

Australians at War Film Archive

John Wilson - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/708>

Tape 1

00:39 **John, we were just talking off camera about this overview. If you could start briefly start with where and when you were born and then take it from there?**

Yes, I was born in Geelong, Victoria in 1935, 12th of April and grew up on a small

01:00 property just outside Geelong itself and we moved from there to a couple of other small places until we got to Charlton in 1941 where I commenced school. And I went through primary through to secondary and completed Form 3, which is Year 9, generally speaking. And then we moved from there down to Berowra in the Western District

01:30 of Victoria and a year later I moved into Colac and a year after that I joined the air force in 1952 and progressed round Australia and around parts of South East Asia too, we got to Amberley in 1980 and, I mean 1977, and in 1980 I was discharged, and we moved to Bundaberg, been here ever since.

And just briefly, just tell us about some of the

02:00 **RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] service, like where did you go and what did you do?**

Oh, initially I did recruit training at Rathmines in NSW on the first course of the junior equipment and administrative scheme which was just bought into the air force in 1952 first course. It ran for 9 courses altogether and we did a full 12 months at Rathmines joining at age fifteen to sixteen.

02:30 I was sixteen at the time and we did academic studies as well as air force drill and discipline and supply or administration depending on which branch we went to. I opted for supply and came out as an equipment assistant after my 18 months training, the last 6 of which were at Laverton in Victoria and after re classifications aircraftsman at

03:00 Laverton I was posted across to Tottenham which was the stores depot and spent some years there and then on to Department of Air as it was in those days, Victoria Barracks in Melbourne, and then eventually that was, Department of Air moved to Canberra and those of us that stayed at Vic Barracks in Melbourne were reposted into Headquarters Support Command which that became known as, and from there

03:30 I had a, whilst I was with Support Command, I had an attachment to Ubon in Thailand and was there for 9 months, and then came back, another 18 months at Vic [Victoria] Barracks. And then went across to 1 Air Trials Unit at Woomera and after 18 months that was closed down and I was one of the last two to leave Woomera and I was posted from there to Toowoomba in Queensland, 7 Stores Depot, had a year there then from there went to Vietnam.

04:00 Came back from Vietnam to Headquarters Operational Command at Penrith in NSW and, which is where I met Leonie, my wife, and from there I was posted to, I had three years at Op Com [Operational Command], went across to Richmond at 2 Aircraft Depot and had a year there, then and was posted to Singapore and we had nearly 3 years in Singapore. And because of that posting, Leonie had

04:30 the option of staying in the air force at Op Com, or get out and go to Singapore with me, so, wasn't much of a choice. She took the option and took a discharge after 12 years and we went to Singapore, had nearly 3 years there, came back to Amberley, where I continued on my job with Air Movements, which I had been doing in Singapore, and to Air Movements at Amberley, and that was in January '77.

05:00 In the end of '79 they posted me B Grade to Melbourne, back to Tottenham and I decided that wasn't for me, so I elected discharge and got out in March 1980, moved to Bundaberg and been here ever since.

Excellent, okay well, we'll go back to the beginning and talk about your early life and, in some detail, tell us about growing up in Geelong

05:30 **and then outside of Geelong?**

Yeah well, I don't remember much of Geelong or the other couple of small places we stayed at. I really, the first recollections are from Charlton and where as I said, I started school and went through the 9 years of schooling. I was for a short time in scouts, Boy Scouts, only for a short time, because the troop wasn't a big one

06:00 and didn't last. But I did attend one camp, it wasn't a Jamboree as such, but it was a reasonably large camp in Melbourne during that period, but generally, I think it was a normal childhood situation.

What was Scout's like in those days?

Oh, it was quite good, we used to do all of the things that Scouts do, in fact still do

06:30 which is chalk trails and tracking and that sort of thing

And do you remember any of your mates from Scouts?

No, no, I've got no, none really, I have run across a couple that I was in school with, in fact called in to see one down at Charlton, still living in the same house they lived in 50 years ago I think, but he's

07:00 still there and we called in to see them on our last trip down that way.

What kind of place is Charlton, in that era?

It's er, well, it was and still is, a very small farming community, mainly wheat and it's in the Wimmera of Victoria, north of Bendigo and it's still a very small town and it has quite a large wheat silo tied in with the rail yards, that sort of thing, but it is quite a small place.

07:30 **And what kind of childhood does that kind of place give you?**

Well, I think it's a typical country situation where you make your own fun, I mean in those days there was no TV of course and you made your own fun and you read a fair bit of literature and so forth. I think it gave us a good upbringing and it certainly didn't tie us into the city traits, which sometimes is not the best

08:00 I feel.

In what ways?

Well, you read about gangs of kids in the cities, and that's certainly something we didn't have up in a small town like Charlton.

What kind of activities would you get up to as kids, what kinds of games?

Oh it was, walking generally, we had a hill, Klunder's Hill they called it, it was probably a couple of miles from Charlton and we used to

08:30 go up there and track around and chase things. Birds and whatever.

What kind of birds?

Oh, that long ago now I couldn't remember what sort of birds they were, never been into that.

And tell us about your parents. What memories do you have of them during that time?

It was, well Dad was, and he was overseas when we moved to Charlton.

09:00 He joined the militia in 1935, the year I was born and transferred to the second AIF [Australian Imperial Force] in 1940, '41 I think it was, and went over to the Middle East. So a lot of the time that I was at School he was away and he came back in 1943 and had a couple of jobs around Charlton, but he wasn't in the best of health and

09:30 he would have been, what, 40 years of age, when he transferred to the second AIF. So, or 43 when he came back from New Guinea and he wasn't in the best of health at that time and so the work that he was doing in Charlton was a bit heavy for him. So he had the opportunity of getting a job in Berowra on a sheep property so we moved down there

10:00 and he worked at that, until he died in, er, would have been about 4 or 5 years later he died. So as far as that's concerned I haven't got a lot of recollection of my father because, he died while I was still, young so to speak.

What, health problems did he have?

