year you were wealthy and the next year you were broke and so forth, as it is today in that sort of thing. It was always very foreign to me, I just wanted to go back on the land but anyway I stayed there; then a few years later

25:30 import restrictions were pretty severe and pretty hectic and the business was starting to disintegrate and I said to my friend Gus "I'll go and get another job, I'll go out somewhere." so I was a member of Legacy, actually working for Legacy in those days and a very good friend of mine who I worked with, Jimmy Leach, was the Melbourne Manager of BP [British Petroleum] although it was called COR [Commonwealth Oil Refineries Limited] then, it returned to the name BP a bit later on, they were just about to

26:00 launch a new oil on the market and he said "You'd better come and work with me." so I did. So that was quite an experience.

Did you have any children with your first wife?

I have a daughter, a daughter Janet. Anyway I did that for a couple of years I suppose until Gus rang me one night and said, "What are you doing?" and he said, "Are you still enjoying it?" and I said, "Yes, I'm still enjoying it, it's a good

26:30 salary, a car provided, what more can a young fellow want?" He said," I'm getting the business to come good, I'm getting so busy I'm going to have to get somebody to come and help." and I felt I had to go back. It was the worse thing that I ever did because two years later this finance restrictions and credit restrictions came in again and we were scratching and it was like that, up and down.

There were up and downs in your post war life.

27:00 More like a yo yo.

And you've stayed active with veterans' associations all the time haven't you; you've done a lot of work with the returned service?

Yes I've been tied up almost right from the start when the battalion's association got under way. We formed that in '48 in bits and pieces but it really got underway about 1950, and I've been out doing hospital visiting on a regular basis and all that sort of thing and looking after people and also I joined Legacy.

27:30 I was in Legacy for many years but I had to give that away because in Legacy everybody had to have a job to do and there was no dead wood and every time that I was interstate or overseas as I was 3 or 4 times, you came back you owed somebody a lot of hours doing the job for you while you were away so I felt I wasn't pulling my weight so I gave that away so I concentrated on the battalion and RSL [Returned and Services League] sub branch.

When were you awarded the OAM [Order of Australia Medal] Alan?

28:00 19? Four years ago, yes.

So that would be ’99?.

No, no I beg your pardon, it was after that it was… how silly of me…

But just recently?

Just recently, yes.

Yes. Well they waited a long time to recognize your service?

Well, I’m lucky. Somebody decided to put my name forward, that’s how it happens.

28:30 They put it forward unbeknownst to me, easy for me to say it now, but would have objected had I known because a lot of people earned it more than I did. Anyway, I was lucky.

But you know, it’s recognizing a huge contribution isn’t it?

That’s right.

And when was your book published?

My first marriage, I should have mentioned that, that broke up in the late 70’s,

29:00 1977-78, my wife and I decided to call it quits because she was a very clever, smart lady and she had an occupation which occupied a lot of her time, I was never home and when I was home I was always doing something for somebody else and we just grew apart particularly when our daughter who did nursing training and finished her training and went to England and she was over there for 6 years

29:30 nursing in England and we just called it a day. I drifted around on my own for many years and so forth and met up with Fay, my wife now, and she was having difficulties and so forth with young children, I used to help as much as I could, so finally she took out a divorce herself and I said that if I’m going to

30:00 continue helping her there is only one thing to do and that’s we get married, otherwise ta ta. That was my way of looking at it. Again it was up here you know. Twisted mind. I was very very lucky, she’s a lovely girl and let’s be honest she’s 25 years younger than me and how she puts up with me I don’t know but she does. We get on very well together. Our two boys are grown up now and are both independent,

30:30 working, but quite well, doing real well for themselves, the eldest boy he left home some years ago, he’s just built himself a new home and the youngest boy is about to go out next week end I believe. So, which is fairly nice, so in that domestic part again, lucky. Lucky Macfarlane, I should have a nickname really. That’s been life really.

And your book?

31:00 **When was that published. Can you hold it up so the camera can all see it. Just hold it up a little higher. And when was that published?**

That’s another part of it, must put this in too.

31:30 This is an annexure that we produce for the history, that’s our two colour patches by the way. Our original red and white diamond and then we changed to the T colour patch of the 9th Division colour change. That was produced to clarify a story about how we captured the Germans’ special unit which destroyed Rommel’s information. 621 Insignia it was, decipher unit.

32:00 I was on the formal committee, there was Bob Searle, these were all great blokes, Bob Searle, Archie Amiett, David Cumming, MacFarlane, Bob Searle and John Shaddock, I’m the only one, oh John Shaddock’s still with us, he’s 90. We formed a committee

32:30 and decided to do something about it in the 60’s. And this was finally produced in 1968. It was 50 shillings to purchase. We’ve just had a reprint, a second reprint which is now $50 for pretty well the same book but we’ve put all those bits and pieces in it. But they were good days putting that

33:00 together. Bit of tear jerking and things like that. A lot of hard work. Bob Searle was magnificent… we had to contact … he would think of so and so that was involved in a particular action somewhere and we hadn’t heard from him so he would write to him and say “Come on what’s your story, have you got any photos?” and things like that you know and we set out to do it and for Bob Searle’s benefit and he’s worthy of it

33:30 of course, the army people in Duntroon I can’t think of the fellow’s name now, but they wrote it up as one of the best infantry histories that had ever been written and it was recommended to the infantry fellows in Duntroon that they should read it. We were very proud of that. We burst the buttons on our shirts from sticking our chests out.

And that’s very high commendation isn’t it?

34:00 Yes. I wish I could find that, I would like to show it to you, the letter. That's the story of our history. We've had two reprints, just finished one recently and 400 copies, we've sold them all, we've now got to decide whether to get some more done but we've got to be careful because as our membership goes down so does our finances and we can't afford to get caught with cost of books like that.

Tape 2

00:31 **Alan you were born in England?**

Yes

In 1918?

Yes in 1918

In 1918, so right at the end of World War 1. Was your father …

Just before the end of the war…

Was your father a soldier…?

My father was an artificer, I think they call them today. An engineer anyhow working in steel working in ship building. He came from Glasgow and

01:00 his family before him had all been in the ship building and bridge building and during the war he was moved from Glasgow and I think it was when he met my mother and he used to work at Camelairds which is on the Mersey River in England, building submarines, he was a specialist in curved steel, steel work and that was where he was working during the war. And my sister who is older than me she was born there and myself and my brother was born 6 months after, he was killed

01:30 in an accident in 1920.

How did he die?

He was in charge of showing all the local dignitaries from Liverpool and Manchester over this first ship they were starting to build after the war and somebody hadn't tied or strapped down, there were planks across all the steel framework to walk on for people working on the ship and he stood on one of the ends where the plank wasn't tied down and down he went. Poor fellow, but it was a nasty way

02:00 to go. It was a bit of a blow and a bit of a struggle for my mother and we stayed on there until I was 10, I was 10 when we left there and we were born over at Wallasey and I must tell you a couple of funny stories or one funny story. I was apparently a bit of a villain and I got my head stuck between the two rails in the school yard one day and they had to get the fire brigade out to get me. I suppose I was there for hours apparently

02:31 and I couldn't get my head out.

So that must be a strong memory?

Yes. That's why I get into trouble all these years over that. A couple of other funny incidents but they were little things that went on then, we didn't realize just how tough it was for my mother.

Of course there was no parenting pension, how did she survive?

I don't remember. I don't remember, she was just a dear lady. She came from what you might say

03:00 a reasonable, well to do family background and when she married this dreadful Scots fellow they disowned her and I think that made it very difficult for her indeed. Finally she decided that she would come out to Australia, how she lasted for those 10 years I don't know.

Do you remember her

03:30 **working?**

No I don't. She must have been working somewhere but I don't remember. I have been going to have a talk to my sister actually, knowing that this was coming up but I didn't know to what depth it was because she's just been moved into a nursing home and she's got a better memory than I have even though she's older than me. Yes it was pretty grim for dear old mum and of course she wanted to stay there because one of the members of her family, their only son

04:00 who was in the Navy Cadets at Portsmouth, but he's older than us but they wanted mum, for my brother Malcolm and I to join the Navy as Cadets at Portsmouth, they used to go in and 10 and 12 years of age you know and she wasn't too keen about that. Anyhow she made a decision to come out to Australia and they said right ho you go, have no more to do with you, and away you go, and she came out here…

Do you remember

04:30 **the voyage?**

Oh yes. On the SS Vedict it was loaded, the heavy ship to came to Australia in those years, it was loaded up with steel for the Sydney Harbour Bridge, in the bowels of the ship. We got caught in a storm in the Bay of Biscay coming past Lisbon and those places and some of the steel shifted and the boat was on

05:00 a list, I used to know certain degrees to starboard and to port, and we limped into Capetown and we stayed there for 10 days trying to rectify this problem, of course they would have had to unloaded the whole ship to fix it properly, but they weren't able to do much about it but we had 10 days in Cape town climbing up and down Table Mountain and those places it was great fun.

And that would have been the first time that you had seen black people was it?

05:30 Yes.

And what did you make of that?

It was fascinating, they were all nice and friendly to everybody, because in Capetown itself the population was mainly white people, black people kept to the sides as we learnt in later years but we saw a few and all the people working on the ship were all natives and they were all singing away as they were working so it was fascinating for us kids.

Marvellous

06:00 **songs of South Africa…**

Oh yes. It was a wonderful experience. I've got some lovely photos of it, postcards and things and I lost my pocket money at the base of Table Mountain, I'll tell you about it later on. I think it was probably a threepence or something like that.

So you would have been upset to lose your pocket money?

Yes particularly when you had to wait until next week to get another one. It was never replaced. Anyway

06:30 that was a fascinating experience and we finally came on to Australia and arrived in Melbourne in October 1928. We moved into a lodging house it was called, they're probably called motels today, that style of accommodation in Melbourne and we were only there 2 days and we were robbed and mother lost all her clothing and all her personal bits and pieces, jewellery and everything like that and the only thing she kept was her wedding ring.

07:00 That was a bit of a tragedy but as kids we didn't know anything about it and just didn't realize just how bad it was, but it was a hell of a set back for her. And then shortly after that I think the Salvation Army had something to do with the placing children in schools and things like that. We were going to a school in Carlton just out of Melbourne. Malcolm and I it was decided that we were to become dairy farmers,

07:30 sent up to Healesville to live with this couple on this big dairy farm along the Yarra and from memory I think there were over 100 cows involved on the place and we were given a little horse each, we used to ride to help, we'd used get up early in the morning in the dark and bring in the cows and help milk, we'd already been taught to milk and then we'd ride our horses up to school, the little red brick school was on top of the hill at Healesville

08:00 and come home again and bring the cows in again at 3 o'clock, 7 days a week of course.

Were they kind to you, the couple?

As I remember, they were, they always seemed to fighting and arguing between each other as I recall. Anyway it got to the stage when Malcolm and I would get home from school one particular afternoon and here's the lady there, I can't remember their names, lying right

08:30 across the front threshold of the door, the doors were open, looked at her and as a 10 year old, I thought she must be dead so galloped off down to nearest neighbour and told them that Mrs so and so was very ill or she was dead and they came down. Anyhow the next thing the police were there and she had committed suicide and had drunk a bottle of iodine. Turned out that they were alcoholics. The two of them managing this dairy farm.

09:00 Perhaps that shouldn't go in there. But for 2 young boys like Malcolm and I were, it was a bit of a shock. Next thing we were rushed back to Melbourne for safekeeping and my mother had just accepted a position as an emergency chef at a big hotel at the Railway Station in Maryborough it used to be a big travelling centre in those days. We were sent out to a place called

09:30 Tally Ho which is just down the road here, this is not a punch line, but here I am now 60 years later back within a mile of the place which was run by the Salvation Army and I think the Church of England was involved in it too, Boys Home, amongst the apple orchards and we were put in there for safe keeping for a while until mother could find something to do with us. It was a dreadful place.

Was it?

10:00 A dreadful place.

In what way?

It was a shock to the system. We used to bath once a week in a big communal bath which would be twice the size of this room, a big concrete thing and Friday night was bath night and you'd get thrown in one after the other and pulled out the other and put another half dozen in and so on. It turned out that some of the kids were problem children being looked after by the Salvation Army and others there were homeless

10:30 like Malcolm and myself, there were two different types there and of course what happened we sat fighting amongst each other and they used to just let us go. Anyway…

So they didn't try to stop these skirmishes amongst these children?

I think, they thought the people who were responsible for that these boys sort themselves out.

What do you think about that?

11:00 Enough said. All we wanted to do was get out of the place. Mum used to come out once a… I have forgotten how long we were there, it must have been several months though because I can remember the apple trees being pruned and I remember eating apples of the trees, so we must have been there 4, 5 or 6 months. And she used to come out on the tram to Burwood, the tram

11:30 terminus is at Burwood the old place, which is now Warrigal Road and she used to wait there for the horse and jinkers to come out and pick up the visitors, they used to come out along this dirt track from Tally Ho and she got friendly with a lady called Mrs Bailey I think it was, yes, had the milk bar this one little shop on the corner and she used to sit in there. Anyhow that ended and mother remarried,

12:00 and we were taken up to live at Merbein.

What was her new husband like?

Pardon?

What was her new husband like, your new step-father?

Father would you believe was of Scot descent, a fellow by the name of McKenzie, we always ribbed him because he couldn't spell his name properly because he spelt in McK instead of MacK and I did that in all innocence one day and I got a belt behind the ears and I thought one day I'll get that back. He was a

12:30 hardworking fellow, as a stepfather it must have been difficult for him, I have experienced it myself, he had a family of three boys, two walked out and left him and the other one, the younger one, was still there and a daughter. But he was, he started this, he was one of the first pioneers at Coomealla he had been in the wheat growing country, growing wheat, producing wheat

13:00 in the mallee. Later on a house was built over there and we moved over there but in the meantime we had been in Merbein some three years I think it was in this house there, where I went to school and I used to work in the bakehouse on a Friday night, kneading dough and helping get what we called the cakes and things ready for the weekend and what not. And at 8 o'clock in the morning,

13:30 without any sleep, I'd go out and help a bloke on a cart delivering bread and so forth. I was determined to buy myself a bicycle which I did. Anyway away we went the house was built and Coomealla and we moved over there. I went to school at Wentworth.

At this time Alan the depression is well and truly affecting heaps of Australians, were you aware of that at the time?

Probably not

14:00 so much as my mother and my step-father would have been and this family who were older than us, my sister would have been more aware of it because she was going to school in Mildura and met some people who befriended my mother and they looked after her, and my brother and I were going to school at Coomealla and we were sent off to Wentworth. And then he went into the Mildura Technical

14:30 school later on, he wanted to be a mechanical engineer, electrical engineer, which he did become. But it was grim, we were dependent upon the crop, your dried fruit and your citrus every year. And there were times when things weren't too good as we were recovering from the depression, you'd have to get an OK from the bank to write a cheque to pay for your monthly

15:00 groceries which were delivered from people called Bowerings from Wentworth, and then when you were able to do that, you'd ring them up and say OK they'd deliver, they couldn't deliver anything until they knew the cheque was right.

And did you have enough to eat, did you have enough clothing?

We all had sufficient clothing we were well clothed, my mother saw to that. I think we always had enough to eat, maybe the same thing from day to

15:30 day. Butter, if you had any butter or margarine, margarine wasn't thought of in those days I don't think, all those sorts of things they used to get wrapped up into a tin and put into an underground tank to keep cool. All that sort of business.

So you'd make your own butter…?

Yes, we had a cow, that's a thing that I resented it because everybody in the district knew that Alan Macfarlane could milk a cow

16:00 so if anybody wanted to go away, so they'd say "Can you look after our cow for a couple of days?" Never admit that you can milk a cow.

All right, I'll remember that. That was the least favourite chore was it? Did you have a favourite chore did you have work that you enjoyed doing?

Yes, I enjoyed working on the block, I was interested in it, I used to gallop home, I used to ride a bike sometimes to school, but you got sick of that because you were always getting punctures with the bindieyes and all

16:30 that sort of thing so I preferred to ride and you would go up home on the horse and get home about half past three or something like that and you'd be straight out working on the block. Always work to be done, seasonal work, ploughing, disking, cleaning, weeding, pruning, and then the fruit crop, drying, dipping fruit, I used to work on the dip, dipping dried fruit and getting it off the rack, I used to like it, I liked it.

What kind of machinery did you have? How did you

17:00 **plough?**

Machinery in those days? Horses. My two young stepsons when I first met them were horrified, horses? They said, "Horses what do you need horses for?" Well I said, "We can clear 10 acres with them, I can handle a team of 10 horses dragging things around." We always had 2 or 3 horses doing the ploughing and the disk work. In those days, we used to keep a block neat and tidy, no weeds, today

17:30 you see vines and things growing and everything is let go. Different, totally different, but no I was very interested in it, very interested indeed and I wanted to go back, when my stepfather… I had a little ten acre lot up the road which I always understood was to be my start in life. I helped clear it in my spare time and got to the stage where we surveyed it and got the stage where we had all the water channels pegged out for the concrete,

18:00 we were starting to put posts in for the trellises, he came home from Mildura one Saturday or Sunday afternoon and announced that he had sold the lot. That was just after we had taken the 37 crop off and he wanted to buy an egg producing place, a place called Murrumbeena down here in Melbourne, which used to be egg farms and market gardening.

18:30 **That was disappointing?**

What was I then…. I would have been about 16… 17 I think. So that was a bit soul destroying as far as I was concerned. Had a very friendly neighbour over the road, a fellow named Norman Eddy and he was a young father and also like an elder brother to me and he took me under his wing from very first time that I met him. I first met him when I first joined

19:00 up with the militia, he used to take me into Wentworth with him in his car, and I used to think fancy people having motor cars. We got one shortly after that but I wasn't allowed to touch it except, this is very disjointed I know, but I was very keen on football and cricket and I was allowed to play and sometimes I was allowed to take the car provided I put my own petrol in it although there was a big drum of petrol there in the sheds, I wasn't allowed to use them

19:30 and petrol was 10 pence a gallon up at the local store, at Coomealla, 10 pence a gallon so it wasn't a big hardship, I used to get, I was then getting 4 shillings a week pocket money, things were starting to improve but I'm getting away from the subject. This fellow who had befriended me he was a great bloke, died some years ago, he and I just started talking

20:00 and people were starting to think about modernizing the operation in vines and citrus with their equipment and this fellow was talking about buying one of the first Ferguson tractors that were being offered about that time and I said "Well I don't want to go to Melbourne." and he said, "Would you be prepared to help me if we get to organize and start

20:30 a contracting business instead of people buying all this equipment, get somebody to come in and do all this work for them, all their seasonal work for them?" and he thought this was a terrific idea. And that's what we were planning to do, we were going to take probably 12 months to 18 months to organize and so forth, I came down to Melbourne with the family, I drove them down, we had a car accident at Wycheproof, we were locked up there for 14

21:00 days, my stepfather and mother were in hospital and my young brother was in hospital, the car tipped over, we had luggage strapped up on top of the car and went into a bit of a skid in the mud and away we went. Got over that, came on to Melbourne and I was very unhappy and I saw this place, going out

collecting eggs, growing grasses, cutting it all up to feed WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s and things and what not and it didn't appeal to me at all.

Alan, I just want to go back

21:30 **to your time in Coomealla?**

You've heard of Dareton, where there's been trouble with aboriginals.

Yes.

Well the township of Coomealla is called Dareton.

I see…

The fruit growing area the general area is Coomealla in New South Wales.

I see, I see. Of course actually that's what I wanted to ask you about, because in the 20's and the 30's there still would have been quite a lot

22:00 **of aboriginal people living around there were there?**

No not in those earlier days no there weren't.

Right. What about people from ….

They used to live on the river banks a lot of them.

Did you ever see them?

Not very often there weren't many of them there. It has only been in latter years, well since after the war they started to congregate in that area, they probably came from all sort of places. The only

22:30 aboriginal that I remember seeing fairly regularly, was a bloke who used to row his boat down the Darling River, every year he'd come and pick for us. He used to row his boat down the Darling River, and up the Murray to Coomealla and he used to work for us and he used to pick his quota of buckets of fruit by three o'clock and away he'd go and be off again. He's the only bloke that I can ever remember to be honest. Perhaps I was too busy looking after myself and my own affairs, I don't know. But you never saw them around the areas.

23:00 **What about if you go down to the river?**

I shouldn't say this but you didn't see them around the fruit crop because they were very shy about working, but later on after I went back there after the war and I went up there three or four times while I was waiting to be interviewed about getting a soldier's settlement block, the place was full of them. And all the people who used to live around the area and around the township of Dareton had all cleared

23:30 off. Gone back to live on their blocks, or their family blocks or gone into Mildura or places like that.

And what about other immigrants, I mean you were an immigrant family, were there other immigrant families? Italians or?

Not an immigrant family in as much as my father wasn't, my step-father wasn't, he was a local man. A lot of the people who took up property there were mainly Australians, there were two or three areas there where they were altogether,

24:00 two or three Yugoslav families and two or three Greek families as I remember,r and the rest were all Australians; oh the fellow next door to us, he and his brother were English immigrants who came out to work there straight off the boat they both had a block each side by side Hubert and Albert Thomas.

So the Greeks, the Yugoslavs and the Australians, did they all

24:30 **mix did they all get on?**

They used to keep, mind their own business, but the used to meet up at the local store or up the street at the petrol pump at the grocer shop, they'd meet up there occasionally but they didn't intermix, they were too busy running their properties in those days. I must confess after the war when I moved back up there of large 80 percent of Coomealla area was owned by people of European descent,

25:00 people who had knowledge of the industry and so forth, so naturally they went there same as they did in South Australia and those places.

Yes it makes sense doesn't it?

Where was I…?

So your ambitions then were to stay in Coomealla and you loved working on the land?

Oh yes. I had plans, not on paper but very well advanced as to what we were going to do,

25:30 We were going to buy a couple of these tractors that were coming out, he would be able to arrange, this fellow would arrange finance for it and we'd get all the company ploughs and disks and all this modern stuff that you worked with tractors, totally different equipment to what you have with the horses and he had a spare 4 or 5 acres near his property which we would put some sheds up and we'd operate from there and I would be responsible for running it. I was only a

26:00 boy but in those day your age didn't mean very much if you were working out on a farm, whether you working in wheat country or farmland or whatever.

So at 16 you were….

Age had nothing to do with it, I was 16 or 17.

And you were ready to take on the responsibilities of a full grown man?

Yes. Anyhow I got a job driving the local baker's cart, that's how

26:30 I existed there. I used to get letters from mum saying that things weren't going too well and that my step-father didn't like what he was doing and he was neglecting it and so forth and would I please come down and help, so finally I felt I had to go down, back to Melbourne. I came down here at the end of '37 I think it was and went out

27:00 to live with them in Murrumbeena, a nice home, nice property but eggs, ooh it didn't appeal to me nor was there an income sufficient enough to support me and the rest of the family. My sister was nursing there, training at Royal Melbourne Hospital and my brother was still at school, tech school somewhere, I forgot, so I decided I had to get a job.

27:30 I got a job first of all through my sister's fiancé, they were engaged, who knew some people in South Melbourne who had a timber mill. Holy mackerel, I remember a young fellow who had been working the land and suddenly going into a great big place which had great big circular saws and buzzes going around the place and dust. I lasted there for about six weeks, in the meantime I had applied for a job as a cadet trainee with a firm called Julius

28:00 Kayser who made lingerie and hosiery in Richmond, near Richmond station and I, shock of my life, I was called up for an interview and I was taken on as a cadet trainee and for two years you had to spend six months in the dye house and six months in the hosiery place, six months in the fabric business and six months with sales people or alternatively in the office, that was the two years training.

28:30 **And by this time you had joined the militia hadn't you?**

Yes. When I came to Melbourne I joined the militia down here straight away. I was fascinated with the 37/39th Militia Battalion which was in the Caulfield Hawthorn area.

Where do you thing that fascination came from Alan?

Pardon?

What fascinated you about the militia do you think?

29:00 I think the army life appealed to me, the fellowship, you loved learning about discipline, it wasn't the fascination about weapons, I mean that was part of it of course it was, but the fact that you were made to wear a uniform and you were mates with this bloke and mates with that fellow it just fascinated me, it always did. The 37th Battalion,

29:30 the 37/39th the 37th was called the Cameron Highlanders, they were associated with them, they wore tartan on their collars and Cameron badges on their caps and they had Cameron buttons and being a bit of a Scot descent I thought that will do me. The 39th they had different badges again but they were amalgamated and that went on. And after a while the 37th Battalion was moved down to Gippsland and the 39th were amalgamated with the 24th Battalion and

30:00 I stayed on with the 39th Battalion and we were all moved into the 39th section of the joint command. Of course we lost our Cameron badges and all that sort of thing but that didn't matter and there I was up until war broke out.

Now were you aware, you would have heard about World War 1, were there any veterans in your life were there any…

Only the World War 1 veterans that I knew in the army.

Right. Did they talk to you about World War 1 at all?