Ah, it was bought on by his war service, um, I think, he had no worries in the Middle East, but it was when he went to New Guinea that

10:30 he picked up fevers, or whatever. And he never looked up from that, and he was actually in hospital prior to his death, when I was at Tottenham. I must have been about 18 or 19 when he died.

Did he talk about his um?

- He didn't talk a lot about the war, no, no and er, I have since got a copy of his service records and
- 11:00 the indication, as I've just said is, that a lot of his time in New Guinea was spent in hospital and that obviously caused his early discharge in 1943.
- Did you notice anything, I mean I know you were young, but did you notice anything about his demeanour, coming back from war?**
- No, not really, I think it was something which I wasn't really aware of at that time and, it just didn't sink in that there was a problem at that
- 11:30 time in particular. It was later in, after I joined the air force, that I realised then, that he wasn't a well man and that has since been attributed of course to war service.
- Was it an influence on your joining the services yourself? Your father....**
- I expect it probably is, obviously - my father's father, was also in the, he was in the Royal Marines, the First World War and
- 12:00 the fact that he had war service. My Dad had war service in the Second World War and at the time I was working in Colac as a plumber's apprentice and I found the acids and the lead that we were using those days, was affecting my skin, giving me rashes and so forth. So the specialist said, "Plumbing's not for you." So I got a job in a shop for a few months and didn't particularly like that and
- 12:30 when the opportunity came up to join the air force I took it and... Both my brothers followed me into the service. Second brother joined the army for 12 years and the younger brother he did 20 odd in the navy, so obviously there was some influence into the military there for us.
- Was there also something about being in that area or part of the country that made you want to join?**
- I don't
- 13:00 think so really, I think Colac was a larger town than Charlton obviously, but it was still very countrified. Especially in those days, so I don't really think the town itself had a great influence, obviously the fact that I wasn't overly happy in the job I had at the time could have been a contributing factor but I think really...
- 13:30 that I thought that the air force career would be a great way to go and, it proved to be right, because it definitely was the right way to go.
- And tell us about your mother, especially during those times with your father away?**
- Yeah, well she um, again my recollections of those years are not really right of course but she coped with the conditions which obviously, weren't real easy in those days and she had
- 14:00 her mother in the same town, which in fact was probably the reason we moved to Charlton was because Mum's mum was there and so she wasn't exactly on her own so to speak. She had two boys at that point in time, plus her mother who was still working at that time and, but she really suffered when Dad died of
- 14:30 course and eventually re married and then the stepfather died in the '70s, oh yeah would have been the '70s while I was in Singapore. But she's still living, she's down in Albury now, she'll be 90 .. 93 next January.
- How did she manage financially?**
- Well, it was a struggle. That was a struggle, I remember that
- 15:00 we never had butter as such, there was always potato mixed with the butter to spread it out a bit and that's one recollection I do recall vividly is the mixture of butter and potato to spread it, eke it out a bit further. But we survived, obviously, and obviously it was with some difficulty but Mum managed to get us through that period, the war years.
- 15:30 **Was there some responsibility on you kids to add to the family economy?**
- Well, not really, we were too young really at that stage. I was 14 when I left School in 1949 so we're looking at, I was 10 yrs old when the war ended in 1945 so at that point in time I certainly wasn't contributing and
- 16:00 Norm, my younger brother he was 18 months younger than me and the youngest, David, he wasn't born until 1945, so he's 10 yrs younger than me so, it was after Dad came back that he was born.
- Tell us of your memories of some of the war time kind of things you had to do, like rationing and things you'd see and notice about that time?**
- 16:30 That's a difficult one.

What kind of strong memories do you have?

Well, not, not very much at all I'm afraid, it's something which probably didn't concern me personally in those days, that was something that Mum looked after.

What about the news? Did you watch the news or hear of the news?

Well, um, there was no TV of course, but I remember we did have a radio which we used

17:00 to listen to the news on, I can recall that. Movie theatre, well, it was once a week, Saturday nights and we didn't get to go there very often because of the cost factor, the occasional matinee we'd get to see on a Saturday afternoon. But really those days back at Charlton, I'm er, not a lot of memory left I'm afraid, probably

17:30 partly to do with the times and old age.

Did you ever notice your mother being worried about your father?

No, I can't, I can't recall that, no.

And, do you remember anything about rationing or anything like that?

No, not really no.

And what about the post war years for your family?

18:00 Well, post war, it was, as I said, it, Dad wasn't real happy with the work he had in Charlton so we moved to Berowra where he was much better, however, everything caught up with him. And he, as I said he died in 1954 it would have been, and so Mum just - at that point in time we had moved into a house in Colac, or

18:30 Mum and Dad had...and of course, at that point I was in the air force and my younger brother had just joined the army. And he came back from Puckapunyal and I came back to them for the funeral, in Colac and from then on of course I didn't get to see a lot of Mum and my brothers because of air force commitments.

19:00 I did get over occasionally obviously and saw them.

And what was the environment like in that area that you'd moved to?

Well, Colac was, it was, well, I expect you'd call it a farming community really. Down that way you've got the potatoes and the onions and cropping, sheep

19:30 and the town itself was probably centred around agriculture and I didn't get involved with the Scouts at all in Colac. I did join the rowing club and tried my hand at rowing on the lake, but then I joined the air force so that sort of shot that lot of sporting activity.

You were pretty young

20:00 **to join up. What inspires a young....?**

Yeah, the scheme that the air force bought in was the Junior Trainee Scheme, which covered both the administration and the supply branches and 15 and a half to 17 was the age range of the trainees. And I was one of the older ones and in fact, I was probably second or third oldest on the course, which puts me

20:30 as second or third oldest jeet, as such and at the reunion we had in Canberra last November there was quick whip round and they decided I was obviously the oldest one at the reunion, so I got to lay the wreath at the memorial. But that's by the by, but the training at Rathmines was interesting inasmuch as that Rathmines was the old

21:00 flying boat race and the last of the Catalinas [flying boat] was still flying at that point in time, although it was effectively stopped flying in 1952, mid way through the year. So the course was basically, I think we had three academic subjects, plus air force discipline and all the other things that go with service

21:30 life and from there we left the Rathmines, in January I think it was, in '53. Victorians, South Australians, Western Australians went down to Laverton, New South Welshmen to Richmond and Queenslanders to Amberley. So that, the course was variously split up then into 3 sections and I think it was in August 1953 that

22:00 I was re classified as an aircraftsman, which meant I could take the blue band off my hat and become an ordinary airman.