No. The only ones…

30:30 This may sound cruel I know but us fellows who were privileged to be in a unit like the infantry or artillery or sappers in front line service, was a privilege in my book. We didn't talk much neither did the blokes from World War 1. We always made a remark that the people who do all the talking were the fellows who worked in the canteens, they mostly came home

31:00 and talked about the horrors of war and how tough it was.

And why do you think that the front line people didn't talk Alan?

There were things about that were very personal particularly if you had been in action, you might have been in once or ten times it didn't matter, it was always the same, the people with you, you were lucky to get out and other

31:30 people didn't, and the suffering and so forth that went on, hell you don't talk about that. Often you used to get remarks after the war, or you'd read in the paper, or someone would make a crack about Anzac Day, oh they all go along and they all got to a reunion and get full and carry on and so forth like that, some did to a certain extent, all those fellows died at a young age I might add. We used to go along and talk about the happy times, the funny things,

32:00 "Remember when so and so did so and so, oh yes that was great wasn't it,?" that's what used to go on.

So even with each other, you didn't talk about the difficult stuff.

Perhaps if two or three of us were having a quiet chat together we might mention something about oh that was so and so…gee, but not to anybody else. My wife, Fay,

32:30 who is so much younger than me, she's fascinated, she helps me, she'd a tremendous help, she tries to question me sometimes but I won't talk to her, it's something that I can't explain it's something that you're trying to forget, something that you would never want to do again unless you had to,

33:00 hell it wasn't funny seeing blokes get killed or wounded or knocked about, or blokes nearly dying with malaria as you were in the islands and dengue and typhus and all those things and blokes being mangled and what not and like in the desert , the desert war was totally different thing to up north here, I mean you're roaming

33:30 around with armoured vehicles and people would be getting run over and their weapons (UNCLEAR) with tanks didn't want to talk about it. I'm talking to you now about it perhaps more than I ever have in my life. And I think that there is also a fear that if you start getting wound up too much you get too deep.

What would be too deep, what would that mean?

Getting down to the nitty gritty,

34:00 the blood and guts, which is what war's about, whether you're in the Air Force, Army or Navy if your operational, that's what it is, blood and guts and I mean guts in the true sense of the word of bravery and being mangled, injured.

So when you say you're going deep down into the nitty gritty's that's still a frightening prospect now

34:30 **is it?**

Yes. I'm no different to anybody else but my battalion which I am extremely proud of, as I mentioned earlier, there were two main attacks in Tobruk. One was at Easter time against the [2/] 17th Battalion, the NSW

35:00 Battalion, it was a sort of a feeler effort but it was bad enough, they performed magnificently that was where the first VC [Victoria Cross – won by Corporal John Edmondson, 3 April 1941] was won but it was different when they turned on us, he turned on the whole thing, we had to be in that particular spot that he picked to choose on and as I said earlier during those two and a half days there were over 80 armoured vehicles of different types in the assault,

35:30 we lost the whole of one company, half of another one and two thirds of another one and some bits and pieces of the company I was in. Hell, who wants to talk about that? Except for the bravery of it they had to stay in their weapon pits, their sangers [salients] and their little holes in the ground when they ran out of ammunition, what do you do then? What do you do? In those days we used to carry

36:00 50 rounds of ammunition, today they carry 200 or 300 rounds all the weaponry they've got now.

So what did you do?

Well when you run out of ammunition you say what do you do, put your hands up and get killed or are you going to surrender. You're surrounded, it wasn't all… Later on, you see, they sent in some vehicles to bring Italians on 1st November

36:30 at the end of Alamein as far as the 9th Division was concerned we were finished, they sent in those great big infantry trucks to bring us out, and it's in the book actually, and the CSM [Company Sergeant Major] said, "What are all these trucks for, sir?" he said, "I've been sent up to bring out the 2/24th Battalion." He said, "Would you hurry up?" he said, "I don't want to lose any of my vehicles with shelling." and the RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] looked at him and said, "Well, you can send them all back except one, there's only

37:00 58 of us left." That's true. And there were over 700 of us when we started you see.

That must have been devastating.

But it's all there. That book should be compulsory reading. And then in New Guinea along with everybody else, compared with that, it was fairly easy going, we had a lot of casualties, battle casualties, but we had to

37:30 cope with the malaria and sickness and all that sort of thing, totally different war to these blokes, we were called the glorious 9th, a lot of pansies they said, all they did was fight in the desert you know. It was totally different but the casualties were high enough but mainly with sickness, some battalions were worse off than others but then lo and behold we did

38:00 this Tarakan show which was most inadequate, the famous historians who sit in their armchairs and write about it say we should never have been sent there, but there should have been two brigades go in and it would have been over in a week on this little island, but we were there for months and our battalion copped it again. There were more casualties in Tarakan for example,

38:30 of the brigade, than the whole of 7th Division at Balikpapan and the rest of our battalion up at Labuan where the other two brigades were put together and our battalions' casualties were highest of the other two battalions at Tarakan.

When the historians say….

Don't think we'd brag about those things. So talking about the war, think about the good bits.

39:00 Doesn't matter, there weren't any. It's like somebody who keeps asking me what do you think about the war, nobody likes war, nobody likes war and particularly fellows who have been in it don't like it, but if they were volunteers, service personnel in either or any of the services, if they had to go they would go again because

39:30 sometimes these thing have to be done but not from choice, not from choice. If that power up there says we are going to have a war then we'll have a war and there's nothing you can do about it. But I don't even like thinking about it.

40:00 I think what drives me and keeps me sane is this, as far as my army service is concerned is my pride in what we did, in what my unit did, what my formations did, what the fellows in the Navy did what the Air Force did although we always complained that there was no ruddy Air Force in Tobruk and there wasn't that's why it was such a dreadful place to be in, but the Navy fed

40:30 us brought up ammunition and so forth but….

Tape 3

00:31 **Now Alan in 1939 you were living in Melbourne you were in the Militia, were you aware that war was a possibility?**

Yes.

You were aware of Hitler?

Very much so very much so. I thought as most of us in my little group anyway, it was war it had to happen

01:00 because Mr Chamberlain had let Mr Hitler off on three occasions with his umbrella and so forth trying to keep peace in our time, as he called it, it just couldn't go on. And anybody who thought about it realized that Germany had been rearming all those years and weren't supposed to be, weren't allowed to, they just went ahead and did it, they weren't doing it for fun and the longer it went on the more the population was going to be behind him anyway.

01:30 So I think it was just as collective thing.

You were aware of Hitler. Were you also aware of Japan, that Japan had invaded China?

No. I'm glad you asked that. I don't think anybody ever gave Japan a thought. I mean the fact that Japan had been carrying on in China and doing some pretty brutal things, it was like a domestic thing up there it didn't enter into it, it was just insignificant

02:00 compared to what was going on in Germany. They kept their preparations pretty much under cover really. All the time of course they were hoping to go in and join in once it happened.

So where were you when the declaration of war came?

I was sitting in my fiancé's flat in St Kilda

02:30 and listening to the radio that night and I was in my uniform and had been out that day and it was almost a sigh of relief that it had happened at long last, it was very tear jerking of course. My wife who was a Canadian, her father had been in the regular army in Canada before she came out here and

03:00 it was a very moving moment and you sort of said, “Well let’s get on with it.” That’s how I look at it now what I felt then as a boy I don’t know but I think that’s how I would sum it up.

Get on with it now.

Well it’s happened, war is declared let’s get into it do what you have to do.

So you knew that you would enlist?

Yes, well even if I wasn’t

03:30 allowed to enlist or I couldn’t leave the militia, I would still be in the militia anyway whatever happened.

You’re already in the militia…

Yes, well I suppose at that moment the AIF hadn’t been called. We didn’t know what was going to happen yet we knew we were in the army and we were going to be involved in some shape or form. I think we were only boys, we didn’t really think at that time

04:00 that as were in the militia forces we couldn’t be sent overseas to Europe if that was necessary anyway, because it was only a couple of days later that they announced the formation of the second AIF and we all wanted to be in it. But as in our situation in the militia we were told that we couldn’t all join, they wanted to keep the militia forces in some shape and tact, particularly if you were in a specialist unit like that.

Which you were weren’t you?

Which I was.

04:30 I was in the mortar platoon and it was support company it was called in those days Mort platoon and machine gun (UNCLEAR). Some of my mates and one of our sergeants, a fellow named Sergeant Butchy Blake, they all enlisted straight away and half of the platoon went to the 2/7th Battalion along with the CO, Theo Walker who was CO of the militia battalion. Of course when that happened, we all wanted to go, we all wanted to go together

05:00 but the edict was issued that they couldn’t allow the militia forces, battalions to be broken up at that stage, so we had to wait our time, so I finally enlisted later on in March. Some of us when we were actually interviewed, we were registered medically examined and later on when we did go in, we discovered that we had a reasonably low regimental number

05:30 which surprised a lot of people and that was probably the reason for it.

Now Alan during those months then between September 1939 and March 1940 you were still active in the militia, what sorts of duties were you assigned?

Well various security duties were assigned to the different units like, there was the radio communication system down at Listerfield from memory just down the road

06:00 I think and I was involved in an internment camp which was being built up at Tatura in the country where all the people who were being rounded up as internees, Germans and Italians and people were being rounded up and put in that camp up there. We were taking it in turns in going up there for 10 days or 24 days, some of us, 14 days I should say, full time guarding that particular place.

06:30 **How did you feel towards those people, what was your attitude towards them, do you remember? Did you regard them as the enemy?**

Oh yes. Well they were obviously there for that reason, they were people who were under suspicion, people who could have been helping the enemy’s cause in the country and we didn’t hate them or anything like that, didn’t dislike them, just made sure that they weren’t going to get out.

Were there only men

07:00 **in Tatura or were there women and children?**

Oh there were a lot, I can’t remember how many. A lovely big old home was made as the depot and they built the compound all round it in Tatura. No I couldn’t remember how many were there but there was a large number. Most of them came from St Kilda and east St Kilda area so I’ll leave the rest of that to you.

Were there only men or did they intern women and children as well?

No mainly men.

07:30 Some women who were done but they were placed elsewhere as far as I can remember. They were of particular interest not because they were wives of somebody, they were of particular interest as

internees. There was one fellow, who I remember by name, was a fellow named Gus Frolich, he was an Olympic swimming champion, he was training our young swimmers in those days as a coach, but he was one of the first that was rounded up. Whether it was necessary or otherwise I don't

08:00 know but you didn't mess about, if you were suspicious of somebody you did something about it I suppose that's how they picked on these various people. But it was all a game, an adventurous game for us, we used to go up there for a fortnight at a time and so forth and come home, take the uniform off, go back to work for a week, next thing you know you're back in again.

And how did your family respond to the war at that time, your girlfriend, your fiancée at that time?

08:30 Well I suppose we didn't talk about it very much. Naturally they were upset about it but they realized I was in the militia and I was committed to it. My mother I think would have been very proud of me but also very worried I imagine. She never said one way or the other. She was always very proud of her eldest son, and later on my youngest son enlisted in the AIF and he was in the armoured division and of course she had the whole

09:00 family and Peggy, her husband, was in the army too so it was a family affair so by the time she allocated her sympathy for three blokes, there wasn't much left for me. I don't know, I think mum, knowing my mother, she would have been proud of the whole thing. No, it's inevitable and that's it.

And at that time, you're thinking about going to war and about

09:30 **enlisting in the AIF and maybe going off to fight a war in Europe, did you feel you were a British subject or an Australian citizen?**

Australian citizen with English background, or I should say Scottish background. My father was a Scot I think I was more concerned with that. I was always an Australian, when I was even younger and we realized

10:00 that the AIF had been formed to help the mother country because she was going to cop the lot as she did and we didn't know where we were going of course but that was in the lap of the gods.

But at that point in time Australia wasn't being attacked, people weren't really aware of the threat from Japan so really the urge to go to war was to

10:30 **defend England was it?**

The mother country.

And was that a strong feeling?

I think it was with everybody in those days. That's 1939. I think it was the mother country and a bit later on when Italy decided to throw in too I think it even became more so because it was coming more this way. I think that the mother country, the King and all that sort of thing, was very much part

11:00 of our life in those days. I suppose how many others would have known who the Governor General was then, I don't remember but the mother country, king and country, God, King and Country actually it was, what we took on an oath.

And that was an important part of your sense of yourself?

That was your basis, it wasn't

11:30 oh hell, I might get a chance to get a trip overseas or anything like that as some of the fellows I know admit to that now but they don't mean it, they don't mean it. A lot of talk was going around about the first people who joined the 2nd AIF were fellows who were unemployed and had nothing better to do, that was rather unfair, it may have been true in some instances I know, I agree, it was rather an unfair comment to be making.

Well some

12:00 **called them 5 bob a day murderers didn't they? What was that about?**

Well I suppose in this day and age some of our journalists, or publicity people and some people like that are much the same, like they were about this recent thing in Iraq, but anything to do to compromise or embarrass the government and they don't care who they hurt in doing it.

It must have been terribly

12:30 **insulting for those men in the AIF.**

It would have been. Those first few thousand people who enlisted in those early days, those accusations were thrown around in the press and became public talk, it think it was dreadful it seemed shocking. Whether it was true or not, and I don't think it was true, there could have been some individuals who said oh this will do me without thinking beyond that, that could have been a possibility and

13:00 going on a few months later, people had to stop and think and you see us fellows that joined later on,

not so much my group that got in as soon as they could after January, February, March of that year there was a bit of a slow down in recruiting because they couldn't cope with them and they didn't know how many formations they were going to make, recruiting slackened off until about the middle of the year, June when they really started again. They didn't know where they were going to go and what was going to happen and so forth. Those fellows by the same blokes

13:30 who went in earlier particularly the earlier blokes, they called those fellow the deep thinkers, so it was going both ways you see, you couldn't do the right thing, if you enlisted earlier you were a 2 bob murderer and if you enlisted earlier you were a deep thinker. Didn't the bells ring loud enough for you fellows and all that. Of course the blokes that went in early, and the press who were behind them, who were rubbishing some them on one hand,

14:00 egging them on to rubbish the fellows who enlisted later on. Yes….

So finally you did get your transfer to the AIF in 1940? In March of 1940. Were you pleased?

Yes I knew where I was going. I knew it was happening and I was a bit disillusioned when I found that

14:30 I was stationed at Caulfield race course, a great mate Peter Hayman, we both went in together, we were nabbed and used as instructors because of our militia background and we thought we didn't come into the AIF for this we were a bit resentful to it. There were various tasks we had to do and so forth until one day a big tall skinny Major Spowers came strolling up

15:00 towards us, he spotted both of us and I give him full marks, he recognized us as one of the two kids from his militia battalion, he was being 2IC [second in Command] and he stood there with his hands on his hips and he said, "What are you two young fellows doing here?" and we told him that we were unhappy and so forth and we were both hoping to get into the 2/7th Battalion as I think I mentioned earlier, Theo Walker was the CO of the 2/7th but they were already to go

15:30 I think, they were on their way. "Well." he said, "I have just been informed that I am to form and command the 2/24th Battalion, so you had better come with me and we'll be going up to Wangaratta where we will form the battalion." Wangaratta showground was being used for a recruitment area. He said, "Don't leave here until you hear from me." Next thing we know we're shot out to Broadmeadows under the banner of Corps

16:00 Headquarters Troops and we're still being used as instructors and they called us the employment platoon which was instructors, drivers and all that sort of thing and after a few days a week, I've forgotten now exactly when it happened, with much relief to me we got leave of orders to report to Spencer Street Station to go to Wangaratta and we marched into Wangaratta and I was a Lance Corporal would you believe it or not, with no extra pay,

16:30 and marched into Wangaratta and the battalion headquarters were already formed, they were in the process of taking over the 10th infantry training unit which it was called and I am recorded in the history as being the first NCO [Non Commissioned Officer] in the battalion because they didn't take the one stripe off because there was no extra pay involved anyway, so I marched in there, that's how we got up there. We were there for a while and finally we took over officially

17:00 in the order of battle we became the 2/24th battalion on 1st July.

And up until then had your training just been drill, so that's what you were instructing the troops in?

Drill, marching and that sort of thing. Peter and I and several others with ex militia backgrounds were being used training fellows in rifle drill and old Lewis machine guns, the equipment was appalling

17:30 in those days, appalling, when you think about it we had no right to be involved in the war at all, we weren't prepared for anything. But that's another story. No we were used as instructors mainly really…

What was the equipment like Alan, can you tell us a little about that? What makes you say that we weren't ready?

We had lots of rifles which were left over from World War 1 which had been in storage and so forth and been used by the militia of course but

18:00 the emergency forces had a few Vickers machine guns but the automatic machine guns used by infantry platoons was called a Lewis gun which was a relic of World War 1 and the new Bren gun had been invented and was in use then but we didn't have any, we didn't see any until later on before we went away, I think we had three for us to play around with and have a look at before we went to the Middle East.

18:30 We weren't just ready, we had enough there to carry on for CMF or militia forces, peace time forces but not to got to war, not to go to war.

And you were aware of that then were you?

We were very much aware of it at that stage, yes. When I went to the 24th Battalion.

Did you have any qualms about going?

No. I didn't think about it. You know we'll get something later on. Some of us knew that we were going to the Middle East

19:00 and we'll get more stuff over there and we'll probably be re-equipped, the stuff we had there anyhow we wouldn't be taking with us anyhow. All your personal equipment you took with you.

And you were promoted through the ranks quite quickly weren't you? You left Australia as a lieutenant.

Six of us were made sergeants in a very short time, all the ex militia fellows,

19:30 all the fellows Peter Hayman, Ted Harty, Alec Dennett, Peter Hayman the others John Mair, I've mentioned him but there were 6 of us and we became sergeants fairly soon in the piece. Just before in September, we were marched to Bonegilla, a new camp being built up there, marched from Wangaratta, the night

20:00 before we marched from Wangaratta and the cat got out of the bag and we were told that were being commissioned and that we would be officially informed when we got to Bonegilla and that's how it happened. We were all delighted young fellows, one that was a bit older than most, it was rather a thrill and rather daunting actually because having been in the militia all that time and looking up to these officers

20:30 and senior NCOs of war suddenly you found you were involved in it and you had these responsibilities. Anyway…

You were a very young man to be shouldering…

I was 21, I was 22 when I was commissioned in September. Anyway we finally got to Bonegilla, we left Wangaratta and all of us were sent on leave to go and get our uniforms and so forth

21:00 and when we got back we were going on final leave and I got the mumps and finished up by going into a tented hospital, it was the start as I remember of the 2 /7th AGH [Australian General Hospital] which went to the Middle East with us and I spent my final leave in hospital and I think I finally got home for 2 days, which wasn't very good.

Were you told that you were going overseas?

Oh yes, we knew.

So how did

21:30 **you tell your…**

We knew and that's when we started censoring the troops' mail. We had to do a lot of censoring so that was kept quiet. Rumours were rife everywhere. Of course the 6th Division had gone and we were 7th Division and were waiting for the 7th Division to go and the 8th Division after us, the 9th Division was formed over there. No we were aware of it.

So what did you tell your girlfriend and your mum?

I was married.

Oh you were married already.

22:00 Just married in May. Before I went to Wangaratta. They were as much aware of what was going on.

Had you planned that for a long time or was that something that you sped up because the war was on.

Say that again please.

Had that May wedding, had that been planned before the war broke out or?

No

22:30 when war broke out we decided that we would think about it. In the end we both agreed together that it would be better to be married before I went away as long as she was prepared to put up with the fact that I could be killed, and more than likely to be killed as not to be killed and then she'd be a widow before I came home. Well it was nice to

23:00 have known each other before I went away so we decided that that was that. In latter years I have often thought it was the wrong thing to do, however.

You felt like it was a hasty decision or?

No it wasn't. We talked about it for quite a while. Before I went to Wangaratta I used to be able to get home nearly every second night, I was either in camp at Caulfield racecourse or out at Broadmeadows

camp

23:30 and you were home quite a lot. It wasn't until I went to Wangaratta that you were in camp and that was it. No, we talked about it quite seriously. It wasn't, what was the term they used to use?

Shotgun wedding.

Oh no that was worse. Shotgun weddings were when you had to get married.

24:00 **Oh I beg your pardon.**

Not thought of these days. No if you found yourself that you were going to become a father before you were married, well that was a shotgun wedding. No it was a combined and very deep considered decision. She was a smart cookie, smart girl and I thought I was a man of the world in those days. Gee when you think back, heavens alive

24:30 we didn't know we were alive. Yes so that's how it all happened. Suddenly we were on our way to the Middle East and we went down by train to Port Melbourne, got on the Strathmore and away we went on the 16th November 1940 and we arrived in Kantara in the Suez Canal and in Palestine, Egypt on the 16th December, it took us a month to get there.

25:00 **Did you dock anywhere on the way?**

That's an interesting question. When we left Port Melbourne, there had been a bit of a scare apparently somewhere down outside the bay, we dropped anchor off Rosebud for the night, moved out again the next morning, apparently there had been a bit of a scare in the shipping lane or somewhere or other. We linked up when we were outside the heads, linked up with a ship from New Zealand,

25:30 the Vittori, had New Zealanders on it and then we linked up with two other ships that came out of Adelaide with the rest of our brigade the 48th Battalion and the 2nd Short Field Regiment and a few others and headed for the Indian Ocean, and all of a sudden we were steaming into Fremantle. There were some raiders in the Indian Ocean and our escort, our naval escort went out chasing them,

26:00 trying to find them, hunt them I suppose is the correct term, the suspected raiders, before we could go on. We were there for 10 days, 10 glorious days as everybody used to say before we left Australia. The Perth people are marvellous, we had leave nearly every night and so forth, but we used to go training, the only training we could do would be route marching, we were mainly concerned with everybody's health, building up the health side of it as you can imagine you've got a thousand

26:30 troops in different stages of health and whatnot, and also different age groups so the concentration was on getting fit and weapons training with the rifles and whatnot, getting used to handling them which we'd been doing for months, then we all got back on the ships and away we went. We called into Colombo for a couple of days and then up the Canal.

What was your impression of Colombo,

27:00 **I mean you'd seen people in South Africa, you'd been exposed to a different cultures there, at Colombo, how did that compare?**

It was similar in many ways I suppose. I suppose thinking about it there was an atmosphere for me, as you've said my experiences in South Africa earlier, these suckers going off to war,

27:30 what have you got, please, please, look at me… trying to sell us all sorts of things, take us down for all they could get. It was different, yes, yet in many ways it was the same. They treated us like a tourist ship, the ship was full and we had leave, of course we had trouble in getting some of the troops back on the boat and we had to leave the next day because we were under the command of the navy and once the navy

28:00 said right we must go we must cross over, the ships had to go, we had to go willy nilly. They were the early days of being a young baggy tail loop [Lieutenant] we were known as in those days, as young officers about the responsibilities we had getting troops together and so forth, it was all good fun

So the troops were off having a high time in Colombo were they? They didn't want to get back on board?

No. It was a strange country for everybody and so forth

28:30 and while they still had a few bob to spend they were out there having it. Generally speaking they were very well behaved but they were in a different country and they were spending their time riding around in rickshaws, and things like that and they'd spent all their money in the boozers. A lot of them went on trips up to Kandy, up to the tea country just to have a look around the place. It was a new culture.

Did you get them all back. Did

29:00 **you lose anyone?**

No I don't recall, I think they were all back, yes.

Did people get seasickness. Did your men get seasick?

Yes. Quite a number.

Did you have any remedies for that?

I have forgotten what there were would have been.... very very ordinary anyway but let's face it, shipping was the main means of travel in those days to go anywhere outside your country. There would have been some laid down rules and so forth but when you've

29:30 got a ship that would normally carry 300 passengers and so forth and suddenly it's got nearly 3000 troops on it, two infantry battalions and an artillery unit the nursing facilities would have been very far stretched, if you were seasick you were seasick and you put up with it and it if you did it twice, you'd get thrown overboard anyway because the troops wouldn't let you make a mess around where they were trying to sleep anyway. In the

30:00 army everyone looked after themselves and woe betide you if you didn't...

It sounds very harsh.

Yes. Some of the troops were in hammocks you know just on flat decks on various stations of the ship, they used to sleep in hammocks, they'd put them up at night time. A lot of them were still in cabins, the ship had only been half converted the Strathmore that we were on,

30:30 from a luxury cruise ship, not a cruise ship, a luxury liner. We were in a 2-berth cabin and there were 10 of us in it. Extra bunks had been nailed up the wall and there was one fellow from Tasmania from the 2/8th Field Regiment, he was a senior, he was a captain and we were all lieutenants, he was a senior but he just couldn't control us blokes, there were 10 of us. Pushing and shoving

31:00 and fighting. He was sleeping there. It was all good fun. We didn't know what we were heading for. We thought we did.

What did you think you were heading for?

We were going to a war. And Italy was then in it and probably we were going to be in Egypt to protect Egypt, Palestine, Syria, it could have come from either,

31:30 it could have come through Syria and of course it came through Libya through to Egypt that's how it all started as far as we were concerned against the Italians.