Tell us what inspired you to join, like what kind of thoughts were in your mind as a teenager....?

Joining the air force? Yeah well, I think it was, basically a desire to travel, I've always had an interest in aviation, which would have drawn me more towards the air force rather

22:30 than the army or navy and the fact that the opportunity was there, the opportunity was there, that the opportunity came up at that time, gave me the incentive to join the air force.

Where did you hear this news? Was it advertised?

I would expect it would have probably been in the local paper, that would be my guess at this point I can't recall exactly where it was but I would take a guess at the local paper.

And

23:00 **take us through writing the application to receiving the news that you'd been accepted.**

Well, that was, actually the second time that I had applied to join the service, I had applied when I was 13 to join the navy as a midshipman but I didn't make it in that lot, so I...

Could you join the navy at 13?

Yes.

What, what?

Midshipman. Yeah.

Well, what would that involve?

Well, it, was

23:30 would have been much the same thing. I think with midshipman, being a junior officer as such, they would probably do a 2 or 3 year course and come out as a midshipman who was a junior officer in the navy in those days. I'd say they, I don't know actually whether they still do it today or not, digressing a little bit I know a friend of mine who was

24:00 a current friend, who was in the navy, a bit younger than me, served in Korea, so he would have had to have been to be in Korea, younger than me, probably 15 at the time, 16 perhaps. So that's, the navy's always been a little bit different to the other services in that respect. But the application itself, well,

24:30 I don't recall actually filling it out, but I would expect that it were the normal piece of paper, Mum and Dad's got to sign down the bottom to say it's okay and away it went. I recall the photo, I had to send a photograph of myself with the application and of course there were the interviews in Melbourne. I recall those, the medical examination and the

25:00 psychological tests and...

Tell us about all these?

Putting squares in circles and that sort of thing.

Tell us about it, what ?

Yeah, the, oh I recall one test was the small, different geometric blocks that had to be fitted into the holes that suited them, which to me, seemed pretty easy, but for some reason or other it appears some people have problems with that and that was one of the tests.

25:30 The eye test was also an early version of the coloured dots, I'm pretty sure that was part of the initial medical examination, although then again, I may be thinking of a later examination I had when I applied for aircrew but it was certainly involved then and

26:00 proving coloured blindness of course, or not, yeah. It was a long time ago and the memory's a bit hazy on that but it was certainly an interesting time of life.

And getting your mother's, or both your parents' approval, how did you manage to..?

Well, they had no objection. Obviously there was no war on

26:30 at the time that was going to affect me, I mean Korea was going on of course, but it was well, into it's course and by the time that I got through my training it was over, so they obviously had no qualms about that.

Was that unusual for them to not, to not have a worry?

I don't think so. No, I mean, they were both well acquainted with

27:00 service life. Dad's long, well, 35 through to 43, he had been involved with the army that long and so they, no as far as I can recall, there was no concern whatsoever there.

And what was your opinion at the time, or news about the Korean War?

Well, again it was, in those days without the TV the news

27:30 was pretty scarce and you obviously you picked up a bit off the newspapers and or the radio. So again, it's something that wasn't extremely well known, obviously. TV really has brought the war into the living room as they say.

Well, on that subject, how does one think of war and

28:00 **that kind of news when you don't you see it. What kind of images come to a young person's head?**

Well, I think from memory, going back over those years the news that you really saw was the newsreel itself and that was where you did see what was happening overseas but then of course it was weeks old when you saw those newsreels. And that

28:30 brings to mind Damian Power of course, who was one of the best cinematographers overseas during the wars.

And where did you get this yearning to travel and see the world, where did that come from?

Ah, probably, my parents I suppose. They were both travellers, they both emigrated independently from England to Australia in

29:00 1920... 21 or something. There was 10 years between them. I think Dad was 21 when he came out and Mum was 11. So they met up probably I think, 5 or 6 years after they arrived in Australia, working on the same property or living on the same property, and they were eventually married in about 1932 or 3

29:30 and went back to the UK [United Kingdom] on a trip, must have been around about that time, together and then I was born in '35 as I said, which slowed them down a little bit, but, I think the Wilson clan have all been wanderers.

Is there any kind of loyalty or kind of connection to the

30:00 **Empire, especially with that British kind of background?**

Well, I would say that's, certainly got something in it too, having been involved with the Scouts for that short time in Charlton we learned all about Baden Powell and the African, his involvement in the African wars, so I suppose there's always that thought in the back of my mind that as

30:30 part of the Commonwealth, as you said, it's the thing to do is to join the service. The fact that there could be travel involved is a bonus.

And so, tell us about, take us through like that kind of first day, so to speak, of being called up to the RAAF?

Yeah well, the first days involve

31:00 the train trip from Melbourne up to Rathmines, which was via Newcastle and there were I think, from memory, there were about 6 or 7 from Victoria only the 1 from South Australia and about 3 from Western Australia and of course we all travelled up together. We were met by a truck in

31:30 probably Newcastle and from there a truck down to Rathmines where we met the rest of the boys who'd come from Sydney and Brisbane. So it was initially a case of getting to know people and getting to know the place. I do recall that we were issued with a palliasse and a bale of straw, that was your mattress.

32:00 So that er, and of course there was the clothing store for uniforms and a lot of the stuff we were issued with was ex World War II stuff and this was 1952, they still had it. It was interesting inasmuch as that, as 15/16 year olds, some of the boys were quite small in comparison to an adult.

32:30 So it was interesting to see the antics in the clothing store, trying to get something to fit.

Tell us about kind of the first memories of an officer or someone talking upon your arrival. Do you remember what they said?

Ah, not really, but I can recall standing there, as I said, a 16 year old looking up at these officers, thinking, "God,

33:00 what have I let myself in for?" But we had a good bunch of instructors, we had a corporal DI [Drill Instructor]. The CO [Commanding Officer] was a squadron leader, a couple of flight lieutenants and a flight sergeant and two sergeants, who were all ex Second World War servicemen, so it was, quite

33:30 daunting initially, but it didn't take long to get into the swing of things.