Did you feel like you were going to be Anzacs ?

No. No. To be honest I can't remember. To be honest I would say

32:00 we would no more have the nerve to call ourselves Anzacs in those days than fly over the moon. Those of us that knew what Anzac meant we were called Anzacs, we were called Diggers but that saved the peace because to be called Diggers, to be called Diggers was fair enough but to be called Anzacs I think was wrong, and we were probably called Anzacs in conversations, in press and things like that, I don't know. Us

32:30 fellows that knew about Gallipoli and knew about World War 1 and France, we held those people in awe but we hadn't experienced anything like that ourselves, we thought we were going to but we had no idea as to what it was going to be like. We knew we were going to war. To think about what those fellows had done before us as far as building our nation was concerned, let's face it, they did. It wasn't until

33:00 we got involved in it till we realized what it was all about. Imagination doesn't compare to the real thing. As we were talking earlier in the piece, blood and guts against realilty, or reality against blood and guts. Yes. What's next?

33:30 **Arriving in Palestine, that must have been impressive you were in the Holy Land.**

Yes it was impressive. Going back to being on the boat, we were steaming up the canal, a fellow came on board from the 2/14th Battalion actually who had gone on the convoy ahead of us, actually they were a Victorian battalion and I knew some of them and there was a fellow named Gerry O'Dea he came up the rope ladder and he was coming to tell us how to behave

34:00 ourselves with the Palestinians and the 14th Battalion were preparing our camp for us and he told us how to do this, to be careful of this and you don't do this and that...

Tell me, what was the etiquette?

All very interesting... Oh no I couldn't do that.

Tell me, were you to bow or were you to shake hands?

Oh no no. Treat them with respect but above all be very wary of "cliftie" which was, you'd lose anything, if you put anything down

34:30 there it would disappear, making us aware that we had to be careful of your own personal arms, your equipment, clothing and things like that and treat them with respect whether they did or not that didn't matter, but that was the guts of it. One thing about health, it's the land of oranges of course, Palestine, and be careful about eating oranges because it was known that they polished their oranges for you with urine

35:00 to make the skin shine on the oranges.. That's true. The sort of thing that we were told about them, but Gerry O'Dea . He was giving us a background as to what the country was like and what to expect and so forth so when they got off the boat and so forth so it wouldn't be a shock but it was still a pretty rude shock. When we got off the boat and so forth.

What shocked you?

35:30 Oh the culture of everything and the way they lived and so forth, the way they existed.

What sorts of things, like the poverty or the dress…?

Well the dress was a different thing altogether and their colour and they weren't but they always looked dirty compared to us, their dress and they were

36:00 always out to make a coin out of you. "Baksheesh, baksheesh." was a common saying, looking for handouts and so forth and the language, you couldn't converse with them, we learnt to later on, but you couldn't converse with them and you didn't know what they were saying about us and they didn't know what we were saying about them, although there were a few smart cookies amongst them, a few smart cookies about the place.

Were you given any instructions on how

36:30 **to relate to the women? To the local women?**

No not specifically, only generally to the population, I think we were taught how to relate to the women when we went on leave before everybody was told about this, we had to pass it on from company to company, troop to troop whenever they were going on leave in Palestine.

And what were you told?

Well to mind your own business was the easiest thing to say. If you want to get into trouble well that's

37:00 your problem. But just behave yourselves.

So the troops were advised not to mix with the local women?

They weren't advised not to, they were told to behave themselves and to behave I don't remember there were no instructions ever issued you must not do this or you must not do that. You must behave yourselves, remember you are from Australia; you are an Australian soldier,

37:30 you are here representing your country and you mustn't do anything to belittle that and that was the message we used to preach all the time.

And did you have any issues with that sort of thing with your troops?

Oh yes of course you did of course you did, of course you did. We had issues with that even in Perth when we were there for a few days. Troops getting into trouble and so forth.

38:00 Whatever in life in the world where there's male and there is female there's trouble, that's life.

Did any of your troops form relationships with the women in Palestine, any marriages, any…?

No. Not with the local people no. There were some relationships formed with women folk in the nursing service, there was a hospital in Kantara and there were two in Palestine

38:30 all their associate staff and things like that and later on the VADs [Voluntary Aid Detachments] went over and joined the hospitals and there were some relationships that were established some of which were lasting.

So you didn't have a whole lot of Palestinian husbands turning up with the machetes and going ….

No they were only interested in pinching the rifles if ever they got the opportunity to do. Yes.

39:00 First of all, for security we used to put the rifles around a chain around the centre tent pole but that didn't work too well because in the middle of the night they were so clever, they'd release the guy ropes softly, pick up the tent pole from outside, pull up the tent pole like that, all the rifles were chained to the pole, the pole would fall to the floor and they'd pinch the whole ruddy lot.

39:30 That did actually happen. They were very smart cookies. We had to resort to other means then for security. That did actually happen.

My word that's incredible.

Tape 4

00:40 **4th April, Benghazi's 3rd April's tasks with garrisoning with Cyrenaica.**

That's the name of an area in Libya that has been settled by Italians. Farmers they were.

01:00 **So was that you first posting?**

In the desert?

Yes

By various stages we went up to in the Benghazi area and we were at oh gosh… can you turn it off for a minute…

So can you tell us about your first deployment Alan?

01:30 My first?

Your first deployment, you were sent up to Benghazi?

Yes, I'm sorry. We went up to the Benghazi area and our battalion were around the Tocra area and in my particular case, in B Company, I was sent to Tolmeter, the idea was to prepare tank traps up this gully by hand with rocks and things which was a ridiculous situation

02:00 but anyhow a few days later I was sent back to Tobruk where the battalion was mainly concerned.

Sorry, but can you just describe what a tank trap is and what does it look like?

Well all we could do was try to build a wall, this is how naïve we were, build a wall out of rocks that high that a tank couldn't get over, a tank could get over damn near anything really, particularly the modern day tank, but the tanks in those days could go anywhere, it was a question of something to stall them that was basically the idea, and this was our

02:30 first experience in being prepared against attack from people with armoured cars and tanks so, well we got enthusiastic about that, but anyhow that didn't work really and it wasn't necessary and I was called back again to the battalion, I was with B Company and we were on top of the Tocra Pass which was a main pass coming up the coastline from the revetment there which was

03:00 200 or 300 metres above sea level I suppose and the rumbles started and we knew that something was happening, and we all knew what was happening, it could only be one thing but nobody realized that the Germans were involved in it, particularly with armour, and eventually information slowly filtered through and one afternoon or late afternoon, my company commander called me over and said, "Macfarlane, I want you to send down a patrol

03:30 and go down with the engineers to Tokrepague." see they were checking out and mining the place to blow it, "Go down with them and have a look and see what those vehicles are doing over there on the coastline." I knew what they were, they were ruddy armoured cars and tanks, everybody knew but that was what I was told to do, anyway this was the first big decision that Macfarlane's going to make in the war, a young lieutenant so I picked out my eldest section leader

04:00 a fellow named Alf Mons who would have been 10 years older than me if I remember and I said, "Alf, I want you to take two fellows with you and report to the engineers at such and such a time and check out what those vehicles are down on the coast." or words to that effect. Away he went, and on the way back their vehicle which they were in ran over a land mine which was all set, booby trapped, blew up

04:30 the tank vehicle was blown up and some were killed I think and Alf Mons was badly knocked about, lost an eye and so forth, he was our first casualty. And of course I felt pretty moved about this because it could have been anybody that I could have picked to send but they were all good blokes, but Alf was a bit special to me, being a bit older and so forth and also an ex militia person. There it was and then…

05:00 **That must have been quite hard on you having made the decision to send in, did you feel like you were responsible…?**

Responsible, yes. As I said before it was the first big decision I had to make in the great big world war of any importance anyway. And the background to it of course, we knew they weren't donkeys and they weren't camels

05:30 roaming along the beach, they were vehicles, and who else would be using vehicles but the enemy? That was our first contact with the enemy. They'd gone around from Benghazi that way. By that time the retreat had started but we were stuck up there in Tocra, and we were moving out the next day and then it was a case of first in first serve for transport, we didn't have enough vehicles to get everybody out so we had to do it in relays

06:00 to get back, to get all the way back, but this one incident there at the time annoyed me, I had a valise when we went up there, we were going to train and we took a lot of gear up there, a lot of personal gear we normally wouldn't have had in the place and I had a valise which all of us new officers had been given with our gear in it, but I saw someone throw it off the truck and throw their own on.

06:30 I couldn't do anything about it and I was very upset about it because my mother-in-law of the time had given me a beautiful fountain pen and a writing pad, but the pen had belonged to her husband who had died in Canada, he had been in World War 1 and it was something special that she had handed on to me. Of course all that went. Because we went on foot then because no vehicles arrived to pick us up

07:00 and it was on for young and old. Like in stages at different places.

So it was a pretty chaotic retreat was it?

Yes. It was mainly because of the transport situation and you could only go around the coast road that was the only built road or the other roads across the desert down below which were Jerry [German] used anyway because it had all this armoured stuff, vehicles, track vehicles that go anywhere, he got to Suez and a few places like that before we did.

07:30 But we were lucky we went round the coast road. The 13th Battalion and the 17th Battalion were involved in a bit of a fight with them at Benghazi. And that was when we realized that the war was really on and we were being strafed by German planes which we had never heard of or seen before, and we had a very small air force of our own and they were too busy rescuing their planes and equipment and getting back

08:00 to other air bases further back. So they weren't able to help us very much.

So you had no defences really against those planes?

Very little, very little. You felt better if you fired a rifle at them. That was like that all the way back to Gazala where we had a pause there, regrouped and then we were told that where we were going into Tobruk and that's where we're going to stay and they started

08:30 moving them back units by units into Tobruk and we were one of the last brigades to go in. I think that was 10th April that we went to what we call the gates, the perimeter. The last day we were outside, we were in our area there, we were strafed by some Messerschmitts 110's, big twin-engined things and they had a machine gun in the front and you would be very wary

09:00 because once they had gone that way they had a tail gunner as well, and he'd have a go at you as he passed, from underneath, and that was a thing we learned very quickly about those.

What would you do when the planes came over? Could you hide?

Wished you were in a hole about 50 feet deep with a steel top on it.

But you weren't so what could you do?

No. Well the desert varied, there was rock and sand and in some places you could dig a hole a foot or so deep

09:30 and some places only a few inches and you'd grab a few rocks and put them around you for protection against bullets and things like that, which were a help, but certainly didn't do much help. There was nothing you could do about it.

You must have felt like sitting ducks out there in the desert with the planes coming over?

Yes. Particularly when you weren't used to it.

10:00 You can laugh about it now but as raw boned soldiers on a retreat like that, of course we were very worried, the 6th Division had gone up and won all these places going up with the other British troops and they had been involved in Bardia and Tobruk and places like that going up and it had been what they call a bit of a bit of a walk over against the Italians, but the Italians didn't want to fight anyway,

10:30 some did and some didn't and here we were on the way back letting everybody down, we didn't feel very good about it, but under the pressure of it and so forth, we didn't have time to think about those things but I think it was a culmination of that and when we got into Tobruk we were being sent out to occupy these posts within a 30 mile perimeter.

Alan, I just wanted to ask

11:00 **you something about that fountain pen that was special from your mother-in-law, had you taken any other things from home that were special like that when you packed to go? Did you have any lucky charms?**

No. Lucky charms, no I didn't. I don't think. No I didn't. I had a photo of my mother, family and my wife and

11:30 we had a thing that was presented to us from the Caulfield Council, I was living in Murrumbeena which

is in Caulfield Council and anybody who had enlisted in 1940 got this presentation gift of a hair brush, comb, mirror and things like that you know when you think about it, who the hell wanted those. But it was a nice thing in a nice zip up leather bag a leather case thing, that all went.

12:00 That pen and this little writing pad thing which had been made I think.

Sounds very special.

But the pen, I was very proud of that, because it belonged to my father-in-law who I never knew, was dead before the family had migrated from Canada. But it had been used by him.

I am just wondering in a situation like that when you've got the planes coming over and when you can see that there are armoured cars

12:50 **coming at you and you don't really have adequate equipment, was there a prayer that you'd say or what would you do to kind of keep yourself together?**

A feeling of helplessness but I'm going to survive thank goodness, here they come again and dive under a truck or dive into a hole. You'd see a rock about that big and you'd get behind that

13:00 and find that you were bigger than the rock. If we were in fixed defences it would have felt a lot better put it that way, even if you were only in a little hole in the ground, the defence, there was someone there and there was someone there, but then in that retreat it was known as the Benghazi Handicap, a lot of it was free for all, and the powers

13:29 that be couldn't organize it any better because there wasn't sufficient transport to move that group back at a time and you cover this lot, it wasn't, and the only line where we had any permanency for a while was the Gazala Line, which figured later on several times, there was line there, but everywhere else it was, you know, my truck's quicker than yours.

14:00 The truck would stop, break down and the next one you'd hail would have 40 or 50 blokes on it and end up with 60 blokes on it and you'd set fire to the one that had broken down and things like that.

So I'm just guessing that one of the things that did keep you going is the sense of solidarity among the men that you are all in it together.

Mateship. Mateship. You're all in together. Whilst

14:30 you're looking after your own skin you were unconsciously looking after your mate's skin. We all knew that there was nothing we could do about it, when we knew we were going to Tobruk well we said we are going to stop.

So who were your special mates?

Everybody in the battalion. In my own platoon, there was my sergeant Tom Mackie and a lovely bloke,

15:00 Alf Mons he'd been injured, he was back in hospital there, Lucky Mons we used to say, he's in hospital. He would have gone back the day before us, and my batman Curly Dyke who was killed with Mackie, a little lad from a dairy farm in Gippsland. I've got some letters here that he wrote to his mother which were given to me by some relative, only recently. I cried, I cried just like a baby, I couldn't stop.

15:30 One day I'll get those things specially framed and put them somewhere. He talks about me and how he became my batman and what he did and so forth, how he liked his job and how lucky he was to be my batman and so forth and a couple of other letters he wrote later on when he got a bit serious,

16:00 and he got killed the way he did. He got wounded and then they fired on him again while he was on the ground.

That was very loyal it sounds like.

That was murder.

Can you tell me again about that Alan, that was at Tobruk wasn't it?

That was on the 2nd May in the morning at Tobruk and we were pulled out in broad daylight which angered me, we should have been pulled out before dawn in my opinion it would have saved a lot of aggro

16:30 but those things happen in war, they happen in war.

You had almost been in Tobruk almost a month by then, so what was this particular battle?

This was the battle of what we call the salient battle. It's known as the salient artifice because he captured so many posts, which was the salient. We never ever got them back and we had to build a new line around there in the battle of the salient that was when he,

17:00 that was his first big attempt after the one he tried in Easter which didn't work and he came in with triple the number of troops I suppose and every armoured vehicle he could find, was to bash through,

because once he got right through there through to where I was in the minefield, he'd be on his way to the harbour, he'd bypass the 92 headquarters which wasn't far behind us just like that. But once he'd broken through that main line

17:30 there was very little stop him and he'd had enough thank God, and also us, and the fact that we hung on for a while and were able to, and the British artillery who were absolutely fantastic, we didn't have our own artillery then and the 2/12th Regiment came on a bit later, didn't have any of our own guns at that stage so the pommy artillery God bless 'em, I can see them now, there were some guns near me firing over open

18:00 ground at those ruddy tanks.

What could you see?

They didn't have any armour piercing shells they were using HE [High Explosive] shells which aren't as effective against the tanks.

Just stepping back there, can you be a camera for me, tell me what you see. Tell me what you can see. You're back there in Tobruk and the British Artillery…

Have you ever seen all hell break loose?

No. There must have been

18:30 **a lot of dust.**

It all happened on the afternoon of the 30th April when they started dive bombing us, literally hundreds of them, there appeared to be hundreds of these ruddy dive bombers, these Stukas, who come screaming down at you with a siren going making one hell of a noise and then they'd let the bomb go and up and away, on and on and on all afternoon into the evening and then all their artillery firing on our battalion, C

19:00 Company, A Company and Don Company and then B Company here, all on us, it was pretty obvious who was going to be hit and we had to put up with that, and we had a lot of casualties from that, a lot of casualties from all that, and then that quietened down and then during the night they started to come in with their tanks and they were able to break the wire, what wire was there around the place and so forth was damaged or blown away and some of the anti tank ditches around some

19:30 of the posts had collapsed and the walls had fallen in and so forth and it was easy for them, so during the night very early in the morning, he came through with all this armour. Surrounded the whole of A Company and part of C Company and part of Don Company with these tanks and if you showed your face, I wasn't in one of those pits I was back, you had a tank looking down at you. Also flame throwers. That was the first anybody had heard of flame throwers they had

20:00 them on trailers at the back of some of the tanks and our blokes were magnificent, they kept firing and retaliating, firing rifles which were ineffective against anything, but they did do a lot of damage with the German and Italian Infantry that were coming in, with the tanks of course it was a different question. Anyhow, one of the tanks got around one of the posts and the posts are there, nothing they could do about it, all of a sudden they were out of ammunition, they didn't even have any ammunition left for their rifles

20:30 so that could show some anger and fire at something, they had to give up. And I didn't have to experience that thank God, that would have been terrible. It was bad enough, actually we were better off where we were out in the open because we could see what was going on. All the time they were in these Italian concrete weapon pits that had been dug out years and years before, some of them were down below, some of them were up top but when the tanks let go with a few bursts

21:00 with the flame throwers and firing their tanks into the concrete places, you can imagine what it was like, I hope you can imagine what it was like.

What can you hear?

And you've suddenly got no ammunition, what do you do? Yeah, your whole guts has fallen out, you've go to give in. We've still got a few of those fellows alive today, I almost kiss 'em when I see 'em.

21:30 They spent the next four years as prisoners of war in Italy and Germany it wasn't as bad as perhaps the Japs, but it was nearly as bad because we were being ill treated by educated people. Anyhow that's another story.

What was the noise of it like Alan?

Pardon.

What was the noise of it like? Could you hear another person speaking to you?

Oh close to you, you could, you would be yelling out and so forth, you had to yell out all the time. We didn't have the

22:00 intercom equipment that you have now or even that we had later on, we had nothing, we had nothing. We had no communications, if you wanted to send a message to someone you had to ask or order I didn't order I used to ask and they'd send a runner to somebody else over there and knowing damn well that he would probably only get half way, but that was the communication system that we had there but there was so much going on I suppose but as

22:30 you said, what was the noise like. Bloody deafening. It wasn't just what was been thrown at you, it was your own, what was behind you, your own artillery and anti tank and things like that. There were a number of tanks, I think there were seven I think from memory, I could be wrong, that got through right into the main minefield which was behind the other three companies where I was and they got their tanks blown off or they'd get partially damaged

23:00 and so forth, and they were stuck there, but they were able to pop up through their turrets and just machine gun us all the time for the next 36 hours 24 hours at least. Anyhow we were hiding behind heaps of rocks and things no higher than that and about that far into the sand. What could we do? We were firing back, yes

23:30 firing at blokes with heads showing out the head of a tank.

So is that how your mates fell from those tanks, machine gunning them?

Pardon

Is that how Mackie fell, from the machine guns out of the tank?

Yes. They were still firing at us and of course they were still firing heavier equipment they were firing at our artillery when it was within range. There were two or three anti tank guns with me and they were all

24:00 knocked out and all the crews were killed from the 26th Brigade Anti Tank and also the 2nd and 13th Attack Regiment, they were the blokes that damaged, these tanks that got through to the minefields. And they were all gone and there was nothing so that was the end of the night of the first of May when it came dark the information got through that A Company had all gone and half of C Company

24:30 and two thirds of Don Company or vice versa which is virtually sixty per cent to seventy per cent of the effective fighting force of the battalion plus all the signallers that were with them, the anti tank people, the mortar people and all the specialists and all that, some of our carriers, one of our fellows went down in a carrier to try to get some ammunition through and he got down

25:00 the road and the tank was hit, burst into flames and that was that; he was a commander of the Carrier Platoon. Another carrier got hit and the driver was wounded and his foot was jammed under the accelerator and it was going around and around and around until they blew it out of the ground. But what I'm saying is that everything was helpless with everything we tried to, do but God bless the British Artillery if they had come through further into that

25:30 minefield, there was no reason why they didn't, for some reason or other they stalled, I think the fact that we reacted so strongly and so well against them with inadequate equipment was a surprise to him, to a fully equipped modern army, this is the army and tactics that he had used, Rommel I'm talking about; invaded France with that, that's how they went through France.

26:00 But if he had kept coming there would have been B Company of us and the 9th, I think it was the 9th or 10th Battalion, 8th Brigade, moving up behind us that day, if he had kept rolling through there and broken into through that thing where we were into the artillery lines it would been all over in two days. Probably one day.

And your battalion suffered the brunt of that didn't they?

Oh yes.

26:30 The whole battalion, not part of it, the whole battalion.

So this was the occasion when your batman got hit wasn't it?

Yes.

And were you standing next to him when that happened?

Yes.

Were you aware that he had been hit straight away?

We were getting out as I had learnt in the militia, when you were retreating you had your three sections always

27:00 you were in three different places supporting each other, you pulled that one out first, then that group came out and the last group came out which was the section behind which is generally your platoon headquarters, And the same thing would happen with a company. I'd got that group out and there were some wounded men there and then the other section's gone up near Cromer Road where we were going and it was our turn to move and we started and I stood up got out of the holes and said, "Let's go!"

27:30 Tom Mackie the sergeant and the batman were down that end in a little hole alongside me, they got up and they both got hit, they fell over there, there, right there, and I was over here and I crawled over to see if they were all right and as I was moving over there the machine guns opened up again on both of them as they were lying there. That did something to me and

28:00 I heard them go “Ooh, ooh.” both of them and that was it, they died. So I went over, what the hell, they’re dead. And the corporal of the section who was with me in this last section, Corporal Tex Alleyne, he got up to move out and he got hit, here, chest and both thighs, lying on the ground and I cried, I can’t do anything for those things, this is my instantaneous

28:30 reaction, well I crawled over to Tex and said, “Well, I’ve got a field dressing in my pocket.” we all had one field dressing, one in your pocket, “Come on, I’ll tie you up around the neck stop that blood making a mess on your shirt a bit.” something silly like that. “No Skip.” my nickname was Skip, “You go.” he said, “I’ve had it.” I said “No, you’ll be all right, where’s your field dressing?” and I got his and put it around and put it around his neck and I started to work on

29:00 his legs, and our artillery opened up, they thought we were all out, and our artillery started firing on our platoon area to stop Jerry who was coming through the minefield, to come in and occupy these pits, it was the first time that I had ever been close to one of our own 25 pounder shells going off and I never want to hear it again, I did hear it a lot of times after that of course but I never want to hear it again.

29:30 They would hit the sand and make a hole about that deep and it was all that way you know. That went on for a few minutes don’t ask me how many I don’t know, but it seemed like a lifetime. We both survived, Tex and I. Soon as it was finished I stood and said “Come on Tex.” he said “No, no.” he was almost unconscious then , “Come on!” and I picked him up put him half over my shoulder and started to walk up the road.

30:00 We got back to where the platoon was being assembled, they were all sitting around having a cup of tea out of what we called hot boxes, it was full of hot black tea with about ten pounds of sugar in it and we were all sitting around there and that was when the CO and I had our difference of opinion and he asked me why I didn’t come out with the rest of the platoon.

30:30 I could have explained to him if I wanted to, but he should have known, and I said something stupid like “What was I supposed to do, form the troops up in fours and march them up Cromer Road?” That had better be deleted later on, but I blew my top, I just lost control of myself I was so angry, because in my opinion we should have been pulled out before dawn.

31:00 Those blokes wouldn’t have been killed, injured or wounded. Even I as a kid, even I could see that. Anyway that was that. I paid for that indiscretion. Friends of mine told me in latter years particularly Bob Searle, Johnny

31:30 Brock, they were at battalion headquarters, battalion officers and adjutant, but my platoon had been noted for an action we had had about 8 days before where 500 Ities [Italians] had attacked the perimeter on their own with a bit of artillery behind them, but I think it was only a feeler thing you know, came through the wire on top of me in front of the platoon

32:00 and we were occupying two posts, we ran out of ammunition, and the Itie decided that he had had enough and went back again and we ran out of ammunition. They cleared off and I put in two blokes to be recognized for that particular show and the platoon was to be recognized in some manner I was told and then this later episode, I was supposed to have done something and the old man refused to sign it.

32:30 **So he bore a grudge?**

So we suffered even from the previous occasion, my platoon from just defending ourselves, had performed something a little bit unusual. The 23rd Battalion was sent, somebody was sent to help us but their history says when we got there Macfarlane had the situation under control. That was the sort of thing it was.

33:00 **You must have been in shock Alan?**

I must have been in shock, I should never have spoken to the CO like that. I think I would have reacted like that to anybody.