Did they try to instil discipline in their first words or...?

Well, I think that was generally speaking, part of the course, that it certainly may not have come in the first few days but it certainly did following that, it was something which was

34:00 I think bought in gradually, but then progressed as we went through. And discipline was of course in several different areas, it was on the parade ground doing drill, there was the PT [Physical Training]

and there was also sport. I was converted to Rugby League at Rathmines of course and continued to play the game off and on, quite some

34:30 years after Rathmines.

Tell us about kind of the conversations you had with the other blokes on the train as you were heading up, what were you expecting?

Oh, well that's again age has got me on that one. I've got very little recollection of those years really.

And tell us about, was it kind of intimidating being so young and in this situation?

Oh,

35:00 I'm positive of that yes. Yes, it was intimidating.

And, what did these officers look like. Describe them for us, through a 16 year old's eyes, so to speak?

Well, they were all old. The corporal DI was the youngest fellow, but the rest of them were to our eyes, quite old and

35:30 it's in fact, the flight lieutenant who taught us history, was a Canadian, in the Australian air force and really that's... There's not much more I can say on that point. It's memory's dimmed and there are odd spots but that's all.

36:00 **What did they look like. Can you describe some of them for me?**

Well, Ernie Sergeant, he was the flight sergeant and he was quite rotund. Walt Wasser, he was the Canadian, he was thin as a beanpole and the CO the squadron leader. He had a round face and glasses which stood out

36:30 and Jack Digny was the clerk supply. He was a sergeant instructor, he was a bit of a beanpole himself too, very skinny. But there were, put them together they were a motley looking crew to be quite honest, but they were good instructors, they got us through readily and without any dramas. That's good.

What were some of the first things you were being taught initially?

37:00 **I think initially was, we had the drill of course, that's one of the first things you start doing. As I said, you have the academic studies of English, history and maths and then we had our own specialties so, me being in the equipment branch, equipment as it was in those days, is now supply, all logistics.**

37:30 **We spent considerable time in the Catalina going through the vocabularies or catalogues as they're called these days, identifying parts, aircraft parts and that sort of stuff.**

And you mentioned uniforms you'd been issued with, what were they, what did they look like?

Well, the underwear was extremely daggy, I can assure you of that.

38:00 **In what way?**

Er, long johns, almost, or cut off long johns. Most uncomfortable I can assure you and we had the khaki long trousers and long sleeved shirts which were in, in those days, but I haven't seen them since. We must have had a blue uniform for winter,

38:30 yes obviously we would have had a blue uniform for winter. I do remember with the blue uniform yes, we had the blue collarless shirts with the starched collars that you put on with the collar studs. Most hard to organise those things, so it was pretty ancient the clothing that we were given. The cap

39:00 we had the cap, we also had the overalls with a beret. Overalls for work. Blue uniform for winter, khaki's for summer. But they weren't, they were long trousers, I mean, later years the shorts came in and the long trousers went out, but in those days the summer uniform was longs.

We might just stop

39:30 **now because we've come to the end of the tape and we'll just do a little...**

Tape 2

00:38 **Just first up you mentioned to Kennan that a lot of people in the air force at the time were ex World War II. What was the sort of general feeling of the RAAF - was it in a transition period or?**

It was in those days, yes - we didn't realise at the time of course.

01:00 But it's become quite obvious since that the air force was down sizing from quite a - very big organisation down to a smaller peace time service. And some of the aircraft were phasing out of use. As I said the Catalina was phased out while we were actually at Rathmines.

Did you ever get to have any involvement with planes like the Catalina?

Not the Catalina.

01:30 Not in those days. I did - I did get involved with aircraft later on in my service life. Enjoyed it immensely. But not at RAAF.

And were there any sort of stories that circulated about you know the great stories of the air force in World War II and that sort of thing?

Yes we did, we did have the opportunity to visit the library of course and read

02:00 books and whatever. And there were always books available on aircraft and stories from the war and that sort of thing, so yes we did do that, yes.

And the fact that the instructors were ex World War II, did they tell you any stories, use anecdotes in their explanations?

I don't recall that happening no not really, no.

And so Kennan

02:30 **had just started talking about the sort of, educationally the first sort of stuff that you were covering at Rathmines. Can you elaborate a bit more - I guess the general basic training that they were giving you?**

It was, as I said, there was a certain amount of academic work which I would assume was to bring us up to immediate standard or, Year 10 I would think in those days. I'd only completed Year 9 at

03:00 school so I had a year to pick up. That wasn't really a problem, it worked in quite well with our other training which, as I said in my area was specifically in the stores side of it. Which meant a bit of time in the hanger going through catalogues and that sort of thing. There were basically 2 musterings in these courses. There was the clerk general, there was a typist

03:30 shorthand. There was a clerk supply, who was a typist and stores person catalogue and then there was the equipment assistant, which I was. And that was, purely looking after store, warehouse or whatever and looking after the equipment therein.

How was the store set up, what sort of equipment does it hold?

The store - well, we have in the air force a variety of stores. There's the barrack store which handles the every day

04:00 barracks accommodation equipment which is beds and bedding, and buckets and mops and that style of thing. The clothing stores just handles every day clothing for all ranks and men and women. The equipment store, then of course branches out and covers the rest of the stores for

04:30 any particular base where it happens to be. There'll be aircraft stores, there'll be motor transport stores and whatever. And off shooting from that you've got your co group which handles the petrol, oils, that sort of thing. And the - J group was the explosives, bombs, ammunition that sort of stuff. And that's going back

05:00 because the old K group and the L group that was clothing they went out - must've been in the '60s or '70s when we changed over our - it would have been the '60s when we changed over to the numeric and cataloguing system.

Why was there a change?

The - probably to align our cataloguing system with the American system because we had

05:30 so many American aircraft in our inventory. That rather than allotting our own identification numbers to the American equivalent we just used the American identification which made it so much easier for resupply and cross references. So in order to do this the old RAAF of the K group and the L group and so forth - they went out the door and the other system came in. Which was a lot

06:00 better really when it all boiled down.