I mean as a civilian I can’t under stand why he spoke to you like that. You’ve just come out of battle, you’re carrying a wounded man

He had no right to speak to me like that in any circumstances. He was sitting around having a cup of tea saying we’ve survived,

33:30 waiting to be sent off to somewhere else. I’ll never forgive him for it. I can’t see it in myself to forgive him yet I admired him as a soldier and as a man, I suppose, I don’t know, but that’s how it went on and on and on.

Well I just have to know did your friend Tex survive?

No. He survived, I'm sorry he did survive he came back and rejoined the battalion when we were in Syria,

34:00 he was promoted to sergeant and was made the Battalion Regimental Policeman. You had to have Regimental Police to control traffic and all that sort of thing and he was given this nice cushy job, we used to joke about it, "He's got a cushy job Tex now, battalion headquarters." Later on at Alamein he survived the Tel el Eisa show later on and the last few days at Alamein, I think it was C Company I wouldn't be sure, one rifle

34:30 company had no officers left there were only 3 officers left anyway at that stage of the Police, Tex went up to one of the Rifle companies and he finished up in command of what was left of the company in the last attack that was made, he was killed. Tex Alleyne, tall, skinny, ugly so and so I used to call him. But what a bloke. Anyway he used to go crook at me and say why the bloody

35:00 hell didn't you leave me there, I could have been just picked up wounded, evacuated and gone home. Because of you I recovered and went back to the battalion. He said that to me only a few days before he was killed actually, or a few weeks actually [Sgt F. O. 'Tex' Alleyne was killed in action near Thompson's Post (Tel el Eisa sector) on 31 October 1942. Ironically he was trying to rescue one of his own wounded men]. They were terrible days anyway but that was that...

35:30 The Germans occupied that area known as the Salient and from the rest of the time then on into Tobruk and different battalions we were moved all round the place relieving, on the front line, the blue line, the red line and so on different units went round the Salient and we were always trying to recapture some it back to shorten it which we did and so forth.

And when you got there Alan, when you arrived in Tobruk around the 10th April, 11th April,

36:00 **obviously you had no idea as to how long you were going to be there?**

How long we were going to be there? The only person who knew that week was General Morshead who said you were to stay there until you were relieved, but you must hold Tobruk because of its harbour, it had a deep harbour and so forth for supplies and so forth and they wanted to rebuild the

36:30 army on the Egyptian border so they could do their counterattacks which went on for the next 2 years, that battle went on for 2 years up and down. But no we had to stay there till the last man, that was the orders.

Yeah, well for your battalion it almost was, wasn't it?

Yeah. We were gradually built up with reinforcements, the navy would bring up reinforcements, taking out the engines and bring up food, rations and so forth they were fantastic

37:00 and the destroyers used to sneak in at night on the dark nights. We couldn't have held Tobruk without that because we would have starved and we were out of ammunition.

So you had a real sense of comradeship with the Navy?

O God yes, oh yes. They were the Rats of Tobruk like we were, we called them rats anyway. There were only five planes of the air force that got back in Tobruk with us, five Hurricanes

37:30 on the first day got shot down and the others were gradually withdrawn because they couldn't be maintained and they were no match for the Germans in many ways, not at all. There was one of them, I did know his name, he took his Hurricane out when the Messerschmitts were about and they used to fly around and they used to chase him he used to fly back over the perimeter, where he knew we had some

38:00 ack ack guns hoping that we could shoot them as they were going past. There were some wonderful things that happened in the seige of Tobruk, Army Air Force and Navy, but unfortunately the air force was unable to stay there and help us, they didn't have the planes and the range was too great from Egypt to fly up there; they could fly up there but they couldn't get back. So they were the days. Our battalion was

38:30 rebuilt, we had one company was reformed from reinforcements of the 2/48th Battalion who were all South Australians, a whole company of them, two platoons went back to the 48th later on and the other platoon wanted to stay with us and they stayed with us right throughout the war. There were still some of them still some of them with us right at the end of the war. South Australians.

Tape 5

00:34 **Right Alan, I want us to go back a little bit now and recall an incident that your referred to yesterday about when you marched out of Wangaratta, can you tell us about that march?**

Oh yes, well we had a big parade for the Mayor of Wangaratta to come and address us and say goodbye and so forth, he did that,

01:00 and he presented the Battalion with this fourteen foot pennant which he had made up particularly for us, especially in grey and so forth and red and white which was then our colour patches, and on it was emblazoned 'Wangaratta's Own', the first time we had any reference to this title which they were honouring us with it, and he gave it to the Battalion Commander and the next day we were marching out, we formed up again and Sergeant Alan Macfarlane was picked out to carry

01:30 this pennant which was a tremendous honour of course, there were about a thousand other people who could have had it, and away we went loaded with our packs and we marched out through the streets of the town, it wasn't a city then, and the first stop on the way to Bonegilla was, we used to stop for ten minutes on the hour, that's right, smoko period, I leant back

02:00 against a fence post on my pack like that and I said to this bloke, "By gee my back pack seems to be heavy today." and had a look inside and here's two nine pound bricks that had been stacked in on top of all my gear, on top, somebody either didn't like me or had a very hot idea as to what was a practical joke, but anyway that was OK, but that having the fourteen foot banner stuck in my belt

02:30 and with a bit of a breeze blowing in was a bit tiring even for twenty one year old. But a lot of the fellows keep reminding me about that, keep saying we must find out who did it. I always had my suspicions it was one of the instructors that was permanently at Wangaratta and was at Recruit Training collection point like all the showgrounds were and he was B class fellows and so

03:00 forth and he was envious of me or envious of us, I don't know, but he picked on me, but I'm pretty sure it was him.

So you weren't amused at the time?

I wasn't. I was furious.

But I'm sure your mates were quite amused weren't they?

Yes they laughed about it. I suppose over the years they kept reminding me of it they had a tape sent down of band music put together

03:30 by a fellow named Jimmy Hughes, he lives at Castlemaine only recently, bits of pieces, the regimental march, army marches and things like this and he starts off with "Remember this lads, this is the tune that we marched out of Wangaratta and Sergeant Macfarlane had the honour of carrying the fourteen foot banner." and so forth, "What a great day it was, people cheering and waving to us and our first stop all hell broke loose when Alan Macfarlane discovered

04:00 that he had two bricks in his pack." So I was reminded of it only the other day.

They've never let you forget about it have they?

I don't think so. Those fellows who were with me that day, there aren't many of them left now, one more died last night, one fellow just rang me up from Pascoe Vale to tell me about George Thompson dying but I don't mind I suppose, it was a joke I suppose.

04:31 **So were lots of practical jokes played, was that one of the things that happened a lot?**

Oh yes. Oh yes.

Are there any others that you recall that made an impression?

Not really, not one that sticks to my mind or comes to mind immediately, no. One other thing that happened to me later on when were near Palestine at one stage I was

05:00 leg-roped or lassoed or whatever you like, coming back from the mess one night and dragged into the tent and for some reason or other they decided to take half of my moustache which I had only started to grow at that period, and they shaved half of it off, so I had the problem next morning whether I take the rest off or wait for it grow again, so I shaved it all off. There were funny little things like that.

05:30 But amongst the troops, they were always playing jokes on each other and it was encouraged because it kept up the spirits and so forth and esprit de corps and as long as it didn't go over the odds.

Were there times when it did go over the odds? Turned into cruelty instead of fun? Were there any incidents?

Yes. Sometimes they would take it out on a certain

06:00 individual which we had to keep an eye on and I keep saying, we are the people who had any authority around the place, responsibility not authority. Those little things happened amongst men amongst anybody, and it was sometimes a way of relieving the pressure amongst themselves, I think that's one of the best ways of looking at it as I recall.

06:30 Nothing was ever vicious, mind you it all depends where you were and what you were doing.

I can imagine not everyone is suited to army life, some young men might really take to it but some might find it quite difficult being away from home and being in this all male

environment, you know, boys together, they will always gang up and pick on one or two.

Yes like they did at school. They do.

So were there men under your command that

07:00 **you had to take care because of those……**

Yes

Can you tell me about them? You don't have to mention their names.

Oh no, it was just a question of Joe Blow got to keep an eye on him, he doesn't seem to be very happy and you'd have a chat with him and try to find out what was going on and things like that, and not in your own interest but in everybody's interest to try to keep everybody coherent but

07:30 there were three groups, there were those who would join in and be happy in any environment, then you had the group that was a bit iffy, and then you had the others who were always going to object to something that they didn't want to do or wanted to be interested in, that was my experience anyway and what we call man management. Our responsibility, particularly in the lower end of the scale in the infantry battalion of the platoons, the platoon commander he was responsible for man management really

08:00 in his own little group. There were those three definite groups I always found, and you could generally gauge it by the reaction to oneself when you told someone to do something, or please to hurry up, or this is they way to do it and not that way, and you could tell by the reaction of what they were and how you had to handle them and it was a privilege for me anyway as a twenty one year old

08:30 or twenty two year old to have that situation where you are trying to handle men. Let's face it they were aged fourty right down to eighteen, seventeen.

And you obviously took that role very seriously I mean, you took that role to heart of the welfare of your men, didn't you?

I had to take it seriously for my own survival.

How was that?

Well you, for the benefit of everybody in your own little group the leader had….

09:00 didn't have to be popular he had to be accepted for what he was trying to do and so that when they came or the flashpoint as we used to refer to it, they were with you and it comes back to what I said before, man management and the worst thing you could do was to try to make a good fellow of yourself that didn't work, not with Australians, they're a wake up to that sort of nonsense. It was very interesting, very interesting,

09:30 certainly well after the war it happened a few times too.

So as a twenty one year old you were almost in a paternal role weren't you? You had to look after their welfare and also discipline them and encourage them to act cohesively. An enormous kind of leap for you wasn't it?

Initially yes, well there was all the way through

10:00 no matter what you were doing. Later on when I became a company commander I got more responsibilities all the time and you had to, when you are a company commander for example, some might drift and you had go sideways, you had three platoons and you were able to say right to so and so to each of those platoons that's your job, you only had to worry about three people and you had to make sure that they were doing their job, so it comes back, as I was saying before

10:30 like a little close knit, like a rifle platoon and man management and a good platoon commander knew exactly where that fellow came from, when he enlisted, what his home address was, what his family situation was, what he thought he was going to do when the war ended if we made it, and all that sort of thing, his own personal history, and that way you got to know each other and understood each other which is very important.

11:00 I had one fellow early in the piece at Tobruk, George Duff, he was Englishman and he had been in the last 12, 18 months of World War 1, he wore medals on his chest and here am I a kid, his commander, I learnt a lot from him. He was a good bloke, a tremendous soldier and he gave me every respect which of course helped and I could always lean on him for any advice or so forth.

11:30 His advice wasn't always good it wasn't always good, he was a funny man, a funny man. Sometimes I used to think was he having a loan of you as you say and then at the other end there was a 17 year old GG, poor fellow, he was only a school boy, a school boy but he acted like a grown man

12:00 when the time came along. No it was interesting.

What was GG's story? What happened to him in the end?

He was still a schoolboy in everything he said and did. He was only a young kid, he tried to be a man, really tried hard and he got riballed a lot and rubbished a lot by his superiors in age and I think he was the butt of a lot of their

12:30 jokes perhaps unnecessarily. When we were back in Dimra as a matter of fact I can remember I had to take several blokes to task for harassing him too much as I thought, and one of those fellows became a bit sullen because I pulled them into line had to keep an eye on him for a while. They're individuals, that went on right through the war.

13:00 **And did GG survive through the war?**

Yes I think he left us at one stage I don't know where it was, I think he was wounded, I can't remember where just now off hand, but he did leave us, and no I can't remember. He wasn't killed, no he wasn't killed.

He shouldn't have been in the army at 17 should he?

Well the number of kids that should not have been in the army,

13:30 kids, I shouldn't have used that term, but young lads that should never have been in the army, but got in there because they wanted to. I'll quote you a prime example, a fellow who wasn't in my platoon, he was in A company as a matter of fact, a fellow who's still alive today, he's very ill actually, he's got terminal cancer, he enlisted just before he was 16, and they caught up with him and sent him home

14:00 and he tried again at another depot, he forged his father's signature, that's right, he got in and was caught up with again and he was kicked out. So he tried again, this time his brother forged his mother's signature for him totally different thing altogether, and this time he got away with it. Lo and behold he finished up in Wangaratta and became a member of the 2/24th Battalion.

14:30 Later on when we went down to Port Melbourne to embark on this troop ship, the Strathmore, he got to the gangplank and who would you believe was the RTO [Rail Transport Officer] at the bottom of the gangplank as he was going up, but his father who was a World War 1 veteran and here's his 16 year old son, his papers forged and he was going up the gangway away to the war with the 24th

15:00 Battalion. He couldn't do anything about it then, he couldn't stop him. But a nice little touch happened after that, he got himself into a situation where certain RTO people had to stay on the ship as far as Fremantle I think it was, some of them went overseas and then they came back with the ship, RTO, they're transport people, and he got on the ship and had a wow of a time and went all the way to the Middle East with his son, every time their beer ration

15:30 was on he would get one too, and both of them were quite good friends, they were always good friends, but they became even better friends after that. It's silly isn't it? That lad was taken prisoner of war when he was 16 years of age in Tobruk he hadn't got to his seventeenth birthday. Spent 4 years in Italy and Germany as a POW [Prisoner of War]. Here he is home now, he's survived but the cruel thing now is that he is dying of cancer.

16:00 He's still only 77. But that is a typical example of how young fellows got into the army, he had three attempts and he made it.

He was so pleased?

He said "I could have cut my bloody throat Alan, when I ended up by being a POW; I didn't see any more of the war."

And was so keen?

He was a nice lad, Les Hanson.

Incredible. Alan

16:29 **talking about your low morale and the hi-jinks troops would get up to I was thinking, you were in Tobruk for a long time.**

The battalion was in Tobruk for a long time, yes.

Now forgive me if this is a naïve question but did you have days off, did you have times when you weren't under fire and when you had recreation?

The Battalions were relieving all around the whole perimeter in different

17:00 sectors, there was the front line, then there was the red line, the red line was the front line, and then there was a blue line, and then there was the green line which was further back which was a rest area, and when you're on the blue line you were on standby all the time in case you're wanted to go in to help out with counter attacks and things like that, but back further was the blue line and while you were on the blue line, we used to make arrangements that you had to pick your time, and hope you were right anyway and at

17:30 certain times go down for a swim and be away for the day swimming and so forth at one of the waddis

back near the town, and if any comfort funds arrived I would get those. Comforts funds used to be issued as fairly as possible to everybody, so the only relaxation available for breaking up was when you went down with a beach party, you might go away with the ration truck to go back to the ration place

18:00 and that took you off duty and off stand-to, because we were all in the habit of being on alert all the time, as you can imagine with a fortification like that anything could have happened. There wasn't much time to relax and that's where the Australia humour came out and we used to keep ourselves amused, some of the troops as I remember them throughout the war were hilarious, the Australians they really are, crazy

18:30 but hilarious. We used to make our fun when and where you could. But in other words, there was no need for leave pass in Tobruk that's the best way to put it as I could see it, because there was nowhere to go.

Were you in constant rotation between those three duties, the green line, the blue line and the red line?

Yes

So I'm just imagining, it must have been wonderful to go for a swim? To actually get away from all

19:00 **of that and be in another element?**

Fantastic. If you could imagine living on a half a water bottle a day, you had a bottle of water which was the ration, half of that ration had to go into the kitchen for certain things, for cooking, you had to shave, we were expected to shave all the time and that was good for morale, there was clean your teeth and anything left you had a wash.

19:30 BO [body odour] in those days wasn't even thought about. It was constant all the time. Most of us only had one shirt or two shirts anyway if we wore anything else. To get down and have a swim was absolutely fantastic to feel free and relieved that you could just dive and splash around in the water.

What did the beach look like? Can you put yourself there and say to me what does it look like?

20:00 Well beautiful, yellow-red sand and the Mediterranean is blue by the way, it is blue, beautiful water and surf splashing in all over the place, it's just out of this world really, that's the only way to describe it. I can't remember how many times I got down there, it wasn't too often but the endeavour was always made that everybody in some rotation would have some relief like that.

Could you wash your clothes?

20:30 No.

Sorry if I'm asking silly questions but I'm just imagining if you had the water to do it.

No we didn't have the water to do it. I do know that some of the lads used to pool some of the water together sometimes to help rinse out a shirt, but things like undies, they didn't exist any more once you got rid of those we just didn't have any, you didn't carry them anyway, they were extras those things,

21:00 so you were just in your shorts or your slacks and your shirt, most of us kept our pullovers and things like that because we always had a great coat up there which you had to wear at night time because it was a hundred and ten during the day and freezing in the morning, at night the sand used to be just icy cold.

What was the effect of that on people's health?

Enormous. It didn't catch up with a lot of people until years after,

21:30 years. But we were fit and hardened to the situation, as fit as we could have been anyway and I suppose we took care of ourselves as much as possible, nobody ran around at night time because there was nothing on, because the situation wasn't such that if you didn't have a greatcoat you'd go and pinch somebody else's.

22:00 Blankets, I can't remember seeing a blanket while in Tobruk, there were perhaps initially, but they probably would have been pooled anyway, but sometimes we used to send out listening posts at night time and to get a hole in no-man's land somewhere, they would go out in their greatcoats and blanket and they would stay there all day, and they would have a telephone line with them, they were just spotting and things like that you know but they couldn't be relieved until

22:30 night time because it was cold and they'd be out in that very, very hot sun all day and then in the cold at night time. I do know that people used to get half blankets in those particular episodes. That's all so long ago, I can't remember much more about that.

It must have been very wearing.

There was a war. There was a war on.

Alan can you describe for me what the trenches

23:00 **looked like, I mean I've seen the movies but I imagine them as not very realistic?**

Well you've seen movies of France of mud and slush and all that sort of thing that existed over there or even Vietnam or New Guinea or those places where you could dig the dirt with a tin hat virtually but in the desert it was just like this floor, rocks and stones strewn about the place, if you were lucky

23:30 you could dig down a foot with your bayonet and things like that, there weren't many trenching tools around like that and we didn't have that sort of equipment anyway, you'd a shovel and you'd strike solid rock. Sometimes you'd only get down six inches and you would be on to rock and it would all depend on where you happened to stop. If you had the opportunity or the luxury of scouting around to find a nice spot, a nice softer sport, well so be it, but you wouldn't get down very far so you'd build up

24:00 what we called sangers and you'd put your rocks around the place and it added to protection around the top, but where situations were required, where the battalion headquarters had to be protected and all that sort of thing, the Sig [Signals] office and those things and I remember a padre once had to have a special doover dug for him, and they struck what could have been an old water hole, they were down about ten feet before they knew where they were, but everywhere else was rock, and that did

24:30 happen. But that's what the trenches were like. In Tobruk itself they were all these fortifications that had already been built there by the Italians, because it was a fortress town when they occupied that part of Libya. But there weren't sufficient to man the whole perimeter or to protect it properly, so we had to make these make-shift things in between which were called sangers. Sometimes you couldn't get down more than that on the ground and up on the front line or the red line, sangers,

25:00 the rocks were anything up to two or three feet high and as thick as you could by collecting all the stones and rocks from around the place. That was the situation right through the desert it was just same in Egypt and Alamein.

Where would you sleep?

Sleep? When you could.

Where would you sleep?

In you hole in the ground.

You had a hole in the ground. The ones the Italians had dug.

In those. Yes. Except when you were on duty.

25:30 **What was it like inside? Those holes in the ground, were they concreted?**

Concreted. Yes. Some of them we always felt were too deep, and weren't good for morale and they couldn't be good for morale because you felt too secure, the feeling that we developed after we'd been there for a while and it was acknowledged, but the central part which was very deep, that was where the stores were and the ammunition and things

26:00 like that and then you went up two or three feet and you went along call trenches and there'd be a weapon pit at that end for anti-tank and a weapon pit at the other end. They were quite extensive, they'd be, the overall pit itself would be longer than the length of this whole house in area but they were the main places.

So you would sleep there on the concrete shelves?

Yes. If it was a quiet area, you would sleep on the top just out on the open ground.

26:30 **They must have been really cold concrete under the ground?**

They weren't a five class hotel. A five star hotel, they weren't meant to be. They were badly designed, built half for comfort and half for everything else really.

Were they claustrophobic?

That's a good term, yes they could have been. Particularly the centre part, where a lot

27:00 of the troops used to have to wait in there because they couldn't all be in the weapon pits, you'd have one or two people on duty all the time, a stand to in the evening because everybody was on stand to and stand to at dawn in the morning then at night time we were fairly active and a lot of nonsense used to go on at night time, troops sneaking through and so forth. Sometimes I heard it said amongst some of the troops it

27:30 was a relief to go out on patrol at night time. You were up and walking about going out 5000 or 6000 or 7000 yards out into no man's land poking around in the enemy's lines and things like minefields, you were doing something and things like that.

So that was a relief compared to being stuck in the hole…

You were doing something instead of sitting there worrying about when the balloon was going to go up and all that sort of thing.

28:00 **What was the balloon?**

Well when the action started.

Unfamiliar term to me.

Right.

You mentioned care packages earlier. What Comfort packages, or the comfort funds?

The ACF the Australian Comforts Fund used to send the troops little parcels made up from donations from the general public, government subsidized and things like that. They used to send them all over,

28:30 one per man, little ones like that, bigger ones for groups of people. Also Red Cross parcels used to come through at different times and then a lot of people, instead of sending off an individual parcel they'd give it to the ACF to go amongst all those things, and the troops used to get personal parcels from home because when you're in Tobruk the only time you'd get any mail was when it came up on a destroyer and the priority on a destroyer was No 1 ammunition,

29:00 No 2 was food rations, water, well they used to bring up a bit of water but that didn't go very far and the other thing was bringing up replacements. When they went out of course they took in injured, casualties and things like that. They always used to find room for a few bags of mail but it had probably been collecting down in Alexandria the main central post office waiting

29:30 for dispatch, it would have been waiting there for weeks and weeks and it would all come up at once and you could probably get 3 to 4 letters at a time, same with the parcels.

Was it good getting the parcels?

Oh tremendous.

What sorts of things would you get?

Seeing grown men fighting over a bit of fruit cake. Tins of stuff, like tinned sardines, tinned meat which was different to our ration of bully beef, like little delicacies,

30:00 tobacco, cigarette papers and things like that. Cigarettes.

Was there a tobacco issue or was there an only sort of tobacco?

No not really. Well it was a luxury that you couldn't afford to be the shipping thing, they Navy God bless 'em they were fantastic, but there were so few destroyers on the run and they could only come in on a dark night it was too dangerous on a moonlight night, because the Germans from the air could spot

30:30 the wake of the ships in the water and follow them up but a luxury, things like that, wasn't that sort of thing on the destroyers. You know the size of a destroyer?

No I don't.

Well you've seen them, they're the smallest battle ship afloat aren't they of the navy ships, there isn't much room for a lot of stuff, they would be overloaded with ammunition and food like that. No they used to get things up to us as

31:00 often as they possibly could, we weren't forgotten, they did everything to keep us happy.

Sounds like the Navy were your lifeline really.

They were just as much rats of Tobruk as we were, the crews on those ships, they lost a few ships and it wasn't just the destroyers there, some funny old broken down sailing ships that got up there, they would sneak them up the coast a bit each night

31:30 and things like that and once, if they got within range of Tobruk they copped the lot if they were spotted. They used every possible means to supply Tobruk because it was vital to the whole war that we hung on there until we were relieved.

And were you getting news from home, were you getting letters occasionally?

Yes I used to get letters occasionally.

And did you have a radio, could you listen to the news?

Radio? What was a radio in 1940?

32:00 **Wireless**

Forgive me. No I didn't mean that there was no wireless. We were lucky if we had one radio in the battalion. To get the news from overseas it would come down through the Sig office from the brigade

and things like that, sometimes you would hear a bit of music come over, the Germans used to try to upset us with propaganda about “You diggers in Tobruk, you’re caught like rats in a trap!” and all that stuff would come over

32:30 and things like that, but you didn’t hear it very often. We’d try to print a bit of a newsletter to send around the troops but it probably would be about four or five sheets of this would go around the whole battalion, passing it around and so forth, what’s happening on the Russian front, what’s happening elsewhere and so forth, news from home if any.

Of course I’m just wondering, while you were in Tobruk there was a new government in Australia, Menzies resigned and… Fadden took

33:00 I don’t wish to talk politics.

No, I’m just wondering if you were aware of that if you knew about that.

Oh yes, those things came through the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] news through to divisional headquarters and they used to get those things up on the radio on army receiving sets and so forth, and whatever news they thought was useful to us they used to pass on by newsletters, scraps of paper or they used to pass it down and it would go around by word of mouth.

So you still thought that you were fairly in touch with home

33:30 **or were kind of out on the edge of the earth?**

We thought we were on the edge of the earth, as a matter of fact we thought we were tipped off the end of it a few times, to hell and so forth. I suppose to be honest we were always looking and waiting for news from home because none of us knew what was going to happen to us in the next 24 hours, didn’t matter what job we were on, we were bombed

34:00 wherever you were, bombed and shelled and any news is vital, but we also realized it was difficult and we accepted the situation and one fellow might, one chap in a platoon might just get one letter and nobody had got one and they would think they had missed out, so he would pass the letter around and all that sort of thing. And we used to write letters furiously on bits of paper and on all sorts of things.