And sort of can you describe the job that you were doing in that first time at Rathmines? What were your responsibilities?

Purely and simply to learn and, that's what it was all based around. We did our 12 months at Rathmines, in a classroom situation. We then went to wherever - and at Laverton we were with one aircraft

06:30 depot in the actual warehouse set up. And there it was a hands on on the job training so to speak, where

we fitted in with the existing staff in that store and did the job. And at the end of the - it was supposedly 18 months but I think it finished up at about 20 months. And we then graduated as aircraftsman and started out in

07:00 the big air force.

And what was Rathmines then like as a base?

Holiday camp. It's based on Lake Macquarie and being a sea plane base obviously the Catalina's could land on the water and the amphibians would put their wheels down and taxi up the ramp into the hangar so to speak. The - whilst we were at Rathmines

07:30 there was also National Servicemen [conscripts], going through training. Basic fitters were doing their courses, at Rathmines and also the officers school was at Rathmines. So it was a reasonably large base on a small scale you could say. There was no airfield as such, that was the lake. But they had a marine section with a crash boat

08:00 obviously to rescue any aircraft that came down in the lake or out at sea or whatever.

What's a crash boat?

A crash boat - it's - I think they used to run to about 60 foot long and they were probably along the lines of a torpedo boat or something. Except they were specifically designed to rescue aircrew at sea.

And what sort of a base was it in terms of the atmosphere?

08:30 Well, actually we didn't mix with the other groups on the base, we had our own mess. We had our own quarters separate from the others. We were on a reasonably strict curfew. We couldn't stay out overnight unless we had approved leave. And we had to be back on base at midnight. Or 23.59 was the normal term which is a minute

09:00 to midnight, we had to be back on base. So our movements around the area off base were very controlled, very restricted.

And how about within the group of you - what was sort of social situation like?

I suppose you could be described as probably what most boys of that age in a group, and there were

09:30 40, 44 of us I think who started the course. We had, made our own fun of course. We did quite a lot of sport. There was a cinema on the base which - at that time I think, probably ran 2 or 3 shows a week, I can't remember exactly but I'd say 2 or 3 shows a week. And so that was basically our life style.

And what sort of sport would you play?

10:00 We had - well, football rugby league, was the major team sport. I'm not quite sure there were tennis courts there - not that I ever got involved in tennis. Swimming naturally - there was an enclosure in the lake for swimming and the cricketing season.

Was there any rivalry between people from different states about which code of football should be played?

There was

10:30 yes there would've been obviously. But being in New South Wales we were stuck with Rugby League. We did have some of our southerners who integrated well into rugby league. I remember Max Mitchell from Western Australia - he was a very good Aussie Rules footballer - a good kicker and he adapted very well to the fullback in rugby league.

11:00 And were you a good team?

Well, I suppose we were pretty average really. We didn't, we didn't get into any league, any competition as such. From memory we had 2 teams made up from our group of 40 odd. And used to, mix around and play against each other so to speak.

Are there any amongst the group

11:30 that you went through with - are there any particular characters that stand out?

I suppose you could say, yes. In fact I'm still in contact with some of them. We have a reunion every so often which has been started up in the last 15 years I suppose. And so I get to see some of them on a reasonably regular basis. But characters as

12:00 such. There was - yeah the 2 that come to mind particularly are, Kev Herman and Ray Hall, they were both Sydneyites and well and truly used to the rough and tumble of city life. And they used to knock around together of course and they were definitely characters there was no worries about that. I haven't seen Ray for years but I see Kev

12:30 on a reasonably regular basis because he's district vice president for Sunshine Coast. And I'm the

district president of Wide Bay Burnett - we're neighbouring districts so you know we do have a fair bit of interaction.

And with them being like you said city boys, was there any lessons on life that they'd tell you about or?

I don't think there were any specific discussions on that but

13:00 it certainly came through no problem, just in ways and actions.

And how about, can you take me through what a typical day would've been like at Rathmines?

Well, the normal - from memory I'd say the normal situation was that, we were getting up, ablutions, breakfast and

13:30 then probably a bit of drill, bit of classroom work then into the hangar for an hour or two in the store. And pretty basic I think with any recruit training unit.

And when you say drill is this?

Square bashing yes. Rifle drill, foot drill, marching.

14:00 And all of those things that come with service life.

Are they enjoyable?

Generally not. That's one aspect of service life which I think is, it's necessary. You've got to do it but you don't necessarily like it.

What makes it necessary?

Well, it's part of discipline and it's also very important on the parade ground for official occasions.

14:30 There's nothing worse than seeing a team of people marching or doing whatever they do on a parade ground out of step and looking sloppy. And, I do have an involvement in Bundaberg with both of the cadet units, in fact all 3 cadet units. And while some of them are quite

15:00 good some of them are not quite so good. And really, I'll say again, that nothing looks worse than a rag tag outfit on the parade ground. So that was one of the things that we learnt right from day 1 was how to march in step and how to do the right turns, the left turns and the inclines and all that sort of thing.

And was there ever did you ever have any problems

15:30 **at all with that kind of discipline in the first couple of days or weeks?**

I don't recall us having problems. It was just accepted that that was part of service life and we did it, got on with it.

And you were talking earlier about the catalogue system. Can you just explain that a little bit more?

The air force had their own cataloguing system in the old days, in those days.

16:00 We utilised manufacturer's stock books. For example at Rathmines we had the Catalina consolidated, who built the Catalina, put out their parts book and each part that goes into the aircraft is listed in that catalogue as such. The air force had their own cataloguing system for the run of the mill equipment, like as I said the barracks store, the bedding and the

16:30 clothing. And the petrols, oil K group and J group was explosives again. And they were all put together by cataloguing section which is through the Victorian Barracks in Melbourne. And I know that reasonably well cause I spent a few years in that cataloguing section. But getting back to your question, at Rathmines our concern was mainly with the stock books that were put out by, consolidated

17:00 for the Catalina because it was those parts that we were identifying and learning through the catalogue to find out what was needed. So the catalogue really is a stock list and of course these days they're all on computer. But back in those days it was a paper volume.

And was the Catalina still in active service?

Up until mid 1952

17:30 and it went out of service in 1952 while we were at Rathmines, in actual fact, yeah.

Was there any sort of ceremony or something?

Not that I can recall. It went from flight, it arrived back, landed on the lake, taxied up to the ramp, put its wheels down and taxied up the ramp and into the hangar and that's where it stayed. Until they obviously disposed of it when they moved the hangar to

18:00 Richmond in the '60s.

That was kind of an end of an era?

Well, it happens periodically - aircraft are always being phased out at sometime or other. But I think these days I think they probably give a bit more fanfare.

And we were talking about the transition period that the RAAF was in at the time. Was there technologically

18:30 **a transition period going on as well. You mentioned a transfer to the Americans - did this herald...?**

Well, the transition to the American system would have been in the sixties I think. So I was at, at cataloguing section around about that time that it happened I feel.

19:00 Again it's a case of - trying to dig out the bits out of the memory of what period's are what. In the initial period, in the early fifties, in the mid '50s, as I said there was a wind down in the services. And it was 50, 56 that I went from Tottenham

19:30 into - it was definitely the old system was still in in '56 for sure because I was in H group at Tottenham, which was nuts and bolts. And Y group was radio. Strange system. But it was still in in '56. I went into Victoria Barracks in the cataloguing section and it would've

20:00 been sometime between there and, '64 I went to Ubon. Yeah, I'm pretty sure it would've been in that period between '56 and '64 that we changed over from the old cataloguing system to the new cataloguing system. I can't remember what they called it now but it was - it was a numbers

20:30 system. It was a numbers system anyway. There was a 4 digit group replaced the alpha group which we had had. The old L group which was clothing went to the 8 4 series, 8410, 8420, I'm pretty sure that 84 was where the L group came in. And it made it a lot easier, much more

21:00 standard and of course being integrated with the American system and using the American system meant that we had more compatibility with our, all the spares parts which were coming from the United States.

And did this change over to the American system kind of represent I guess a greater change towards I guess an American allegiance with their own forces?

I don't know that that'd be the case really.

21:30 It was certainly a benefit to us, to adopt their system. As I say, we had so much of their equipment and we were - I mean it didn't only apply to aircraft. I mean we had American clothing, we had American equipment of - battle field equipment and transport. So it was just a matter of

22:00 just adopting their numbering system to be consistent.

And in terms of say for example when the Catalina was retired or taken out of service, what sort of new advances in aircraft technology were taking these planes places?

Well, the Catalina as such, was a air sea rescue or coastal

22:30 command type aircraft. It would've been, it was replaced by the Neptune, which was another American aircraft. And that in turn was replaced by the Orion which we now have. So over that period of - oh it's 50-odd years now. We've gone from the Catalina to the Neptune. And there were 2 grades of Neptune. There's the original one and then the upgraded version, it came in.

23:00 And then we went from there onto the Orion. And I think at this stage we're onto the second or third mode of Orion. Aircraft are being updated all the time as you're obviously aware. And in some cases the complete aircraft is replaced by a newer version, which has happened to our transport aircraft, the C-130 Hercules. We're now onto the

23:30 fourth new Hercules.

And how about in terms of, I don't know if this is correct here, were there jet engines and things like that becoming more...?

Well, they certainly have come into the fore with the fighter aircraft in particular. Fighter strike you're looking at the first of those was the Meteor which came in during Korea.

24:00 That was the English Meteor. And then we went into the American Sabre. I say American, the idea originated in America but the Australian Sabre was quite different in as much as the fuselage was rebuilt to accept the British A1 engine which had more power than the American engine. The Australian Sabre was

24:30 basically a unique Australian aircraft in as much as it would use the modified American fuselage and fit in an English engine. And from there we've gone onto the - from the Sabres to the Mirages and the

Mirages to the Hornets and the strike aircraft, the F-111. And it's now into its probably 4th or 5th upgrade

25:00 with new equipment to keep it running and thinking back over the years the F-111's now 30 years old so it's still a good aircraft but work needed to upgrade it all the time,

And when things like the Meteor and the Sabre and that sort of thing were coming in was there much excitement about I guess a new type of technology?

It was certainly a new era that's for sure, yes. Yeah, I'm

25:30 quite sure of that, that's for sure. I was at Laverton at one aircraft depot when the Sabre came in and I was involved with the initial acceptance of those aircraft from a storage point of view.

And what's that procedure?

Well, it was doing up the inventory. I had the job of writing up the inventory cards for the aircraft that were coming in. Writing down the aircraft serial numbers and

26:00 filling in the appropriate columns for where they go and what they do when they came in.

And how detailedly do you inventory a plane? You mentioned that you, with the Catalinas would go on all the different parts. Would the Sabres have...?

Yes, every aircraft had the same system situation. Generally speaking of course in most instances they used the manufacturers stock list.

26:30 Our catalogues in those days didn't go into breaking down the aircraft itself but we catalogued the parts, spare parts which would be required to be replaced from time to time. So that we always had the situation where there would be parts available in our store house to replace an item that need replacing on any

27:00 particular aircraft. And each aircraft had its own parent store, so to speak. The Amberley based aircraft storehouse was at Toowoomba, 7 Stores Depot. And the Richmond base depot were storehoused at Regents Park in Sydney. And Victorian bases had their storehouse at Laverton or more specifically

27:30 at 1 Stores Depot at Tottenham.

And what are your first memories of seeing the Sabre when it came in?

It was certainly a different looking sort of aircraft and, very powerful looking. And of course very sleek and fast through the air. It was really an impressive aeroplane.

And were you feeling any

28:00 **sort of sense of - that new era sort of?**

Mm very much so, yes. Yes, very excited being in an air force which was modernised to that extent.

Was there much talk in the mess about the Sabre and what it could do?

Well, I expect there would've been. I don't know that I ever ran across anything specific in that line but

28:30 certainly the hangar doors were never closed so to speak in the mess. There was always somebody talking about aircraft or...