34:30 It’s easy to say it wasn’t as bad as it sounds, but it was a situation that nobody wanted to be in and never wanted to be in again, and we survived by a lot of people doing the utmost to help us, the army command and everybody else and people at home and so forth. We in our own battalion we came across

35:00 an old, I’ve forgotten what you call it now you slam a bit of paper down on it and run an ink pad over it.

A stencil.

A stencil type of thing. We used to print our own little newsletter, it’s called the Furphy Flyer and Mufti, we still print it three times a year, that’s our newsletter, Furphy Flyer and Mufti, and it’s still on the same sheet of paper that we used in those days,

35:30 we kept the things, the same format, I’ll show you one after. But we started that off two or three very good blokes in our I [Intelligence] section used to catch all the bits of news around the place and put it on and a few jokes about someone or other and whatnot, they even went so far one time to organize concerts for when you were back in the rest areas, concerts. Sometimes they were interrupted by air raids, but you cut it off and

36:00 any lighting you had was from the vehicles, lanterns and a few things like that.

What sorts of songs were they singing? Can you remember the songs from then?

It was like Tivoli in miniature put it that way.

Really, were they doing the can can?

No that’s not Tivoli.

I don’t know what Tivoli is, you will have to tell me What was it like?

Oh if you… make believe, singing old songs and things like that you know, jokes that we’d all heard before.

What were the favourites, the favourite songs?

Well one of the songs we used to sing was Let the Lights Of London Shine Again, that was a good one, The White Cliffs of Dover, all those wartime songs that came out which we got to hear about and got to sing all of those. You’d be amazed how we murdered

37:00 Waltzing Matilda.

How did you murder it?

What?

How did you murder it?

Singing it over and over and over again in all sorts of raucous voices. No, some of the lads were fantastic in what they could come up with, singing and try to amuse each other and the authorities were very good to enable us and encourage us to do this sort of thing where it was possible and when possible. I mean there is nowhere to go but just out into the open desert, in a wadi, where

37:30 we were a bit out of view and so forth but you never knew when a shell was going to come screaming over and if they decided there was a gathering of men you had to be careful.

And how does that go Let the Lights of London Shine Again?

Great. Oh there were songs or tunes that you could sing easily and the words you could make up your own if you couldn't remember the others. Lilli Marlene which was a German song the Germans used to sing it over their propaganda radio,

38:00 we sang that and put our own words into that.

Could you sing it now?

Could I sing it now?

Do you recall the words?

I wouldn't like to break the recording system here. No I can remember just bits and pieces of it. Sorry.

No, no that's all right. Lili Marlene was so effective in Germany they banned it.

It became too popular in Germany. It used to go: "Underneath the lantern, dah ti dah ti dah,"

38:30 we used to change some of the words to suit ourselves. It was a marching song, not that we marched very much up there, it would help your gait and so forth, make you feel a bit better.

It's actually a song about a woman missing her husband isn't it?

Yes, yes.

So did it tug on your heart strings?

Underneath the lantern by the village square .....and all that sort of thing. Oh yes

39:00 you couldn't describe how all individuals felt like and how they reacted to anything really in any shape or form in life. I couldn't remember myself either and I don't think I'd like to at this stage of the piece, we were all young fellows, most of us were young fellows trying to do our bit who met in rather extraordinary

39:30 circumstances. I have often felt that there has been an awful lot of armchair critics and would be authors and journalists who have written about the siege of Tobruk, in my opinion it has never ever been written properly, now whose fault that is I don't know, like people like myself, but they used to talk about what it was like and what we were doing and things like that. Chester Wilmot [Australian war correspondent] made a very valiant effort and did it quite well,

40:00 but it was a most extraordinary situation to be in and fighting a war and knowing that there was nowhere to go except to sea if you kept getting pushed back and pushed back and so forth, that was the end of it you were there, and this was at the back of your mind all the time, who you were and what you were, it was at the back of your mind all the time and that. I

40:29 suppose it's fair to say that most of us that were there, some people may argue this point, but I reckon everybody aged ten to twelve years, not in their bodies alone but in their minds, and things like that. Men became grown men and kids became men and of course from thereafter the war wasn't over when we did get out we had bigger and more ferocious things

41:00 to happen later on.

Tape 6

00:31 **Now Alan a couple of times you have mentioned the rats of Tobruk can you tell me where that term came from?**

Yes it came from Lord Haw Haw, the German fellow with the radio with the propaganda and so forth, he used poke muck at us and so forth saying "Rats in the trap, holes in the ground." and all the rest of it. The rat thing took on and we don't mind being rats

01:00 in the ground, rats and what not, and that's where it came from and it was just taken up by a group of people after the war. In the war we were known as the 'Rats of Tobruk' in the army anyway, by other

formations and so forth by those in Tobruk, and that's how the rats was formed and they decided to form an association after the war, which some of us oddly enough perhaps, not the right term oddly, but weren't too keen

01:30 about it the 'Rats of Tobruk' starting a separate organization for that particular episode is not going to help formations like the RSL [Returned and Services League] which we were prone to lean to coming back a bit, with our dads coming back, relatives had joined and so forth, we thought perhaps it was going to be splinter group; anyway it did perform and did very very well and they're still going, struggling like everybody else. But that's where the name came from, Lord Haw Haw

02:00 of Germany.

So was taking the German propaganda .....

Yes, well we were being referred to as rats, rats in the ground and you know they were going to treat us like rats and stamp us out and all that so he did us a good turn. The reaction was well why not, we're here

02:30 to stay anyway we've got nowhere else to go anyway.

Now you must have got very close to each other in that period, I mean you were under extreme pressure, you were living very closely together, can you tell me a little bit, who were your special mates your special friends?

They were all my mates. They were all mates. When as an officer

03:00 you weren't divorced from your troops and things like that, you weren't in contact with a group of people other than your platoon or whatever your command happened to be, so they were all your mates, you hoped they were anyway, you treated them as such. I suppose in fairness, I had some that were a bit special than others probably because I got on the same

03:30 wavelength with certain people better than others, that's probably the best way to describe it.

And who were those people?

Well I referred to earlier about my episode earlier in Tobruk, my sergeant, and even going back earlier to Corporal Alf Mons who was our first casualty up at Tokra, those fellows, and my batman who I thought was a tremendous young fellow and he was so,

04:00 the word batman I always resented that, he was a runner, he was my supporter and he used to make sure that I had a cup of tea when one was available or anything like that, or if there was a bit of water left for me to shave, because I had to show everybody else what to do, he was there, but he didn't do it like a servant and he was just a good bloke and enjoyed what he was doing and…

What was his name Alan?

Curly Dyke. Eric Erwin 'Curly' Dyke, son of a dairy farmer in Gippsland, yep. I think I may have mentioned to you earlier, whether it's recorded or not I don't know, but a relative contacted me only just recently and sent me up some letters, copies of letter that he had sent home to his mother and I nearly cried like a baby when I read the first one, and the way he wrote it, it brought back so much of course

05:00 at the same time, but it was terrible for anybody to see anybody killed, but those two that were killed at the same time and when the Germans stood up there and machine gunned them while they were lying on the ground and killed them from 40 to 50 feet away, it… I never got over that and I think if that bloke had survived

05:30 had they both survived, Mackie would have finished up as an officer for sure if I had anything to do with it, they were both sergeants, but had Curly survived he would have still been with me, I wouldn't have let him go. We were good mates. We understood each other and well I think we all did so, but he was special. There was quite a number who I could name and perhaps I wouldn't like to name some of them because some people might hear this and hear a name mentioned

06:00 and it might upset some people. We were a very happy and close-knit group, 12th Platoon, B Company which I have referred to. We reckoned we were an army on our own. I had other mates who had enlisted together, Peter Hayman who was killed at Alamein, he was commissioned at the same time as I was.

What was he like?

06:30 His name?

What was he like?

Well he was a nice bloke. We were two fellows who used to meet in the militia days at camp and things like that. He worked in the bank and I was working at Julius Kayser doing a cadet traineeship, and I was the lad from the farm and what was his background, his parents were

07:00 both bank people too, he was from a banking background, but we clicked like that and the fact that we went and enlisted at the same time, or went into the AIF at the same time, we had both tried to enlist

earlier together, we went together, and the next thing we ended up in the same unit and went away together. There was another fellow, Ken Payne, who was a funny fellow, who was a character. Johnny Mair who was taken prisoner of war in Tobruk,

07:30 he escaped into Switzerland, we caught up with each other when he came back, after he was released he came back after the war and we were pretty close friends. We had both been friends of Peter Hayman, yes I suppose that was a trio. Poor old John only died four years ago, he was a couple of months younger than me. His father

08:00 was the Premier of New South Wales. But I could go on through a lot of people who I suppose I could call mates. The special ones were those fellows. I don't think I was as close to them after that throughout the rest of the war. I hope I was always friendly with everybody, accepted in friendship not just because we were in the army together.

08:30 But I never got as close as I did as those three fellows.

So Peter was in Tobruk with you as well?

Yes the three of them, were we were all together. John was taken prisoner, Ken Payne was killed going out on a fighting patrol with a lot of his troops. That was a nasty business.

At Tobruk? That happened after you left or while you were still there?

09:00 No before I left.

Were you with them or…

No. I was acting as 2IC of Don Company on the perimeter and he was still with B Company. He was with another platoon, the incident I referred to earlier about pulling out on the 2nd May in broad daylight, but poor old Ken he left a note beside his haversack to me.

09:30 "God, if anything ever happened to me…" sort of thing… let's change the subject.

Well I was actually going to ask you a bit about some of your officers, it sounds like your CO was a harsh man, I mean that incident where you related where you've just carried your wounded mate back from the attack, and you had just lost two of your special mates

10:00 **and he has a go at you, was he a harsh man, was he hard??**

A disciplinarian I think is the fairest thing to say and he was CO, and I try to be fair about some of these things, but he was a CO of a battalion which he had seen formed, built up, got them fit, got them trained as well as he could with whatever was available, took us overseas and

10:30 he'd been actually to a command school, he wasn't up at Benghazi with us, a 2IC was running the battalion and he was away at a senior commander school and he rejoined us when he got back to Tobruk full of vim and let's go sort of business. All of a sudden his battalion gets decimated and it must be shattering for him, I've got to be fair, the way he spoke to me hurt like hell, I've never forgotten it.

11:00 He was a very vindictive man but at that particular time he had every reason to be on his high horse if that's the right term, agitated, concerned and so forth but to a little old boy like me it was inexcusable in my opinion, that's why I reacted the way I did and I shouldn't have done but I did. It was to my own detriment

11:30 because he never let me get away with it. The way I referred to him before I think I suffered over twelve months' seniority over it. I had to wait for my captaincy to come through in due course and I should have had it earlier and the fact that there were some decorations that were floating around that were never signed. As a matter of fact, he

12:00 made a statement to me second hand, and he made a statement that why the battalion didn't have many decorations for that particular action for that week or so or in that period, his answer was, we have suffered a defeat, that was it. Of course he was a World War 1 man, a lieutenant in the Guards Regiments in England, one of the guardsmen, he'd won a MC, DSO [Military Cross, Distinguished Service Order],

12:30 a bit of a hero, a real hero, which was a bit difficult to fathom with his attitude because there were a lot of people who should have been decorated in that particular episode. From memory there is only one Military Cross got through to one officer which everybody said should have got to somebody else, those things happened anyway.

13:00 There were 2 or 3 MMs [Military Medals] and few MIDs [Mentioned in Dispatches], one of my blokes got an MID and that's about all. Other battalions had decorations hanging around their necks by comparison. There was another old saying that if you were too far back in the queue when the ration truck came up you never got a decoration, they were all issued out before you got there

13:30 but if that was true, I didn't hear him say it. That was told to me, and that was common knowledge and that was it, he was so bitterly disappointed and shattered that the battalion had suffered so badly and it

was unavoidable, we just happened to be the ones in the wrong, right place and he would not hand out decorations for us. You see decorations are things that are allotted anyway,

14:00 there are so many for this and so many for that for each action, whoever gets in first gets the lot.

Right. And what about General Morshead, he was present in Tobruk all the time wasn't he?

Yes.

Did the men respect him was he a loved leader?

Yes.

So that must have been very helpful.

We worshipped him I think everybody did, I suppose the fact that he was there with us and he was our boss and he was the fellow who said yes or no to whatever happened,

14:31 I mean he used to issue all the orders for counter attacks and things like this, and what you will do, and he ensured that the main thing was to save Tobruk was to occupy no man's land which he did by his policies that he issued, and his instructions about patrolling and things like that and he used to go around and visit as much as he could, he was respected, highly respected because he really made his name at Alamein in

15:00 (UNCLEAR) over there. He was 9th Division.

Now Alan, yesterday you talked a little about your second major confrontation at Tobruk I think it was, but you had mentioned there was an earlier one when the Italians had tried to come through. So that would have been your first exchange of fire with the enemy was it?

Yes that's right. Face to face with the enemy. Yes.

15:30 Getting shot at and firing back.

Now tell me if I overstep the line because I don't want to upset you, but I'm just … having kind of been under gunfire myself I know that your body response, like whatever you've been, you might have been trained this way or that way, that's quite a physical response and the fear kind of grips you, is that your experience?

Yes, you just go numb all over

16:00 and that's only one part. "What am I going to do about this, what can I do about it?" The only other thing that you can do is turn around and run away. No we were occupying these two posts with my platoon underarmed, very little ammunition and we'd only just been in the place a few days and I was sent out to [Post] S12 and S15 up there

16:30 and it was a mile away to the company because all the posts between me and the rest of B Company it was along this ravine and nobody could have come up through there anyway they would have had to come up this way or that way I presume that was the reason, plus the fact that we didn't have enough troops anyway to man it all.

So how do you overcome that impulse to run away to run and hide. What do you do to overcome that?

O I suppose I've got to be flippant about that

17:00 and say there was nowhere to run. We were all there together myself and thirty others occupying these two posts which were a hundred yards apart, what could you do, I thought you don't sit down and analyse it and say well if I run away they're going to follow me, or if I run away on my own I'm going to be a coward and I'll probably get shot.

17:30 If I do run away anyhow, that's all nonsense. There's something here that grabs you, you're all there together, we've read books over the years and we've heard stories about people who have broken and people who have deserted, and there are individuals and you have to be sorry for those people. I only know of one throughout the five years of the war

18:00 I had to defend him at a court martial. I don't know, I can't explain that, you're there, and you see these silly looking characters coming towards you shooting at you, climbing through the wire and so forth, and there's reputed to be five hundred of them all together through the wire and they're all Italians and they're all dressed up in their fancy uniforms and what not, yeah it was one of the main regiments, different regiments had

18:30 different plumage in their hats or bonnets, really big bonnets, really big things, these things flashing around and we grabbed three or four of them and one was an officer, which we hung on to one and the others were starting to go back again there that hadn't been hit. But we ran out of ammunition. Fortunately they'd decided that they'd had enough had they hung around for a while they could have walked off with us and we had some help from 48th

19:00 which was next to me and I was at the end of the line with the [2/] 23rd Battalion and the [2/] 48th was next to us and we got some from there. Late that night the CSM [Company Sergeant Major] and Peter (UNCLEAR) our 2IC [Second in Command] came up to with a box each, that's all they had, a box of ammo, if you had another battle the next day he would have been around again. It was all so stupid, the situation in those days, it was stupid. But anyway that

19:30 all blew over and I had this Italian officer with two or three of his henchmen with him and all they were saying was "Mama Maria, Mama Maria." and producing photos of their mother and saints of this and saints of that and whatnot. I don't think they showed me a photo of the pope, I probably would have hit him, but that's how they carried on. And while all this was going on I had a pistol there which

20:00 was at the ready and the Italians had little grenades and we called them pill boxes, letter boxes, because they're black at one end and red at the other, made of aluminium and they'd fill them with tacks and bits of wire and stuff like that, fairly harmless really but they make a hell of a noise and this bloke had one in his hand all the time and he dropped it, and poof a cloud of smoke went off then

20:30 we had little bits of wire in the shins, didn't do any damage but he was trying to frighten the hell out of us so that he could turn around and run away, I presume. Anyway I pulled my pistol, knowing damn well that I didn't have any ammunition, he was an officer issued with a Smith and Wesson and no ammunition, that's honest. Anyhow

21:00 that blew over and we all laughed about that… he had his try and I had mine. When he saw the pistol and he didn't do anything else. We marched those blokes and hung on to those blokes and apparently the 23rd got a message about how serious it was and they responded and a company of them were coming out with carriers and things to help out, they were the reserve battalion and came up to help me and it's in the history when they arrived they found that Macfarlane had the situation under control. Probably

21:30 what they meant was that Macfarlane was sitting in a hole in the ground shivering his socks off. But it was under control that's all, and it blew over. But during that period when ammunition got crook and a fellow named Lester Hitch, his sister rang me yesterday to say that she was ill and that she was feeling better and she said she saw me on TV on Anzac Day and she couldn't help crying for me and Lester, he was another bloke I was very close to. I haven't mentioned him I know. He crawled

22:00 around on his belly from this post across to that one down there, cadging a few rounds of ammunition from the riflemen, and would come back and load a magazine for our one and only Bren gun. He did that twice. Eventually the riflemen had nothing to give him anyway and I put him in for a decoration I thought he should have got a DCM [Distinguished Conduct Medal] or an MM. But that all blew over but that was that

22:30 a great baptism of fire as far as were concerned. We didn't have any casualties because the Ities were only interested in making a noise and I think they would have loved to have kept going and we would all have been taken prisoner. It turned out later on that the Germans were firing machine guns over their heads forcing them to come in, that's written up in the official history. But when they saw our reaction that we didn't want them either they started to go back,

23:00 we stopped firing, they just had to go back for two reasons, we didn't want to fire on them going back and secondly we didn't have the ammunition anyway. It's hilarious, think about it. How the hell we won the war.

Did they suffer any casualties?

Pardon?

Were there any Italian dead?

Yes there were.

Alan how did you feel about the prospect of killing somebody?

After that first episode I never

23:30 thought about it again, couldn't afford to because all the time you could be the next, it was the situation you were in.

Did you have misgivings or did you have doubts that you could actually do it?

First time when we were fired on by enemy planes during the retreat that put the wind up me a bit and I thought hello, this is what it's all about. But it was the first

24:00 time that we were actually in contact and being fired at, except in the wadi 'Cuffe'. Wadi 'Cuffe', C.U.F.F.E. I think it was, a very deep wadi, which we were told to stop at one end and defend it on the retreat back before we got back to this island. There were a few shots fired around there and we weren't sure who was firing or where they came from but no, the first time the war was presented to us on a plate was this particular episode, just my platoon,

24:30 nobody offered to help us, you dealt with the best way you could, as I said earlier the only alternative

was to pick up your haversack and run, or leave your haversack behind because somebody might want your water. I'm being silly now but …

That's all right.

Better to be silly than cry.

Did you know whether you killed anyone in that encounter?

I don't know.

25:00 I didn't have a rifle, I had this pistol which I knew didn't have anything in it.

It's incredible really.

If they'd got really close to me I probably would have grabbed somebody's rifle with a bayonet. We'd reached the stage that if they had pressed on much closer we would have been down to the rifle bayonet situation to survive. But that was our

25:30 baptism as far as my blokes were concerned and when we were pulled out of there to go somewhere else later on it was the talking point amongst the rest of the battalion for a while, well the blokes were, troops were, you can imagine what my blokes were saying to the fellows from some other battalion…

Because you had captured an officer and these other Italians?

Oh no, we had been in action and they would probably be calling you chocco

26:00 boys, you don't know what war is all about, you know how the troops talk amongst themselves. Yeah that was it anyway in this later episode that I was talking about when we were pulled out of that thing in May, what was left of my platoon, had those fellows killed. The night before we had been pulled out we did a bit of a counter attack which was a complete and utter failure because we couldn't co-ordinate it and this fellow Hitch who I had put in for a decoration, and individual decoration,

26:30 was killed.

Lester?

Killed. Yes he was killed. Killed along with our CSM in this counter attack which was a bit of a shemozzle and how we weren't all killed that night I don't know, that was the night of the 1st May.

And what was that action Alan, can you tell me about that what were you supposed to do?

Well what was left of us in B Company and the 48th Battalion were coming in to do a counter attack and we had to go in on the right flank of it, through the wire through the minefield

27:00 and get through to our troops to try to save some of the troops and to try to recover some of the land a piece we didn't know whether our troops were then prisoners or not, it wasn't until the next day that we found out the full story, because of no communication only telephone wires which were all cut to pieces with the shelling so we didn't know anything at this stage, but excuse the expression but it was a bloody shemozzle

27:30 and why we weren't all killed I don't know. We had to go out through a gap in the wire through the minefield and try and spread out and then it was called off before we got any further and this young fellow Hitch, Lester Hitch, was killed along with two or three others, so his decoration thing became null and void and he only got a MID because he was dead. Thinking he should

28:00 have had a VC [Victoria Cross] in the first place.

It sounds very dangerous to walk through a minefield.

It is not recommended, particularly in those days, as the war went on, you had different mines, you had some of the mines you could walk on it wasn't generally known but some mines are pedestrian, if you stood on one it wouldn't go off, they were timed for

28:30 a vehicle or something heavier to put them off, but the Germans used to put trip wires on them so if you kicked a trip wire you just get bang and you'd two go off…

Could you see them?

No they're all buried.

Isn't it a bit suicidal to send soldiers out into a minefield?

Well you had gaps through the minefield which were marked with a painted rock or a flag or something like lying on the ground so the Germans couldn't see where your gaps were

29:00 from there place and there were only marks so you could only see them from this side and the same with their minefields, you had your gaps where you had to get your vehicles through with rations and things like that to the troops who were in front of the minefields, this was a secondary minefield which was behind the others and they were all filled up with what we called mines, in what we called that

particular thing, after we got into Tobruk, Egyptian coffins, long things,

29:30 they were about that long and about that wide, square things, coffins, and they'd been in the armoury and sheds in Egypt since World War I and all they did was just put new firing pins in them, half of them didn't go off anyway, because they were so old and rusty. We didn't tell the Germans that, but they stopped a few tanks coming in on us and we blew a few some of their trucks I think

How did Lester die?

Pardon.

How did Lester die then?

30:00 He was killed in machine gun fire, the Germans. It was a nice clean effort, I was able, she'll never hear this, I've said too much, he had a clean death, put it that way. Not like these other two who were wounded and then got...

So then he died very quickly?

Yes.

Were you able to bury him?

No.

30:30 Because we had to pull back then. He was buried by the Germans along with the others, same with my batman and sergeant, they were buried by the Germans and later on their bodies were exhumed and their bodies were brought back to the cemetery in Tobruk after the war.

And was that done respectfully, when you buried the enemy's dead?

Mmm?

When if you had to bury the enemy's dead like for instance the Germans burying your mates...

Yes.

31:00 Yes if you had the opportunity you could bury anybody and you just put the helmet on them or leave their rifle there or if they had any arms or anything like that. In our own case, with our own wounded, if you weren't able to recover at the time, you used to take the identification tag, there's two around your neck, you take the bottom off, one for identification and verification as well but with a battle going backwards and forwards so naturally you couldn't do anything

31:30 about it.

So Alan I'm wondering if you weren't able to bury those three friends, you weren't able to have a funeral for them, was there a particular ritual you would go through to mark their deaths, was there anything that you did together to say this is for Lester or this is for...

I used to think about them and talk about them later on and so forth and when you got home after the war of course there were also reunions and Anzac Day.

32:00 Anzac Day you think of all those things and all those people, everybody, not just your own. There were very few opportunities to bury somebody and say a few words, very few opportunities. Our pioneer platoon had that responsibility, if we were in a static situation the way to recover them and they used to put them all together in the grave and there

32:30 are a couple of photos over there some of the extensive burial grounds where they were buried or else you would just leave them there and try to bury them hastily and just stick a bayonet, the rifle up and stick the bayonet in the ground with the helmet on it and it may sound awful but it was the sort of job that you did later.

So a lot of your grief and your anger at this you had to store it away did you?

33:00 Yes. It just made you more determined to try to win the battle.

And Alan I'm wondering after a battle like that you know, you've lost friends, you've been shot at and you've been in danger you know and sometimes you might have felt that you have won the battle and sometimes that you have lost it but either way, you've just been through quite a traumatic experience

33:30 **together, how did you recover morale amongst the troops, how did you get yourselves together again?**

A very deep gulp. No, you'd commiserate with one another I suppose, you know the first opportunity you had to think about or talk about it, someone would say "Oh it's my fault,

34:00 he shouldn't have got it I should have got it, if I'd done this...." and you think to yourself if, if, if, if I'd done this I'd done that, I think every officer, NCO, or leading senior NC private who was in charge or

something like that probably would think I should have done it differently, and that was not a good attitude to adopt at all, it had happened. There are so many other aspects that are attributed to it that was happening in a big battle and so forth, and people

34:30 are falling over like flies, there's nothing you can do about it, it's not any individual's fault, but that's how I think anyway and the sooner you stop talking about it the better otherwise you wouldn't be worth two bob.

Did you pray together?

I only prayed to myself, with myself.

35:00 Of course when you are in camp and anywhere like that we used to have church parades but that didn't happen when you were in the battle area. Sometimes the padre used to get around. Padres were different in different formations, in an infantry brigade you had three battalions and there is a Roman Catholic padre with one battalion, there was a Church of England Padre and the other was had an OPD [other Protestant denominations] which could have been

35:30 anybody, could have been Methodist or whatever, they were called OPD's. They used to interchange periodically and if you were a RC [Roman Catholic] you went to an RC parade if it was available, if you weren't you had your own fellows and so forth like that. But that didn't happen very often, some of them are very good and some of them would go beyond the call of duty. There was one padre, I won't mention his name,

36:00 from memory he was with the 48th Battalion at one stage and he used to carry a little broken old gramophone with him, he had a few old records, he used to carry them, he was awarded an MC for his efforts and so forth of bravery but they were few and far between because what was the use of a padre roaming around there when they were all going to get killed somewhere? You couldn't replace them over night.

36:30 **Still music can be a great solace can't it?**

Yes. Well this was mainly in Tobruk when we were in static posts in defensive positions and things like that. This fellow used to go roaming around, he used to go to other units too, he was quite a character. I'm not too sure of his name but I won't mention it.

Now Alan Australian men are notorious for not showing their feelings, but do you think that changed under the stress of battle,

37:00 **would they cry with each other, talk about you know how they felt and missing home and things like that?**

I'll answer that by saying it would have been great to cry if you could. I've seen fellows cry in as in a group, but only for that split few seconds and that's done with it, the emotions have burst and that's it that's the end of it.

37:30 See you didn't always… an action didn't start and bang it started and people get killed and then bang it stopped, it was an ongoing thing that you were either advancing somewhere or you were coming back somewhere or whatnot, it was when the thing was over and you gathered those of you who were left if you were lucky you were still all there or some of you weren't there and you'd

38:00 talk about so and so and "Oh he'll be all right he got one on the ankle he'll be right, he'll be in hospital and he'll be back." and all that sort of thing and what not and "So and so hasn't got much chance and poor old Joe he's gone." They didn't stand around, lie around or sit around moping or crying in groups like that, they wanted to I'm sure, they wanted to. I experienced the wanting to but

38:30 let's be honest, I don't think anybody wants to see you cry. I think perhaps that's the best way to look at it. See those things, you never thought about. You're asking these questions which are very, very good but you never thought of those things. I suppose you just steeled yourself to it,

39:00 you become so embittered because you've lost so and so and so and so and so and you don't want to worry any more about it. An interesting subject. Perhaps somebody should write a book about it, you tell me that you've written books.

Not yet, I'm just on my first.

No there were lots of times and most of us wished to God that we weren't in the infantry. See, just to quote an example of what goes on in an infantry battalion, well we got badly knocked about in Tobruk and Alamein and then of course later on in Tarakan, Borneo, but there were over three thousand eight hundred and something names that went through our battalion and we've got our own memorial up in Wangaratta which we've built ourselves,

40:00 I recommend to you two ladies if ever you are going through Wangaratta, call in there for a cup of tea at the Wangaratta Cemetery and have a look. We built it ourselves, the centrepiece is a beautiful piece of Australian black granite with 375 names on it, they're all killed in action and for the rest of the war there are little plaques all over it for fellows who have died since the war and it's our mausoleum you might say,

40:30 but of the three thousand eight hundred there are 375 that were killed on active service and that's a lot of people.

Tape 7

00:47 **Alan you've talked about a couple of battles you've have been involved in now, in Tobruk, I was wondering after your first battle you don't know what you're in for do you,**

01:00 **when you're going into subsequent confrontations was it worse or better, I mean knowing what you were going into did that make it harder or easier?**

I suppose it made it easier in some ways. It was easier to adapt yourself to the situation was I suppose but

01:30 I don't know, I don't know, I don't think it was ever easy and people went in with a lot more experiences than I, I was one of the lucky ones, but there's only two alternatives, you were going to go through or you weren't going to go through. In the words of the gospel, so might it be.

02:00 **You mentioned earlier that there was only one instance that you witnessed where a soldier did break down, could you tell us about that?**

No I'd rather not.

Really, you don't have to mention any names.

No. He wasn't one of my own he was from another company. Poor fellow he just shot through and he was picked up…

And was he in a nervous state by then?

02:30 It was one of those cases where he didn't seem to regret what he had done as I think I mentioned to you in passing funnily enough, it was the only one I knew that this had actually happened and I had to go and defend him at the court martial, during a lull in proceedings

03:00 another one of our officers was, I was the defending officer the other fellow was…

Prosecuting.

Prosecuting and he had a bit of experience this other fellow and I hadn't, but how on earth do you defend a fellow who had virtually deserted and charged with desertion and there it all

03:30 was, where he is picked up and everything, and all I had to do was going to try to speak of his character, the possibility could have happened to anybody, it could have happened to me, I can remember saying to the judge advocate, naturally he didn't get away with it poor fellow. He was a special individual in regards to that particular episode because later on he was being returned to Australia and he went on to a ship,

04:00 a New Zealander you know, in a similar situation, they were both on the ship together and they both jumped off the ship together before it sailed into the Canal at Port Said somewhere and then they were picked up again, they were in trouble all along the way. What happened to the bloke in ensuing years I'm not too sure but he did emerge later on

04:30 funnily enough I don't know when, he came to see me under very strange circumstances and he thanked me for trying to get him off or not, but he wasn't angry with me or anything like that and he came to me as though nothing had happened. Well I knew something had happened and I didn't have much respect for him as a matter of fact after what he did afterwards. He died a tragic death later on poor fellow.

05:00 But that's the only incidence that I know of where it was cut and dried.

So lots of times it was much more grave than that?

Yeah a bloke might go to ground quicker than he should have or he didn't get over quick enough to help somebody and things like that because his legs wouldn't carry him. We're all guilty of that at different times unknowingly or knowingly.

05:30 I think it's another subject that we can discuss at some other time.

OK. Now I was also wondering as a lieutenant whether you had any input to the command politics if you like, the running of the whole brigade, whether you, I know the army doesn't work as a democracy, but whether you had a chance to make recommendations?

06:00 Well we had our opinions made known of the company command as a lieutenant in charge of a platoon, sometimes you were a lieutenant in charge of a company, your input for or against and you were able to

put forward your point of view, you nearly always finished up accepting what you were told to do even if you didn't think it was right, but you put in your piece to try to help the situation whether it be to do with going into

06:30 action or a leave policy for troops or whether the mess times were wrong or whether they weren't getting fed properly or something like that, or I've been the Orderly Officer too often this week and why doesn't somebody else do it. That was all listened to and from thereon it would have to go up to the battalion, battalion would go to brigade and things like that, but no we always had access to press our point of view but

07:00 you could never do anything to change any policy, if you thought it was wrong and they still insisted that that was the way it had to happen it happened.

So you had some rights to have input but you had no appeals?

You made a contribution with your point of view and you were listened to but invariably an order would come from up top and it would filter down, down to the bottom level

07:30 to a platoon commander you know and so forth and this is what we are going to do. Well that's what we're going to do. But if some order came through that you were going to commit suicide, you'd stop and think you'd say something about it. No there weren't that many occasions where you were asked your opinion before something happened, you were asked afterwards why it happened and why it went wrong, whether it be training,

08:00 a football match or anything.

Why I'm asking that is because Churchill or Montgomery via Churchill you know, didn't want to relieve the 9th Division in Tobruk, they wanted them to stay there or this is what I've read anyway, Blamey insisted that the 9th be relieved, I was wondering whether officers at your level had been pressing for relief for the troops, was that something that you advocated?

No. No. We did very little of the higher politics of the thing we learnt a lot about it later on. But at that time when we were withdrawn from the battle, when the Germans started to retreat we were pulled out what was left of us and we went back to Palestine where the troops started coming back from hospital and convalescent depots and things like that and a few reinforces

09:00 that had already arrived and we started building up again and we were too busy going through that process but at the back of our minds what's next, because the 8th army was then chasing the Germans across Libya and the New Zealanders were still with him, South Africans were still with him not that we had much to do with them but we were more interested in what the New Zealanders were doing that was more like close to home

09:30 and we felt we should be with them I think. I would say the majority of us felt why aren't we going too? And then it started to come through that no, we were going to be sent home they wanted us to go back and fight the Japs and we felt God there are plenty of people at home to fight the Japs, we're busy over here. The Australian Government didn't want us to be involved in Alamein really but Alamein was so crucial, but they had to get hold of every bod they could find because here was a whole division,

10:00 highly trained and experienced in everything from the Tobruk episode and the fact that they had been training up on the Syrian border watching the Turks and so forth, we were worth about three divisions really in that sense, no way named were we going to go back to Australia then. Then of course we helped play a major part in a major battle of Alamein and we were slowly coming

10:30 to grips with that and we were rebuilding ourselves getting back and so forth, and we had reinforcements there and we were in a formation and weren't quite up to strength, but we were big enough and experienced enough to play a major part in the major war which it was then, and when it became known that there was a bit of a battle going on about us going home, of course Blamey had no option but to insist, he was told politically that "We want them home."

11:00 I don't know but I suspect that if Leslie Morshead, our General Officer, had been asked what to do he would have said "Let's go to Italy." Well he was very proud of his division over there. He had a formation of desert fighters, very useful to the allied cause and I think that's the way you have to look at it. Politically at home,

11:30 I've got to be careful of what I say here, I am not a labourite, put it that way, and I think they panicked and they wanted us, the rats, our division, to go home because they were having trouble getting enough troops of their one, their National Service, they weren't National Service, but they taking blokes from here and putting them in the army and so forth, who didn't want to be in the army, it was a bit of a rag tag, they only had a few

12:00 militia battalions and the 7th, 6th Division, one brigade the 6th division had been left in Colombo, why they didn't take them home I don't know, of course some of the 7th Division were taken off the ships to change ships in Sumatra on the way home and they were taken prisoners of war by the Japs, so they were a little bit messed about. So politically I suppose though the troops at home were to defend the country, that peanut MacArthur,

12:30 should not have said that really, he wasn't a peanut, he was a corn cob pipe smoking peanut and he wanted us all back there to use the Australians as much as he could, and he proved that later on the way he handled us.

Anyway just coming back a bit to when you've come back to Palestine a little bit earlier, you came back to set up the training unit to train the 9th Division new recruits,

13:00 **you came out of there a little bit earlier and then by August through to December I read it was that long to get them all out of Tobruk. Was it a relief to be out of Tobruk?**

Yes. Oh yes. Certainly I think for everybody, we'd had it. No doubt about it and we were very, very lucky to be relieved because

13:30 they had a brigade of Poles, a brigade of Polish troops and an English brigade that happened to be been idle at the time, otherwise we wouldn't have been relieved. Nobody would say that they wanted to stay there and certainly the formations were all glad to get back. We'd have been in a pretty sorry state if we had stayed there for another 3 months under the circumstances that was going on.

14:00 A lot of people said they wished we were still there because when we were relieved and started to break out when the Eighth Army caught up that way, we would have performed a lot better than the ones that were there. And then when Jerry, the Germans, counter attacked and came back again and they lost Tobruk overnight first go, they reckon that would never have happened if we had been left there. But who knows, they're probably right I mean I suppose it's all right for me to say that

14:30 for some reason or other we were far superior than the other formations, we were all volunteers in the AIF over there, the British army was made up of volunteers, regulars and territorials and the territorials units were built up with conscripts as they required more reinforcements. Looking at it in that light it's a bit difficult to criticize

15:00 people but on performance and the way we felt and what other people felt we were just different that's why we were better. They weren't going to let us come home, they wanted us there and they used the fact that there wasn't any shipping to send us home anyhow and they got the shipping as early as they could. But I don't know.

I was wondering about that Alan because

15:30 **your division, your division had spent all that time in Tobruk and you'd defended it at enormous cost in terms of loss of life and injuries and so on and the 6 months later on the 21st June [1942] the Germans walked in.**

Yes they took it in 24 hours.

What was the feeling among your troops when that happened?

They were furious. I think I have to say

16:00 that. I think most of them were very upset about it. Why the hell couldn't they…Because if they had hung on a little bit further the Germans would never have got back to Egypt like they did and they were at their wits' end supply wise and everything else. We could have hit them back then and that would be the end and there would never have been Alamein and so forth but South Africans were at fault there. It's in print

16:30 in history, I'm not just saying that, that particular South African Division was different to the other South African division, they were totally different but it's just a question of command, personnel and everything like that. The only troops that tried to do anything in that particular episode was this British Guards Brigade which were up in the north west corner and they kept fighting to the end until they had to give up. But no, we felt pretty terrible about that.

17:00 **Did you feel betrayed?**

Yeah. And the German propaganda made very good use of that reminding us that we had been betrayed and let down after what we had done and so forth.

How were you hearing the German propaganda? On the radio?

You'd pick it up on bits of radio, news items used to come through. At that stage, the (UNCLEAR) were printing an AIF news in Palestine for everybody, things were on the improve as the war went on

17:30 we were always being told, we used to get a lot of that news then. No it was a bitter pill for us because irrespective of what anybody thinks it wasn't easy at Tobruk, we just didn't sit in a hole and defend the place, we defended it by being aggressive, we were out every night occupying that no man's land we had fighting patrols, special grades and things like that just to keep the Germans and Italians away, they were 6000, 7000, and 8000 yards out they weren't coming in that close to us.

18:00 So we weren't just defenders, we were being aggressive all the time otherwise we would never have held it for that long.

And I mean for you, you'd lost a few of your really close mates in Tobruk. I mean that really

must have added to your anger?

Yes, Yes. Yes. What's next?

18:30 **Sorry to go back to that.**

No please you keep going, that was just my easy answer.

That's all right. Well I was wondering when you were back in Palestine I mean you were back to garrison duty then weren't you and training and you're in relative freedom again aren't you, you can go out to dinner and you can go to the beach, go to the local café…

If you saved up you could go on leave every

19:00 four of five weeks and go to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem or Haifa or whatnot.

Yes I saw some photos of you in Tel Aviv.

Yes I had two trips up there. I had one special trip when I was in charge of a relief party, troops who had never been there, I got a few days out of that. You get dressed up in your uniform, have a wash and a shower and stay at a decent place at night time. Yeah. That was

19:30 a shame. My CO made me stay there too long, he was still taking it out on me, I was there for quite a long time, I was in charge of the place in the finish. I saw an awful lot of troops and battalions go through there and getting fitted out getting ready to go to Tobruk or ready to go up to Syria to join the battalion up there as they came through, people I got to know before they were even known in the battalion.

And what were people doing for recreation?

20:00 Oh we used to play a lot of sport, inter company, inter football matches, inter cricket matches. Leave was fairly regular because everyone was at the same places but as long as you had enough money in your pay book to go on leave you used to go as long as you weren't required for other duties. There is a very strong and rigid training program that had to be carried out all

20:30 the time, fell training, route marching and rifle drill and weapon training and tacticals and stuff like and getting them ready so that when they got to their unit they could fit in.

Now Palestine was the regional base wasn't it?

Palestine was the depot for the Eighth and Tenth Armies, the Tenth Army was up north in Syria, Iraq and Iran and those places and the Eighth Army was in Egypt but Palestine was the core of it.

So I mean

21:00 **forgive me for asking this, but did a lot of camp followers grow up around that base?**

What camp followers?

Well I mean prostitution really.

No.

No, the Palestinians didn't capitalise on the presence of all those soldiers?

No. Well they did in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and those places they were main centers where there were white people it was that easy.

21:30 There was a lot of … of course Palestine was full of what should I say, immigrants forced out of Russia and those places, a lot of Europeans and so forth and Latvian and Russian and Turks, not Turks, a lot of those countries that were in trouble and they had escaped from the Russians, and from Europe,

22:00 they had gone through Europe into Russia and got through that way and the Jewish community was being built up rather rapidly there, they weren't all Jews but the population grew in those places perhaps by one hundred per cent during those years of the war they were there and of course when the war ended it even got more so. Although Tel Aviv, Jerusalem were ordinary towns

22:30 but they were attractive from a historical point of view, particularly Jerusalem…

Did you go and see the sights?

Mmmm?

Did you go and see the sights in Jerusalem?

Oh yes. Yes I walked through the Garden of Gethsemane and all those places and bought a few little foibles for my mother and my wife and so forth. Some of the commercialisation going on in the place disgusted me because that happens anywhere

23:00 and anything, here were these thousands of troops from all around the world on leave in the places and

I suppose they could tell you something like this belonged to so and so and was a thousand years old and was probably only made last night. Good luck to them, good luck.

And were you aware at that time what was happening to the Jews in Nazi Europe?

Oh yes. Oh yes.

23:30 We knew about that before we went away in most cases.

So did that give you sympathy for the Jewish community you encountered?

To a certain point but it made you but it made you more angry with the people who were committing the atrocities.

Of course, yes. And I was wondering now that you're out of Tobruk and you're in a relatively safe place,

24:00 **did homesickness become prominent again?**

I would say yes. I think after a lot of cases, after Tobruk and they were in Palestine the battalion and the formation and the division actually moved up through Lebanon into Syria and got deployed up there, they probably would think more about home then they had done a bit in Tobruk sort of business, and what the hell are we doing up there, hoping to God that the Turks didn't decide to come in with the Germans otherwise they would have been involved in

24:30 another battle there, although we weren't looking for one. I think that period there, there could have been a lot of home sickness. Yeah that would be fair comment.

I was also wondering, you were in Palestine…

I'm sorry if I made it up but probably when we realized that the 6th Division were going home, the remains of 6th Division after Greece and Crete and the 7th Division which had been in battle for Syria beforehand, they were going home too and we wanted to follow them probably

25:00 but then leading on later on when the bugle called for us to go and save the situation in Egypt, well let's get at it, we forgot about all that then. I think in that period there would have been a lot of homesickness with what was going on.

I'm wondering about the February '42, the Japanese took Singapore, bombed Darwin

25:30 **on the other side of the world, you know how did that affect you?**

Oh gee that's great, well it was a lot safer here. Oh it affected it of course it did. We knew that there was nothing that we could do about it, you couldn't get on your bike and go home.

Were you worried about your wives and your mothers?

Of course. We didn't know how serious it was at that stage. It was a shock when Singapore fell because it was

26:00 supposed to be impregnable which it wasn't of course and it would have been against anybody else but with the Japs it was a different story. We heard all sorts of funny stories, we heard the story that it wasn't very serious in one sense, because they had bombed Darwin, the people of Darwin ran away and they didn't stop until they got to Adelaide, and we heard stories like that you see so we thought why worry about that it wasn't very serious, I think that was just attitudes that came out of it, but basically of course we were worried. But there

26:30 was nothing we could do about it.

What was the rumour mill like? Were you hearing lots of wild stories about what was going on?

Where?

Well where ever you were really, when you're in a conflict zone there are always lots of rumours that fly around.

Oh yes. Well when more than two people get together there's rumours. Truths and disbeliefs and so forth and wanting to be smart with the story and things like that yeah.

27:00 Did you hear so and so, no cut it out, oh it couldn't be true no, fair dinkum, is it, next time you heard it, it was twice as bad. Rumours … it was part of our job to stop it.

Now some of the 9th Division went up to garrison the border of Syria and…

The whole division was there at different times. We were based in Syria and took turns up on the Syrian border just keeping an eye on

27:30 Joe the Turk because at the stage the game, no one knew if he would change his mind and come in with

Germany. It was even more so, or more urgent to keep an eye on him when the Germans were coming back down and got into Egypt and heading towards Alamein because if Alamein had fallen before he got right through there on to the canal over to Palestine

28:00 he'd link up with the Turks and say we're in with you now, that had occupied Persia, Iraq and all those place, Syria where all the oil was and they would have linked up with the Japs coming through Burma. That's why Alamein was such an important battle to win.

Yeah they would have had the whole Mediterranean.

Yes. And the Turks wouldn't have sat back and said you naughty boys, don't come near us in Turkey, we'll join you.

28:30 **Syria was quite a different landscape wasn't it than Palestine and Tobruk?**

Yes, yeah terrible, pretty rugged. Cold, the weather wasn't very nice but it had its good moments I didn't spend much time with them I was with the training unit all the time there was a certain number of officers and ORs [Other Ranks] who used to go to this ski school in Lebanon learning to ski

29:00 in case we had to find ourselves fighting a war in Syria amongst the snow, that was a pleasant surprise for a lot of people learning to ski on the slopes in Syria-Lebanon amongst the pine trees and what not.

It would have been beautiful.

Yeah. Beautiful country some of it. But further north back towards Turkey it's pretty rugged and mountainous, deep ravines and things like that and pretty sparse.

29:30 **And what were the locals like? Did you make much contact with them?**

The majority of them were friendly and if came to that the chips were down it would be the other way I think. You always felt that you couldn't trust anybody completely and they would feel the same about us no doubt. See their way of life and their politics were so different to ours and we always tried

30:00 to respect it, see we used to have trouble and so forth with troops getting out of hand when perhaps they had too much to drink, they might say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing in different places, that happens all over the world, but in those countries they had to treat it differently and handle it with kid gloves and you also had to try to keep them on your side of the fence. It was an interesting time.

Would you ever

30:30 **eat in the local cafes**

Yes.

And go to local dances?

Oh no never went to the local dances, no.

Were they called dances?

Yeah there were local things up there but the Jews did not want you interfering with them very much, and the Arabs didn't have that sort of social activity anyway. We had facilities set up in Jerusalem, Palestine and

31:00 up the road a bit, Syria and so forth, men's clubs, canteens all set up for entertaining people, picture theatres, there are picture theatres in Tel Aviv, I saw Gone With The Wind in Tel Aviv when it first came out, it was shown there before it came out to Australia I believe. I don't know, I think the army amenities

31:30 service did a wonderful job to entertain our troops when they were on leave in those places, if they went elsewhere on their own they did it on their own risk and they used to get into trouble.

Anyone land in the local jails? Did you have to go down and talk to…?

Yeah they used to get bashed up and told to keep out of here and that sort of business but they were always warned not to go off wandering on their own anywhere, even if they thought they were friends and of course the regimental,

32:00 the army police were kept busy everywhere, particularly in Cairo, Alexandria and those places. But Cairo and Alexandria were special leave from Palestine mainly used to go to Jerusalem.

So Alan this reprieve didn't last long, the 9th Division were pulled out of Tobruk in December and on 4th July you were

32:30 **in action again at El Alamein**

On 4th July we were back in El Alamein, Tel el Eisa, on the 10th July the 26th Brigade which we were in and the 48th Battalion and our battalion did this attack on [Trig Point] 33 along the coast to straighten the line out and it was so successful that we went a bit further than we needed to and we captured

practically a whole Italian battalion, complete

33:00 when we captured this other Sikh [not Sikh, rather elements of the Italian Sabratha Division] unit and we captured the 33 and we captured the Tel el Eisa Station, a railway cutting near there which turned out to be a bit of a blood bath later on trying to defend it. But that's so we went back into action on 10th July.

So Tel el Eisa 33, so that's Hill 33 and what was the other name

33:30 **you called it?**

Hill of Jesus it got nicknamed. I don't remember why, but it was nicknamed the Hill of Jesus, something to do with some local thing, I don't know. Perhaps they thought that's where Moses planted his stone or something, who knows. It was, there were very few features in the desert

34:00 and when you did get one you took advantage of it because you could see a bit further, get some early warning or things like that. So it was pretty vital that they got 33 because it was an elongated thing that ran parallel to the coast. So that's when the thing started on the 10th July as far as going into action. [Actually, the vital ridge ran along the coast for about three miles beginning with Point 26, then west through Point 23 in the centre, and ending at Trig 33. About one and a half miles southwest from Trig 33, across the railway line, lay Tel el Eisa (Hill of Jesus), a twin feature, 24 metres above sea level]

So the whole of the brigade went in the whole of the 26th or…

Yeah the 23rd came in

34:30 the next day after us and we were all occupied in that area.

And how did that compare to the fighting in Tobruk? Of course this was a much more pitched battle wasn't it?

This was an attacking battle, yes. This was a different thing altogether to what we had been training for up in Syria. That was totally different and I wasn't there, I was LOB [Left out of Battle] that morning thank goodness.

35:00 We started off, went over the start line before the artillery started, to keep quiet, we were on our way when the artillery started and the thoughts that were going through those blokes trying to keep quiet and so forth tramping along in the sand through the sand dunes along the coast, I can well imagine what was going on and all of a sudden all hell lets loose. Initially we got it easy because the Italians

35:30 didn't want to fight anyway, we caught them asleep in their holes in the ground, it has even been described by some would be reporters that they were in their pyjamas, that's been a bit ludicrous that is, I thought that was what they meant, but they were asleep most of them, they didn't expect anybody and we got through that and we captured this other 621 Unit, which was a vital thing, that's what helped us turn the war. [The German unit captured was their most important signals intercept unit, Nachrichten Fern Aufklärung Kompanie 621]

So what was the 621 Unit Alan?