And so just back to Rathmines for a minute, what was the sort of process of leaving, graduating, finishing?

We had our passing out parade at Rathmines in December, I'm pretty sure it was December '52.

29:00 When we did all our marching and parade drill work. And there were promotions handed out I think from memory. And then we all went off on Christmas leave and came back in January for the final wind up of the course. And then we went off to our new units.

And how are these postings decided?

From Rathmines it was specifically by state.

29:30 If you were a Queenslander you went to Amberley. New South Welshman you went to Richmond. And the southerners went to Laverton.

And what was, in a slightly broader sense, what was the process of long term, deciding where you wanted to go. I mean had you decided that stores was your area or were you still interested

30:00 **in pursuing - I guess I'm interested what options?**

Yeah, the career path. No well, at the point it was decided that those who were doing administration were going to go into the administration stream. Those doing clerk supply would do that and those who

were doing equipment would go into equipment stores, generally speaking. There was

30:30 particularly in the equipment assistant mustering a chance just to specialise. You could do a J group course which was explosives. You could do an air movements course which I did, which puts you into air movement sections where you could load, unload aircraft and that sort of thing. And I think that's, no I think there might have been a POL [Petrol Oil Lubricants] course as well, which is

31:00 K group, petrol, oil, lubricants. I think that was a separate course. Explosives definitely was a separate course. And air movements was a separate course.

And what exactly does air movements involve?

The air movements section operates the turnaround of aircraft, transport aircraft in the main. Caribous [transport plane], Hercules, and any visiting transport aircraft

31:30 all goes through the air movements section. So that's passengers and freights are handled by that section.

And sorry, can you walk me through. If a Hercules with freight on...?

The normal process - the air movements officers goes out to the aircraft - briefs the passengers if there are any and deplanes them into the air movements section where they're processed

32:00 through the normal airline type procedures so to speak. He then talks with the load master who is one of the crew members and he is the - generally a senior NCO [Non Commissioned Officer] or warrant officers who's in charge of the freight side of the loading. And generally speaking this is all prearranged by - in those days we used to telex.

32:30 These days it's probably email. But we had a telex machine which used to rattle through - what was coming out.

I don't really know what a telex ...?

A telex? Yeah. What would you call them? They used to operate a strip of paper and you used a typewriter keyboard

33:00 to punch in your instructions, your load list or whatever on this strip of paper. And it punches holes in it and then you feed it into the machine and it'd transport it to the other end. Old technology. Diverting slightly I had to learn how to use one when I was at Toowoomba, 7 Stores Depot. Because

33:30 Vietnam was hot and strong at that point of time. 7 Stores Depot was the holding depot for 2 squadron which was the Canberra bombers. And we used to get in the middle of the night, requests for special equipment or whatever from Vietnam and the only way we could get it initially was through the phone. The telex would come down from Vietnam into

34:00 Brisbane. The post office or telecommunications or whatever and they would ring the orderly officer of Toowoomba and one night at sometime past midnight I got the phone call, and there I was sitting up on the side of the bed writing lists and lists and lists. And I said to the boss the next day, "This is ridiculous. Why can't we utilise the telex system on base?"

34:30 So it was instituted that if a call such as this came up, the duty officer would shoot across to the depot, open up, turn the telex on and it could just come through in the normal fashion. So don't ask me the technicalities of it now, because it's so long ago I've forgotten. But I did know how to use a telex at that stage. But getting back to the original question, the

35:00 generally speaking, the air movements of the section would have the details of what load is coming in. The air movements officer would converge with the load master, work out what pallet had to come off or pallets. The air movements officer would then gear up his transport driver with the aircraft loader, which is a strange looking vehicle. Which has got a flat roller bed front to back.

35:30 The driver sits on a little point on the side of it, drives it into position. The pallets of freight can then be rolled out from the aircraft onto the loader and taken over to the hangar and dispersed. And then the loader can come back with the freight that's got to be unloaded to go to the next destination. So the - generally speaking the air movements section is specifically geared up to unload and reload

36:00 aircraft, process passengers, arrange inflight rations for the crew and passengers. And all of those things that are needed to operate that transfer aircraft.

Were there any security checks that you'd do, unloading freight?

36:30 Not really. No, we had - the security was on the base of course. Entry was restricted. But in the section every pallet that was loaded onto an aircraft was made up in the air movements section itself so we knew what was going on. The pallets for the C-130s are -

37:00 I can't remember the exact proportions now - probably 8 foot by 6 foot. And they could be built up to probably 6 foot high. Stack a fair amount of stuff on that. And it was quite an art to stack a pallet. But the air movements people were trained to do that and that was part of their job. So a lot of their time in

the section would be made up of either stacking up pallets or breaking them down. Once you broke down a pallet everything was

37:30 checked off, listed, and then dispersed out to wherever it was going to on the base. And that was an ongoing process.

And so did the air movements department - did you work in conjunction with the transport or did you take care of transport yourself, was it inclusive?

Generally speaking the transport section on the base came under air movements anyway. So they were integrated -

38:00 I know at Amberley the 2IC [Second in Command] of the air movement section was in charge of the transport section. And as I said, with pre warning which we used to get over - whatever means - if we needed the aircraft later it would be at air movements section before the aircraft arrived. So that there was no delays, straight in.

And what sort of things, typically would you be transporting?

Well, you could, name anything really that's used

38:30 in an air force base. Or an army base, or a navy base for that matter. Because we transported some of their equipment as well. But it could be motor vehicles or just boxes of nuts and bolts or parts of aircraft. The Iroquois helicopter breaks down and fits into an aircraft, a Hercules.

But like Leggo or something.

Well, with the

39:00 with the Iroquois it's quite simple, they just tie the main rotors fore and aft and just wheel it in. They just put a set of wheels under the skids and it's not easy but it is done.

So it's not literally taking it apart?

No, no, they virtually go on in one piece.

What sort of affinity I guess did you feel with the aircraft

39:30 **as in your involvement was often with the aircraft grounded? I guess people talk about a relationship that sort of develops with an aircraft?**

Well, I think that's, that's probably one of the best aspects I've enjoyed in my aircraft career was my work at air moments. Because there was always the opportunity - occasionally get a flight and we were able to do that from time to time.