A Special Signal

36:00 and Cipher Unit that the Germans had, they were very, very clever in high tech stuff, they had vehicles full of radios and intercept units and things like that and they were tied into all the information and radio stuff that was going through Alex [Alexandria] back to England and across to America, back to America, back to Egypt and back to Egypt, all the high stuff, the political stuff, but they were so good at it that Rommel used to get reports

36:30 on our activities when there was a battle was going on, even the conversations between tank commanders for example, that's how good it was, no wonder he was a brilliant general and when we captured it we didn't capture all of it, some of it got away but we started to wake up to the fact that higher command were feeding false information through pick up and pass this on to our advantage you see.

37:00 I'll show you a book afterwards which tells the whole story, it's called "Unit 61" which we captured. [Most likely referring to Everard Baillieu's, Both sides of the hill (1985)].

That sounds like that that was really important…

Tel el Eisa was the big turning point in the war it enabled us to be so successful with Alamein later on in October.

And were there losses amongst your troops in that battle?

What?

Were there casualties?

37:30 Oh yes. The first morning there were a lot and as the days went on and the counter attacks came on, of course he was furious, and he threw everything back at us after that and the counterattacks were pretty

horrific, the casualties kept mounting and mounting then the other brigade went in on the other side and eased the situation and after a while we were pulled out after about 10 or 12 days the other brigade came in. The casualties on that first morning were very, very light but after that they got very heavy.

38:00 **After, I'm sorry, Tel el Eisa was there then a reprieve up to El Alamein or was…?**

There was a lull as far as were concerned, there were small battles going on for this particular spot this point so and so and point so and so and counter attacks would come and go back again but then there was a lull as far as we were concerned right through until September we

38:30 started training for the coming battle this October one but other brigades were occupied in other part. Another brigade took over from our area, they were involved in action and so forth.

So could you still hear all the battle noises from where you were?

Oh heavens yeah. Oh yeah.

Day and night?

If you could imagine, out in the open desert if somebody coughed a mile away you'd hear it eventually. There were battles going on

39:00 all the time not just in our area, but further down the line right down to the Qattara Depression which was at the end of the line where the Germans couldn't get through, they had to turn the line, there were battles going on all the time.

Were you able to sleep through all that noise?

Well you slept from habit when you're in a rest area and so forth but we had the stand to every night at sunset and you had to stand to in the morning.

39:30 When you're in the rest area you always had a certain number of troops who were on anti parachute alert, vehicles ready to dash off and things like that you know there was always the threat that the paratroopers that had occupied Crete you know would come over and help at Alamein. Oh no, there was no let up.

And there must have been a lot of tension building up knowing that you were going to go …

You lived on tension, you existed on

40:00 tension and they instituted it when the brigade or the battalion that was furthest back, you let so many troops dash off and a few trucks off down to Alexandria for the day and come back that night, and they used to come back and bring back loads of canteen Beer, Canadian Beer it was, an issue of beer and things like that and a few little niceties to eat

40:30 just to change, just to keep the troops amused and so forth like that. That's how close we were to Alexandria you see, only 4 or 5 hours in a vehicle, but that only happened when you got back in the brigade rest area which was behind Alamein.

Tape 8

00:34 **So I think we'll go to the 23rd October [1942] now. Did you know that you were about to launch the battle, were you given that instruction?**

Oh only a couple of days before hand, we knew something was coming because of the activity and the training we were doing, we were suspicious, and we also knew that it had to happen sooner or later,

01:00 we weren't going to sit there for the rest of the war. It became common knowledge as far as the battalion officers were concerned and then we gradually let the troops know and then the CO had an address the night before and all the preparations were made known and so forth. Of course we had to move up into special pits that had been dug for us behind the unit that was in front of us.

Were you moving up by foot?

01:30 No, we moved up to an area in vehicles to a certain area, I'm speaking of my own battalion, our brigade, the 26th Brigade, the 48th battalion and the 24th battalion were in the main line of attack and the 20th Brigade were on our left and our brigade had the right of the line. My battalion had the honour, having the onus and the responsibility of being at the right of the line during the whole of the attack which was quite an

02:00 honour I suppose.

Can you describe what that means by being right of the line?

Well if you can imagine a battle group going in back like that, as you went in the enemy was on your

right and the enemy was on your left you weren't fighting at the front at the whole time there was a certain area charging in. As we went in we had an exposed flank where there was the enemy and we had arrangements

02:30 made, I've forgotten what unit that went along protecting our flank, if Jerry had launched a sea of attack we could have been in trouble, so it was a big responsibility we think anyway, and we were quite honoured, mainly because we had done such a good job in the July show, I don't know. But we came up the night before and these holes had already been dug by the units on the defensive line there

03:00 prepared these positions for us to crawl into those things at night after our evening meal and there we stayed all the next day we were not allowed out to move about but you've got to imagine the whole battalion was like that.

How did you go to the toilet?

Well where you were, they didn't have toilets in those days. No we stayed there. At dusk

03:30 we were allowed to move around, shake ourselves, stretch our limbs and so forth getting ready to move up the start line which was out in no man's land which was already taped by a line and where we had to go and so forth, and that's what we did on the 23rd [October], we hopped out of our holes that night and moved forward to the start line so did the 23rd Battalion, the 24th Battalion and the 48th Battalion

04:00 and there we were, lying, resting ourselves on the start line when the artillery barge started, which you've probably heard about and read about, it was the largest artillery barge ever known in any warfare and it lit up the whole desert it was over 800 nearly 900 guns on the front firing behind us.

What did it look like what could you see?

Well

04:30 if you can imagine being out in the desert and everything being deathly quiet and black as the ace of spades and it was partly moonlight but it was still black and all of a sudden this flash started behind us, we turned and looked at it, of course we knew it was going to come on, but didn't know when, and it was just like the whole of Bourke Street lighting up at the same time and you were sitting up on a skyscraper watching it and the noise came and the whistle of the

05:00 shells going over the top, that was all firing on to the German artillery and their ammunition dumps and things like that, it was all pre-ordained as to where they'd fire up until a quarter past ten and then they came down and started firing on the front line of the Germans for us to start to move off for the attack, following the artillery in. Unfortunately there was one gun with all those guns that were firing short and one landed near us

05:30 and one barrage came over boom! And one shell dropped near us, the same gun, so we had to stagger part of our company up there and part back there like that. Extraordinary you know, you thought it was Guy Fawkes at St Kilda or something like that, but it was far more serious.

Were you getting like that strobe vision where you would get flashes of light and darkness again or was it just constant?

06:00 It was just constant, then it started coming from the other end, the Germans started firing back, their guns were firing, there were shells flying in both directions and then there was also the local stuff with mortars going off and things like that and machine guns firing. There was a Bofors gun firing behind us, firing tracer shells as an indication to keep us straight

06:30 and that was firing through, there were lights everywhere it was like fairy land except it was very noisy.

Did they create much smell? What was it ...?

Oh dust and smoke

Dust and smoke and?

Dust and smoke and dirt. It was indescribable but there you were, you were on your way in and you hit the wire. I was in the

07:00 A Company, B Company had gone in ahead of us, we came in behind B Company but there were still pockets all around the place and that was where I got wounded, there was some bloke who popped up out of a hole and fired a machine gun at me and it went through here, through me shoulder and arm, spun me around and I fell over the parapet into this weapon pit and I was temporarily stunned I think, and in shock as well of course, stunned because I didn't know where the hell I was and what I was doing.

07:30 That was it I didn't go on, couldn't go on but.

Could you see him as he was firing at you?

No I just saw the flash and this may sound dramatic, but we had just hit this wire that we were climbing through looking for a gap and I just raised my arm to yell out swing around this way, I think they were

the words I used, when this happened and it hit me there and most of it went through there. In a pouch

08:00 there I had three grenades and had they been hit they would have blown me to pieces. See, lucky, lucky Macfarlane, and I just got a bad wound that severed the nerve system and took a fair while to heal up. But I was lying down there and my batman Ernie Diffie dressed up my wound and said, “You’re not going any further.” and I said, “I’ll be right.” and went to get up and couldn’t stand up. I fell over again, I think it was just shock and a bit concussed where I hit

08:30 this parapet and fell over. He said “I’ll stay here with you until the stretcher bearers pick you up.” which he did. I was picked and carried half way back and said that I wanted to walk, so I started to walk and I fell over again, otherwise I think I would have turned around and gone back and joined the battalion so that’s my excuse anyway. Next think I know I’m lying back at RAP [Regimental Aid Post] lying on the ground and

09:00 something funny happened at that particular stage thank goodness we had a padre, an RC padre, called “Slim” Honner, he was a hell of a nice bloke, we didn’t agree with his religion and so forth he and I, but he was crawling around and he had his tin hat on and his strap pulled so tight that he was nearly choking himself, his face was red and he always smoked a bent stem pipe which would sit on his chest, poor old Slim, and he’s crawling and he got to me and said, “Ah Macfarlane, now I’ve got you, you bastard.”

09:30 Which I thought was beautiful coming from a padre and I think I managed a laugh myself at the time and he was crawling around and talking to all the fellows and so forth and that was my main experience at the main Battle of Alamein. I just listened to it and followed it from then on, what was going on. Each day it got worse and worse and worse but the

10:00 battalion were brilliant, they were brilliant.

Your battalion and the 2/48th took most of the firepower of that battle didn’t they?

At Tel el Eisa they were together and were again in October in Alamein. The 23rd were reserved doing something else. At the main battle of Alamein the 23rd were being specially trained to come in later on with the

10:30 tanks in a drive through, and the poor fellows, that turned into a hell of a shemozzle and the tanks got in the minefields and got blown up, they had a terrible time. We always joked with them and so forth and said they were always in reserve, I don’t think we would have liked to swap with them that night, it wasn’t their fault, because the Battle at Alamein was touch and go and what was going on was unbelievable just trying to break through,

11:00 but we achieved what we set out and were told to do and they were able to break through a weaker spot later on you know.

So you were taken back to an AGH [Australian General Hospital] in Palestine…

Yeah I finished at the 2/7th AGH an Australian thing near Alex and they were so busy there they were clearing us out of there, what we call the lightly wounded ones, or the walking wounded and then sent back some went on hospital ships across to Palestine and I went by train

11:30 back the 2/6th AGH at Gaza in Palestine.

So when did you hear about the death toll from the battle of Alamein?

Oh they kept it drifting through pretty well, somebody kept the information coming through. Everywhere we went we heard another story this and so forth, and about the battle was going well or the battle wasn’t going well and who was still occupied and oh you’re battalion’s still going…

Of course your battalion had dreadful casualties in that battle didn’t they?

12:00 Pardon

Your battalion had dreadful causalities in that battle didn’t they?

Yes I can sum it up by saying that on the 30th November [October] we went in for the last attack, it was 87 I think it was or 88, on Thompson’s Post and it was aborted because the Germans had left it at this particular strong point and the 48th again they were going down each side of the railway line.

You weren’t back in battle by now were you?

Mmm?

You weren’t back in battle? No, with your injured arm. No, good.

No I wasn’t.

12:30 We in the 48th were going back down the railway line, turned round to go back again and somebody hit a trip wire which set off two aerial bombs which had been laid beside the railway line and we were reduced to 58 and that’s all we had left of the battalion. The famous story about the ASC [Australian Army Service Corps] coming in

13:00 later on with the troop carriers on 31st October 1st November it was, coming back with their troop carrier to bring out the 24th Battalion and the 48th and he had this great big line of these great big trucks, the ASC officer getting all agitated and worried, he said, “Come on hurry up. I don’t want my troops to get bombed and shelled and knocked about.” and our RSM Bill Nicholls said, “Well sir, you can take all your trucks back except one.” “Why?” he said, “Where’s the battalion?” he said, “We’re all here

13:30 58, we’ll all get into one truck.” That’s out of over 700, around 700.

It was a very heavy price paid for winning.

Enormous, enormous. Yep.

And when did you learn that your friend Peter hadn’t survived?

Oh just a week or so later I think. Yep.

14:00 **Did that hit you hard?**

What?

Did that hit you hard that loss?

Hit me heart?

Did that hit you hard did that…

Oh yes. When the news started coming through about who had been only wounded and who had been killed and so forth, the casualty list started coming through. It was pretty hard to read it towards the end but we had had enough casualties

14:30 just prior to that, and you see we were just getting over those and my friend Peter Hayman was killed not long after the Tel el Eisa show he was going up, he was acting as 2IC in one of the rifle companies, he was going up on a carrier with some ammunition and a shell landed behind the carrier and he was hit through the back and killed so there was only one, let me think only two officers

15:00 still with the battalion at the end of it the CO had been wounded and there was an I Officer, David Cunning, and a fellow named Ted Harty who was commissioned with me at Wangaratta, they were the only two officers left in the battalion in that group, so it was pretty grievous and hard to accept too. Still as they said, we had done our job and that was it.

15:30 The 48th were the same, so…

So at that time when you were reading those casualty lists and somehow trying to cope with the enormity of that loss, you were in hospital in Gaza were the nurses a great comfort to you?

Oh yes of course they were, wonderful, wonderful. The nurses and the VADs, they were a batch of volunteers, they weren’t strict nurses

16:00 they were good, even the males say everybody in our hospital or not, they were all wonderful people but I was in the, little things keep coming back to you, I was just put into bed in the hospital at the [2/] 7AGH back towards Alex, you could still the battle going on the noise

16:30 of it and I was lying there and the nurses came through long tents, they came through from that tent and through into this one and I was the first bed here, and they were looking at the sheets at the end of the bed. “Here’s one.” the nurse called out and it happened to be a lass named Robertson who trained with my sister at Royal Melbourne. She since married and her husband died and I thought, “What on earth is going on? Oh never you mind, never you mind. and I heard, “Here’s one,

17:00 here’s one.” and the next thing I was shoved on to a trolley, wheeled back into the next tent, pulled up beside another fellow who was lying there wounded, and they gave him a direct transfusion from me, they were looking for someone with B3 blood and I was the first one they found. I thought that’s a bit rough, I’d been having transfusions myself the day or night before but this blood saved his life, half his face had been blown off unfortunately poor devil. I used to meet him in the years

17:30 after the war, he survived, and every time he saw me he would start hiccupping, he said “That blood you gave me Macfarlane, was full of bloody whisky.” That was a standing joke with him. So you can always laugh, there’s always something that you can laugh about. I had forgotten about that story. I can still see the sister coming through with the veil and the red cape, “Here’s one, here’s one, a B3”. Didn’t mess about in those days.

With such a bad

18:00 **injury you can’t believe they would take you for a transfusion, that’s amazing isn’t it?**

A direct transfusion was fairly common.

OK so we’ll move on a bit in December of that year I think the 9th were starting to be shipped home weren’t they, when did you arrive home?

March ‘43.

March of ‘43?

We left in February and it took us 3 to 4 weeks, the whole division came home in one convoy. That was a wonderful sight.

Was it?

The Queen Mary, the Queen Elizabeth, Isle de France, Vittori and half way across the Indian Ocean the whole British Eastern Fleet including two battleships were escorting us, made you feel proud. Not only proud to be Australian but proud to be an Englishman, proud to be on the right side of the war.

19:00 I’ll never forget those days watching this going on, they left us before we got back to Australia and a couple of Australian ships took over and we pulled into Perth, we went right up the side the wharf in Fremantle not Perth, because we had a lot of West Australians on board and we were greeted home by the bloody wharfies who were on strike and wouldn’t unload these fellows’ kitbags.

19:30 The Communist Party was running Australia then.

I’ll bet you were mad.

We had to go down and do it ourselves to help the fellows. That’s true.

So not the warm welcome you had been hoping for.

No not there. And in Perth where we had had such a wonderful time before when we were waiting for the raiders to be caught and then we left there finally and

20:00 headed to Melbourne, one ship went to Adelaide and another ship went round to Sydney.

So you came into Melbourne.

Yes. We came into Melbourne on the Orion, almost a brand new ship it was, it was a big ship, a huge ship, it came in through the heads, when it came through the heads it tipped over to one side like that and I enquired why this was all about and they were worried about the depth of the canal

20:30 in the heads, so they tip the ship over like that deliberately, that’s the story we were given anyway, but it definitely did go over like that swung it right over to get through.

And how was it to be home?

It was great.

Now earlier on in the piece Alan, on your way over you said that you didn’t really feel like Anzacs you didn’t feel like you deserved

21:00 **that name, but coming back you’re the veteran of some really hard won battles.**

We felt we had made a contribution and we’d done our bit towards the country and to what the people thought of as the original Anzacs, and we had tried to match and done our bit, we were very proud, yes. We had a lot to be proud of but we didn’t flaunt it or anything like that but our division was probably

21:30 picked out because we were involved in the worst actions and the most important actions in the Middle East and we thought we came through with it pretty well, pretty well.

What was it like seeing your wife again, you weren’t married for very long and you hadn’t seen her for nearly 3 years?

I think I said, “Oh… are you still here?” or something like that. It was wonderful of course it was, you can’t describe those things.

22:00 It was so good to be home and of course we were off the ship and on to trains and sent up to Seymour, which was to be our holding camp whilst we went on leave and we were there for about a month altogether I think, and they gave us a fortnight’s leave, 14 days Liddington Leave, that’s right was on the leave passes, 14 day Liddington Leave, where they got Liddington from I don’t know, everything was code named in those days and then we went

22:30 back and gradually reassembled in Seymour and then it was decided that we had to march through Melbourne before we went up north. And I’ll never forget that, the greeting we got from the public, it was out of this world and then back to Seymour and then we…

Sorry, the march through Melbourne was that down Bourke Street or Swanson Street?

Yeah, right down Swanson Street. Where did we start?

23:00 I’ve forgotten where we started, anyway down Swanson Street, down past the Town Hall and then we swung around through to Spencer Street Railway Station.

That must have been fantastic for morale that you get that appreciation from people.

Yes and the hysteria as you can imagine then troops

23:30 coming home from the war and you were able to see them and wave to them, they just went wild and they were up in all the buildings throwing stuff down and what not, it was a great feeling to be home and the fact that we'd all been home and it was pretty hard when we'd turn down Flinders Street heading towards Spencer Street to go back on the train and everybody wanted to run off home again and the very next day we started, we went up on two

24:00 trains right back up north. I was 2IC of the first train from Seymour, anyway that night lo and behold I got a message to say to go to a certain house in such and such a street in Seymour, we were all allowed to go into Seymour, but there was my wife and 2 other lasses and we had a couple

24:30 of nights there and a couple of days there. That was very nice.

What did your wife do during the war Alan?

She was a secretary to a manager of a firm, Beer and Ramsey they were the name of the firm and he was also a Member of Parliament, Victorian Parliament, and she was his private secretary, and parliamentary duties and what not.

So she had quite an important position.

Yes, oh yes. I remember joking about it what

25:00 I was getting paid and what she was getting in those days which wasn't much of course but it was colossal money. No, she had a very big job, very capable young lady but her boss had gone to the war and had been taken prisoner in Malaya but she still carried on the same duties while he was away.

So she was running his office for him?

Virtually, yes.

25:30 **Must have been very capable.**

And then away we went up to Queensland gradually, it took us about a week to get up there. The trains were so overworked and overloaded then with troops going up and down and all over the place.

When did you arrive in the Atherton training camps?

Let me see now, it was probably March, early April.

And 12th May 43

26:00 **Rommel is finally defeated in North Africa, he surrenders in North Africa, how did you feel when you heard that news?**

Wouldn't it have been great to have been there to see that end, to see that officially end, but thank God it's happened anyway.

Were there a celebration?

Oh not a deliberate celebration, no, everybody was just delighted to see that yeah the bastard he's gone and great,

26:30 aren't the Kiwis lucky, they're going over with him and they're still there. That's it.

Now in Atherton they started giving you jungle training so you knew ?

Yes

You were off to…

Oh yes, we knew what we had come home for, we were desert fighters we knew nothing about jungle fighting, we had no initiation into it like everybody else, had so we had to knuckle down

27:00 hard and get into it.

What were the sorts of things that were different like in terms of the training?

Oh everything, tactics were different, it had to be different, it was going to be down to the junior commanders and that sort of thing and jungle tracks and even if it was flat country it was still going to be jungle and so forth, and observations were different and you had to start to work out how you were going to do it. You were going to use forward scouts down to individuals and things like that.

27:30 Who were the blokes in your own little group, who were going to be good for this, good for that. Lectures at night about this and how to look after yourself, training and getting down to Atebrin training against anti malaria and all this was at the back of your mind all the time and different

conditions and different rations, different eating situations, everything was going to be different, totally different.

28:00 You're going to be wet all the time, where we had been living on half a bottle of water for a couple of years while we were in the desert anyway, suddenly you were going to be living where it was going to be raining 24 hours a day. It was a big project and we had officers from, a fellow named Bob Thompson, I remember him so well, in the 14th battalion who I had known before World War II and he fortunately came to our battalion

28:30 with experiences of the [2/] 14th Battalion who had been on the Kokoda trail and the battles that went on up there. That was a big help.

And did that training adequately prepare you for the condition that you met in New Guinea?

We couldn't have done without it. Nobody could have gone straight to New Guinea off the ship except having been in the desert, you wouldn't be worth two bob.

29:00 You would have survived perhaps but you could never have operated and got on with the battles that had to place and so forth.

So around August wasn't it that you were finally sent to Milne Bay.

Yeah. September.

September was it? By ship…. were you shipped there?

We were the first Australian troops to go on the Westralia which had just been converted to a landing ship.

And what had you been told about the enemy? I mean you're facing a new enemy now?

Oh everything. Various Liaison Officers and things like that, information came through, this fellow Thompson stayed with us for several weeks and talking, and he used to talk to us in the mess afterwards and so forth, talked about nothing else 24 hours a day and we used to do river crossings and things like that splashing around in the rivers and so forth, we did as much as we could to prepare ourselves for what we were going to get up north, we were

30:00 doing was getting ourselves ready, conditioning ourselves but knowing that we were going to have to go and fight under those conditions was a different story all together. No it was a busy time. Didn't give us much time to think about we were back in Australia and Mum and Dad were back home sort of business. We were busy.

So getting into Milne Bay were you in a LCI or…

We were in a landing ship

30:30 infantry, LSI…

LSI, I beg your pardon.

LSI which was the Westralia and we were still associated with it and they took us to Tarakan too, the Australian Navy, and we pulled into Milne Bay and it was pouring with rain and you couldn't see your hand in front of you and we had to unload the ship by hand into barges, stores, ammunition, everything, weapons and so forth, down

31:00 the scrambling nets, came up and down unloading your stuff on the bridge and stacking it into areas where it could be easily loaded on to barges later on and so forth. That went on all night and they wanted to leave before dawn and get away from the place because of the Jap planes and the bombing and so forth. We achieved that and the Navy were very grateful and so forth and away they went and we settled into

31:30 this dreadful place and it was still ruddy well raining. You can imagine being sopping wet, everything being sopping wet, water running everywhere, so we put up a few tents, we were up the road from Milne Bay up along this ridge, so called ridge, but the water was that deep all through the tents everywhere. I can remember being horrified I thought hells bells, we thought we were ready for it.

32:00 I think that night landing in those conditions, I think it was a good thing in many ways it really brought us down to earth. This is what it's all about, what it's all about. Anyway it was about that period that I must have got bitten by the wog, by the typhus bug because a few days after that, on the way

32:30 to Lae, I collapsed with Scrub Typhus.

What were the symptoms of that Alan?

Well the shakes and you can hardly see out of your eyes, terrific headaches and when I eventually collapsed I was in a coma for 14 days. And all they could feed you with was that liquid aspirin, they didn't know how to treat it in those days.

33:00 But I was told that five others went out with me but whether they were from the battalion I don't know,

but they got us to hospital, Moresby I think it was, we were flown over there somewhere, but the other five died, the five that went out with me from wherever, the five died. So lucky Macfarlane was still floating about.

And then you were then evacuated home to Australia weren't you?

Yes after a while yes I was. The first stop was in Townsville, there was a hospital on the beach at Townsville, beds all along the beach, it was an idyllic spot, it was beautiful lying there with the breeze blowing through the tents lying in bed, but I couldn't even get up and walk at that stage; and from there I was moved out to Warwick, inland in Queensland, a big hospital there and I was there for quite a long time a month, six weeks or longer I think. Finally I was drafted down by hospital train to Concord hospital in Sydney and

34:00 from Concord down to Melbourne and then when I was ready to leave hospital they sent me out to a convalescent house that was owned by Sir Rupert Brooks, have you ever heard of Rupert Brookes the tennis players, the Davis Cup people, Dame and Mabel R Brooks, a beautiful home in South Yarra on the corner of, it doesn't matter. I

34:30 had go every morning, walk down the main road go around the back of the shrine and come back again walking on heel and toe, like that, my legs had all gone stiff and I looked like a ballet dancer. People used to look at me going past and I'd mutter under my breath "There's nothing wrong with you, you bastard, you should be in uniform."

Were you in your uniform as you were doing that?

Yes. It was an officers' convalescent unit

35:00 and I discovered after I left there that opposite one of those lovely old homes there in South Yarra was the Melbourne Headquarters of Z Force [Services Reconnaissance Department], where they were planning a lot of those fancy operations, and the bloke in charge of it was a fellow named Budge who had lost a leg at Alamein from our battalion. If I had known I would have ducked on this walking bit and would have gone to see him every morning. Yeah those were funny days.

35:30 **It was quite a long convalescence?**

Yes. I didn't think I would ever get back. I wanted to go back. From there I was sent to Ballarat Convalescent Home and that was the end of the world, full of nissan huts and a bloody dreadful place, cold, miserable.

It must have been quite depressing for you?

It was, it was. The Senior Medical Officer there was a fellow named Sir Harold G Smith and he became Mayor of Melbourne after the war.

36:00 He was a top surgeon, he wore a monocle and he didn't care if people laughed at him, he was a funny bloke, but he collared on to me because I was wearing a medal, the Africa Star, the 8th army on it and all that sort of nonsense and everywhere he went I went with him, had to sit with him at the mess and I didn't get attached

36:30 to him but I accepted it and thought, if I have to put up with this sort of nonsense at least if I want a favour I know where to go, so I started working on him about getting boarded, I had been boarded B class, never to go back to an operational unit, I knew what was ahead of me and I'd be sent to a training depot, oh I was promised, oh you'll be a major overnight and blah blah blah. I didn't want that, I wanted to go back to the battalion.

Alan why did you want to go back so much?

37:00 Why do chickens go home to roost? That battalion and those fellows meant an awful lot to me and I knew what they were going to have to go through and I wanted to be part of it. The fact that I'd got sick because I'd been bitten by a bug that shouldn't stop me. All right people tell me I was crazy, people who I knew, people who I met up in the LOC [Line of Communications] area said, "You're mad Macfarlane,

37:30 you'll get a nice cushy job now for the rest of the war blah blah blah, you've done your bit." but I didn't want that. Look who's to judge was I right or was I wrong. All I know, I wanted to go back. My wife didn't want me to go back.

I imagine that you might have missed your mates and missed...

Of course I did.

Was that hard for your wife to understand?

It was a unit,

38:00 I had been involved in an action that I had seen so much, and I wanted to see it through with the battalion. Anyway finally he relented and he got me through pulling strings I think, I'm sure of it because all of a sudden I was changed to A1 again and I still wasn't walking very well and anyway I got back to the battalion and the CO was supposed to sign a form

38:30 RMO [Regimental Medical Officer] I meant to say, to sign a form for me accepting responsibility to go back north with the unit beyond a certain area where you weren't supposed to go if you were B class, if you were in the militia unit or something like that, because being in the AIF we could still be sent anywhere, and anyway I got back to the battalion who'd had just come out of New Guinea so I missed all of that thing thank God

39:00 and the officer who took over my company by the way was killed, doing what I would have probably been doing, what we call jungle drill, he was caught, it was all rather tragic and a lot of others who I knew but I was back with the battalion and for the next 12 months we were being trained in amphibious training and whatnot down to Cairns…

Sorry Alan, was that hard for your wife

39:30 **to accept that you wanted to go back?**

Of course it was. Well she understood it. What little she had seen of me or heard of me of course she saw a lot of me while I was in the convalescent home, I wasn't allowed to go home, I was allowed to go home on Sunday. We were living in a flat at St Kilda but no it was, perhaps I was being

40:00 very inconsiderate, I don't know, I don't think so. There was a bloody war on. And I'm no hero but I was very much in love with my battalion and blokes who were still alive rightly or wrongly I went back, I got back and we spent the next twelve months in vigorous training, boring training and so forth, got home once on leave during that period and later on we

40:30 were off to Morotai to get ready to do the landing in Tarakan, our brigade.

Tape 9

00:32 **So after the training for the landing at Tarakan, when you got there what was it like? Describe for me tell me what you can see as you're coming in to the beach.**

Well first of all the reaction of everybody to that was when we going over the side of the ship, going down scrambling nets getting into the barges, that was a little bit breathtaking

01:00 we knew it was on then. Fortunately we were reserve battalion for a change and the 48th and 23rd had already landed and it was a fairly trouble free landing as it had become a habit with the Japs, they used to pull away from the beach and just get back into the jungle fringes and things like that, so there was nothing much being aimed at us as we went in the barges. The naval bombardment had been on and the air

01:30 and the bombers and that had all finished but there was still gun fire going on and artillery and whatnot, and it was a question of those few moments when you left the ship and you were all going in like that what's next and sort of half bowing your head down the side of the barge looking to see what was going to happen and surprise surprise, we were pulled up along side the

02:00 little landing stage because the beach was clear and so it was a non event, the 48th and 23rd had much the same thing we had our first casualty, a bloke who was a steward in the officers' mess went ashore and got hit with a bullet running along this little pier thing. He was a Canadian immigrant to Australia, Fergie,

02:30 he had a ginger moustache sticking out here, hope you don't mind me telling this, but he was a character, our first casualty from our battalion going ashore, nobody else was hurt in the infantry, poor old Fergie. Anyway, we got ashore and we moved up to our assembly area because we were the reserve battalion and our job was to go up and grab the airstrip as soon as they created an area wide enough, and away we went and I forgotten the timetable now but

03:00 I was with the reserve company and we were to do the final assault on the airstrip, which was my big job which we were all a bit apprehensive about, it was just like being a really big stunt against the Japs out on an open airstrip if you can imagine what I'm trying to say, anyway, away we went and the time came for us to move forward, this was the next day from memory

03:30 and we had to go up this track, this road, and the tanks were going up with us, the first tank that went along hit a mine and got blown up and that was the end of that, it blocked the road and everything, the Japs were still firing across this waterway across to us so we got into this ditch to walk up which was half full of water, half full of oil because all the oil tanks had been ruptured and we were walking along holding our rifles up like this and finally we got up to this place,

04:00 got to the end of this ridge which dominated the air strip, and we had to get to one end of it and clear the Japs out of the way, and all of a sudden dark hit us, and there we were and in the meantime we had got to a certain stage where the Japs had started firing at us, mainly with snipers up in the trees above us, and we had a couple of casualties, 2 blokes were killed rather rapidly there. We decided to

04:30 wait to see what we were going to do the next day. I at the time could hardly talk, I had a big boil on my lip here and boils on my legs here, which had been ripped off with the landing and was a real mess and then if the truth be known, the reality hit home that I had no right to be there, I wasn't a very fit man and subject to all sorts of funny little things and late at night I got a call,

05:00 my batman Ernie Diffie used to talk to me on the telephone and radio and whatnot, and the CO would like me to go down to battalion headquarters and discuss what we were going to do in the morning. I thought hell, it was jet black so away we went.

And presumably there were still snipers up in the trees?

Yeah, well it was night time, dark but we wandered down through the jungle following the telephone line, half way down to battalion headquarters where we thought it was

05:30 and found that the telephone line had been broken, but anyway we finally found battalion headquarters which was sitting out in the open or somewhere or other and we sat there for a while talking to the CO, and the medical officer was there, Frank Haymanson was there, he happened to be there while we were talking, we had a disagreement as to what we should do in the morning and so forth, why don't we do this and that sort of talk and just nice and friendly in a way,

06:00 but of course you're not supposed to do that and after a while we said well, we'll do this and we'll do that, the conversation got a bit strict, stern or whatnot tense you might say and I didn't know what the hell they were going to do next, so I didn't like what I was going to have to do at five o'clock in the morning, our artillery by the way had landed on a little island outside the bay and they were

06:30 firing across from over there and we wanted the artillery to fire over and try to land on this ridge ahead of us, to try to thin out some of the timber and rubbish and so forth, also it was pretty obvious that's where all the bunkers were going to be when the Japs landed and also for our own mortars to put a barrage on it and if possible have a couple of light bombers come in, that was the scheme of things but the way it was going to be done and the timing differed.

07:00 Anyway to cut a long story short I felt this hand on my right shoulder, I can feel it now, Frank Haymanson, the MO [Medical Officer] pushing me down looking across to the CO and saying, "Sir, I am evacuating Captain Macfarlane now, he is ill." Within half an hour I was swinging on a hammock down there in a landing ship which was being used as a hospital, Americans,

07:30 and I had a label sitting on here "To be evacuated" and the doctor spoke to me and said, "Well Captain," he said, "You've been to the war too often lad, you've been to the war too often." he said "Home for you, a big promotion and a homecoming." I laughed, and he said "No, I'm serious." I said "I'm all right, what's wrong with me?" I said, "I can go back. he said, "You're finished." that was the end of the war for me.

08:00 So lucky Macfarlane again. No I should never have gone there.

You must have never recovered enough for service.

No I wasn't 100% fit. I was getting these breakdowns with boils and getting headaches and all this nonsense and so forth.

Alan I wanted to ask you about, you said that there were battalion headquarters, the battalions had just landed in Tarakan, what headquarters could they have?

It was just a point,

08:30 an area on the map.

So you were just sitting down on the floor of the jungle?

Virtually. Yes.

With a few maps…

No tents, no nothing, no, no.

Okay thanks because I was curious about that, did you have time to put up a shack or…

No, no.

And with the mines on the road, you said one of the tanks hit the mines, could you tell that there were mines there?

Oh we knew there probably would be but we weren't looking for mines we wanted

09:00 to get up there by foot and I suppose the fact that a tank hit, and I feel sorry for the tank but it was probably a blessing in disguise, and we realized then that we could have even set a mine off and it was discovered later on they were all attached to trip wires, they'd mine this end to stop people from getting up this end of the air strip you see, and the whole area was like that, marine

09:30 mines and huge bombs and shells that mined the chaps but that was part of their defence system.

Now you were taken out to the hospital at Morotai weren't you, there was a AGH there.

Yes.

But your battalion was still on Tarakan and fought there for another three weeks, there were quite a few casualties weren't there, 250 dead I believe or something like that if I'm not wrong

10:00 267 wasn't it? 257, 267.

And the air field that you had been sent in there to secure was destroyed by the allied bombings and then unable to be rebuilt, were you then resentful of that campaign do you recall?

Yes of course we were. Later on C Company, a fellow Ralph Ells, the Commander of C Company was fatally wounded in the final attack on the airstrip and half the company got knocked over

10:30 and when the air force people came in to look at it, it was useless because it had been bombed and strafed naturally beforehand over a period of time when the Japs were just occupying it before we ever arrived, prior to us going there of course, all this bombing business was stepped up. It seemed to a layman like me that the bombs that they were using were too big and heavy for the particular job, they'd just gone straight through the coral

11:11 based thing and the water kept seeping up and they took four weeks before they even attempted to land a light plane on it and it was declared unsafe for that, and we were supposed to capture that air strip to enable air cover to be allowed for the 7th Division who were going to land at Balikpapan over on the mainland over there and the rest of the 9th Division up at Labuan, they were going to use as a fighter strip for air cover, air cover for

11:30 the bombers and things like that and the Navy. It was useless, useless and the whole campaign has been written up by smart aleck lawyers ever since the war saying that we should have never been sent there, that's rubbish, that wasn't the point. The mistakes that were made that there should have been two brigades go in one in the north and one in the back, clean up the thing in a few days and given them more time to do it and perhaps build another strip somewhere else. But that was all politics of Mr. MacArthur;

12:00 but no Tarakan wasn't nice, wasn't nice and my old battalion copped it again. So there we are and there endeth the lesson.

So you would have been in hospital when VE [Victory in Europe] day came was that a good…

Convalescent I was…

Was there

12:30 **a celebration?**

I think I mildly said hooray or something. Yeah there were celebrations everywhere. There were celebrations when we heard that the bombs that had been dropped, we servicemen were hilarious because we knew that that was it and what damage the bombs did well what the hell, there would have been a lot more people killed if they hadn't dropped the bombs if we had landed in Japan we were earmarked to go up

13:00 for that, what was left of us. It was indescribable the moment and the feelings and so forth that the damn thing was all over, we'd already been happy and bright because it had ended in Europe and we'd won there, it was all over there and that so and so has been dealt with and for it to be finally over and be

13:30 amongst the Japanese and know what horrors it was and what a terrible enemy they were to fight, you couldn't describe it. You've heard stories probably both of you, the way the public carried on and so forth they just went mad, so it was it was only so.

I mean over that whole period there was a lot of pent up emotion you must have stored did some of it come out at that point?

Yes. It was like a bottle of good champagne where you

14:00 had tried for 3 weeks to get the cork out and all of a sudden the bottle burst you know.

Were you hugging each other, were you cheering?

I don't remember really what I was doing on my own but I might have even cried probably did inwardly, thank God it's over and you felt a little feeling of pride

14:30 and you felt what you had done your little bit towards it and let's get on with the next thing.

So the next thing was going home was there a victory march, a victory parade?

Oh yes there was yes. What it consisted of I don't know but there was a victory march.

You didn't go on it?

I think I did. I think I did, I think I did. Can't remember honestly

15:00 there was so much going on then getting home and so forth and being discharged and getting discharged and so forth.

Now you were discharged not long after the war.

Yeah. I was put on a reserve of officers actually which is the same thing, you can only sit on the reserve for a certain period.

But you were back home?

Back home, back home on familiar territory.

How was that?

How?

15:30 **How was that being back home was it strange at first?**

It was strange, you were suddenly a civilian, well you thought you were. The routine, the every day routine that had been going on for over about five years, five and half years irrespective of where you were what you were, and what you were doing there was a routine and suddenly

16:00 it wasn't necessary any more and you didn't know what to do with yourself. I suppose that's one thing, you probably weren't conscious of it and all of a sudden life changed overnight like somebody pulled down the blind or put the blind up whatever.

And from having been among people where you were all in it together and you're got a common purpose and then you're out on your own

16:30 **how did you deal with that?**

It's a different life, totally different life altogether and I suppose having my family and having a wife to talk to and attend to and say what do we next and so forth, oh well we'd better go down and do some shopping or something like that you know but I suppose it wasn't long before I said well I've got get myself a job I had to start earning some money, and I started to think what I was going to do.

17:00 **But did all those everyday things like shopping and doing the housework, visiting family, did that seem silly, did that seem…**

No not silly, no it was

Unfamiliar?

No, unfamiliar but fun. Very unfamiliar, very unfamiliar. It was for me anyway and that would be for everybody else.

Did you feel that you could communicate

17:30 **what you had been through to your loved ones?**

No, I didn't want to talk about it. Never did.

Did they ask you about it?

Yes. Not in a pressure way. Perhaps there were occasions over the many years little hints were dropped to try to bring something out I suppose but I've talked more in the last 48 hours than I have over the last 60 years.

18:00 About generalities and little snippets of things you talk amongst your mates at reunions and things like that or visiting a bloke in hospital in later years and you'd talk, oh yes that was so and so but not just like I've been talking tonight yesterday or whenever.

And why didn't you tell your wife what you had been through, or your children later on?

Well I suppose they were told little titbits,

18:30 funny bits, but not the real in-depth stuff about it, you didn't want them to know anyway, they didn't have to put up with it why should they worry about it now? They'd probably think I'd be an idiot anyway if I told them, they probably wouldn't believe it, a lot of it. You two people believe it because you have experienced it in some shape or form

19:00 but it was a different life so why pour it on to somebody else. It was over.

How long did that sense of strangeness last it being quite strange to be a civilian again?

I think it went on for a quite a while until I was finally settled into civilian life.

Like a year or 5 years?

Oh 3 or 4 years and you'd settle into life and you'd start to build a home, you'd settle

19:30 into a job and you'd be earning your own money and all of a sudden there was the prospect of a child and all those things that you just sort of came home to.

Alan what kind of support was there for you when you came home, from the Government from Defence Department or Veterans' Affairs how were you treated by them?

It's very difficult to say, I think they did what they could for us

20:00 but there were so many, the number of people who were in the armed forces in the three services, the number of people who had been working in the wartime necessity the public who had to put up with suffering and waiting and all that sort of thing it was an enormous task for a government to try and cope with that, enormous. We used to joke and say they gave us our deferred pay and they gave us a

20:30 suit or a coat and sent you on your way and we used to joke about it and when you think about it, it was better than nothing and the Repatriation Department had been established and it was there and they then had to weed out the people who required 100% service and people had to be hospitalised and the genuine people and the genuine things,

21:00 the amount of pensions that had to be allocated to people and for what purpose.

Yes I understand that they would have had a lot to do but still you mentioned yesterday that there was no debriefing for you there was no kind of counselling for you afterwards there was no assistance support for you to adjust back to.

Only what you went out and looked for yourself.

21:30 **And did you find any yourself?**

You found it in different places at times yeah and then you realized then well listen mate that you can't depend on somebody else to help you had to do a bit for yourself. See this had been going on for five and a half years. I'm not, perhaps I, I'm not making excuses for things that were missing by the government I'm making excuses for the fact that it was possible to do very much more you see comparing it to other

22:00 situations since then, the Malayan campaign, Korea was still bad enough but then we come along to Vietnam which was a shortage thing, nowhere near the number of people involved, it's much easier to turn on something even though they didn't do it immediately and they didn't do it properly but eventually they did, but that wasn't possible to cope with it. The enormity of getting a country back to normal was civil population and production

22:30 and everything like that.

And Alan did you think it was a just war?

Yes, yeah.

You thought so then.

Yes I do very much so.

Do you think so now?

Yes, it had to be dealt with otherwise you or I would be speaking either German or Italian or Japanese I mean, there's no doubt about that whatsoever. I don't think you'd've liked that.

23:00 **It sounds as though it has been very important to you to keep up links with your old mates and the members of your battalion and your brigade, is that true?**

It's not difficult, I'm doing it all the time

I said it sounds like it's important.

It's very important to me, ask Fay. Ask Fay it's very important to me and at times

23:30 it becomes too important but I spend every moment when I'm on my own and so forth and otherwise thinking about people and thinking what can I do for so and so well what's going to happen… well I've got a bloke who's dying in hospital and he's the secretary of our association, young fellow, and he joined us for the Tarakan show another bloke down the road here who

24:00 is terminally ill and he's just turned 77, he was the 16 year old that I was telling you about earlier, all these things are the main things that keep this association going and the blokes that are still alive and have something to cling to, to keep our newsletter going, I'm trying to get one ready now after Anzac Day, normally it would have been produced by now but because the secretary is so ill our

communications have broken down a bit

24:30 I've reached a stage where I think I should give up driving but I can't do that while I can still drive and I've got my own car and without interfering with my wife, I can still get about.

So I'm getting a sense that this is a really important part of your return to Australia was keeping that…

Yes.

Contact with your old mates, can you explain why that is so important?

25:00 I'm one of the lucky ones that came home. In memory of those who didn't, the blokes that are suffering today I'm trying to do something to help them and the only way to do that is to keep in touch with them through your association you see. Do hospital visiting, attend the funerals, conduct the funeral service where the family request, things like that. I owe that. I'm one of the lucky ones.

25:30 **So the memory of those people who were lost that's still driving you now?**

Yes.

Yes that's really clear.

Yes it's a fact that the army service, I was very very lucky to be a member of the 2/24th Battalion who had a fantastic record in the war, suffered enormously and it's up to me to keep that

26:00 flag flying as long as I can breathe which I intend to do.

Now Alan your memories of the war obviously are very strong memories and very emotional memories for you, you were mentioning yesterday that you still dream about the war.

Yes, not as much as I used to, talking to you two ladies yesterday stirred the emotions a bit but I

26:30 had fought the war again last night and I won it, I still won it. No anybody that doesn't suffer from that are only kidding themselves. You can't help it. I don't think anyway. I thought I was pretty strong minded and strong willed and so forth but last

27:00 night shocked me because of how I felt and I realized that that's part of me.

What do you see in those dreams, can you remember them?

Oh some of them vividly, a couple of things I went through last night and I know I was asleep and I didn't know what was going on and Fay said she heard me a couple of times yelling out, I wasn't aware of that but

27:30 you start to think why did it have to happen why was it him why was it me, and if I had done it this way perhaps I could have saved him or he could have saved me and you start cross examining yourself, I do anyway. Why was I spared why was I in touch with all these things and get out easily

28:00 it's almost like I did it on purpose. I can't describe it…

So the war changed you?

Yes

Can you tell me what were those changes?

I was very much aware of my fellow man which I wasn't before because I was only a young man anyway and made me realize what life's all about

28:30 it made me realize how lucky I am to achieve whatever I have achieved it makes me feel proud and an inward pride and the fact that I can honour my fellow man the one thing it hasn't done for me it hasn't helped me to understand other people's feelings so much

29:00 up to a certain point I get cross with people who I think are wrong in the thinking their taught, that's why some of the things that happen in the community these annoy me deeply because I think hell why did we bother, I've thought that a few times only because something has upset me but I think it helped me a lot, I

29:30 didn't have it easy, I was never very successful, I was successful at one stage of the piece and it all fell apart and I've been lucky and I have someone now who loves me and cares for me and I'm quite happy and we can exist, we don't starve, we do most things we want.

Have you been back to the places you fought?

Pardon?

Have you been back to the places you fought?

Back to the who?

Have you ever been

30:00 **back to the places you fought?**

Sorry. No I haven't. I've been to Egypt and I've been to Cairo and places like that flying through the place and haven't been up to the islands I don't want to go up there. I had a chance to go back to Alamein I was involved with the 9th Division we were building our own memorial of Alamein, when this

30:30 lousy fellow Keating gave us a miserable $30,000 towards a memorial that was going to cost us $270,000, so we raised all the money ourselves and got it all organized and built it, that was the whole of the 9 Div Council and I had a chance to go back with a friend of mine, a very dear friend of mine who was a very wealthy man as it turns out, wanted to take me with him for company and as his guest and I said no, that's charity Bob, and at that stage

31:00 of the piece my marriage had already gone and so forth and I was contemplating living on my own and so forth and I wasn't prepared to spend that sort of money to go and I knocked it back, and it was the silliest thing I ever did because I had the chance to go to Alamein and if we'd done that, we were going to go through hell and high water to try to get to Tobruk which a few people have got there but it's very difficult

31:30 because Colonel Qadafi won't issue out too many visas for that area.

But you would like to go back?

I would like to go back. I'd like to go back to Tobruk more than Alamein, I'd like to go back and go down and visit a spot called Forbes' Mound, I'd love that but nowhere else.

What's at Forbes' Mound Alan?

That's where we were when we got into trouble at that May show

32:00 when Mackie and my batman were killed a nasty business over those three days. This little Forbes' Mound which is perhaps as large, no half of that, as that hill behind us was a prominent feature in the desert. I'd like to go back and look at the old fig tree that was there in one particular spot that was a point at night time if you got lost you'd lie down on the ground and you'd scan the skyline and find

32:30 the fig tree in a certain area. Incidentally I've got a cutting of that which has been planted up at Wangaratta and it's growing and it's about that high and eventually it will have a nice wall built around it. No that's where I'd like to go but I was silly not to take the opportunity to go to Alamein.

Well you never know you might get another one.

No you never know, I think I'm beyond that.

There's been lots of movies of World War II and there was even one

33:00 **about the Rats of Tobruk. What was you view of them?**

What with Chips Rafferty and those fellows, they were wearing English battledress they weren't even dressed as Australians.

Did they come anywhere near depicting what it was like?

No. They were all part of it when they were firing a few crackers and things to make a noise and dust flying around yeah and even the wire, I can see it now in that one particular scene, I've never forgotten it and they were charging

33:30 through this wire, we didn't go charging through wire at Tobruk, we were defending the ruddy place and also they had steel pickets and things and the posts around Tobruk were all wooden posts with the wire on them. It was so ridiculous and blokes that were in Tobruk, gee that's about 40 years ago that one, used to go and watch that one and laugh.

Did you go together to watch it?

I don't remember but I do know I went to see it a couple of times.

34:00 Chips Rafferty, he was a character, he was funny. There was another one about Alamein where this Richard Attenborough, the two Attenborough brothers, the one that does the other one, one was Richard what was the other one, he was an actor and he was doing films in those days and he was in a British tank about Alamein that was so ridiculous, it was like going to a Sunday school picnic, they shoot tanks and things

34:30 but still that's entertainment but inwardly we old fellows wish that it had never been done, because it was a mockery the way it was done. So there we are.

We're going to finish up now Alan and I just want to ask if there is anything else you would like to say anything that we've left out that's important?

35:00 No I think I would like to say that I think this is a very worthy project and it's unfortunate that there are a few hundred fellows that I can think of that are not here today that would like to be in it, and I think you're to be congratulated for it and you two ladies the way you have conducted your job so professionally and so helpfully, and I can only say thank you and if I've made a contribution in the name of my battalion I am very happy. Not in my name but in my

35:30 battalion.

Well you certainly have Alan.

Thank you. Thank you very much and good luck.

INTERVIEW ENDS