40:00 Especially when I was in Vietnam I did a lot of flying there with the Caribous in particular. But we were servicing them 7 days a week where I was at Ton San Nhut. And at Amberley I had the opportunity of a couple of flights. And it was always that possibility so it made it so much better.

We've just reached the end of that tape...

Tape 3

00:39 **So tell us where you were posted to after Rathmines?**

Yeah, from Rathmines I went to Laverton and completed my training at Laverton in the aircraft depot. And then was based across to stores depot at Tottenham, at stores depot.

What extra training, what was different about Laverton's

01:00 **training?**

Well, the Rathmines had been academic classroom type in the main whereas Laverton was on the job. We were integrated into the section and became part of that section and moved into the more routine type storage work. And of course we'd completed the academic education and we had no idea as much drill and parade ground work

01:30 at Laverton as we had at Rathmines.

And tell us about receiving the posting to stores depot at Tottenham, how did you feel about this?

Well, it was - to me at that point - a convenience because it was still close to home. Parents were still living at - well, Mum was still living at - Dad was still alive at that time - they were at Colac which was only probably

02:00 90 miles down the road from Melbourne so it was handy for me to still be in the same area. And so Tottenham was at that point convenient and nice and handy.

What did the place look like?

Tottenham? A cluster of brick warehouses in a city

02:30 suburb basically. The domestic side of the base where we lived was wooden huts - we had some Quonset huts I think they call them. They were igloo type accommodation and there was also the mess, the dining room and so forth.

03:00 The depot itself were the big brick warehouses.

And what kind of work were you doing at this stage?

Well, I went into H group which was nuts and bolts and just working with the NCO in charge. And just doing the normal issues and receipts basically. The procurers at Vic Barracks

03:30 would decide what items we needed to buy in and so forth and I'd do the procurement side of it. And as units came up with their demands for different items of equipment we'd just get it out, pack it off and send it off to them. So it was a pretty routine sort of a system.

And what about outside of the base?

We had more freedom certainly at

04:00 Tottenham. We could come and go as we pleased. As long as we fronted up for work that was the basis of it. I think we probably had a weekly parade which was more for show than anything else. And so trips into Melbourne or Sunshine was common occurrence.

What kind of things would you do in Melbourne?

Well, I recall those

04:30 days newsreel cinemas. We're still talking about before TV and they had, I think from memory, 3 or 4 very good newsreel cinemas in Melbourne which just ran newsreels and cartoons and that sort of stuff, which I've always enjoyed.

And what was the news?

Well, at that time - it was after Korea - so there's probably no wars on at that

05:00 stage but there was the world news obviously plus Australian national news. I can't recall specifically what it was but...

What about the atmosphere of the '50s, communism, did you recall that?

I don't know that we had any contact with that. Obviously we would have known from the news what was going on. I think it was probably around the era when

05:30 the Russians pulled off the aircraft in Darwin, or something. That'd be around about that time. So obviously we'd have been aware of what was going on but probably at our age it was a case of, it doesn't concern me so why get too worried about it.

Do you recall it being instilled or talked about - say your commanders talking about this new potential threat of communism?

06:00 No, I don't really recall having being involved in that one.

And so what about Melbourne, did you follow the football or anything of this sort?

Yes, yes I would say so. I'd always followed Geelong in the Australian Rules. I did get involved with rugby leave while I was at Tottenham. There was a small competition

06:30 in Melbourne. There was no air force team in it so I played for one of the local - Canterbury I think it was - it was in Melbourne. Until I made contact with the hard ground with my left ear and that put me in hospital for a while so I gave up football then, at that point. That was, that would've been about '54 I think, '54, yeah.

07:00 But I took rifle shooting seriously while I was a Tottenham and shot with the services team. So at weekends down at Williamstown in Melbourne, the rifle range. And in those days of course there was no gun laws to worry about. You put your .303 over your shoulder, got on the train and went to Williamstown.

It must've been unusual playing rugby league in Melbourne at that time?

Well, not really. It was a - it was a league that was operating in Melbourne. I mean there weren't too many teams, probably 5 or 6 teams. And we were playing a sport we liked and so that was, that was what we did.

08:00 But until I had the accident and then of course that curtailed my football career at that time. But it wasn't until later that I got involved with the Melbourne Australian Rules football. That was at Sub Comm [sub committee].

Was it made up of ex kind of northerners, people who had lived north?

Oh, yeah I think the - I think basically it would've been

08:30 people from New South Wales and Queensland who were mainly involved in rugby league in Melbourne at that time.

Was this in the lead up to the Olympics in '56?

Yes. It would've been.

Do you remember the build up?

Well, I remember the Olympics. My brother was in the army

09:00 still at that time and he was one of the Don Rs [despatch riders] on a Harley Motor bike roaring around escorting the Olympic buses and so forth. So through him I had a lot of contact on what was happening at the Olympics.

What was Melbourne like during this?

It was a busy time. It was a very busy time. I was - at that point I was married and I was living out at Bayswater which is on the eastern

09:30 outskirts of Melbourne. And so we were travelling each day from Bayswater into Tottenham. So it was something that we saw a lot of, the buses and so forth running around with Olympic people everywhere.

You said you were married, when did you meet...?

That was the first wife. Yeah, we met in Colac actually, when I was home on leave. And we

10:00 were married in April 1955 and had 2 children. And separated at Woomera actually in 1967. Yeah, so that was one episode in my life.

And did you meet her on leave?

Yeah, I was home in Colac on leave

10:30 when I met her. She was visiting her cousins who lived in the next street to us. And I'm not sure exactly where we met but it could well, have been through her cousin I think.

Before meeting her what was the social activities like? Did you go hit the town, go to dances, what did you do?

Yes, at Tottenham there were

11:00 groups of us who used to go out to dances, that sort of thing yes. Particularly in Sunshine. We'd go out to Saturday night dances.

What were they like?

Well, once you've seen one you've seen them all. They're all much the same yeah. Particularly in those days, there wasn't a lot of - it's before rock and roll.

11:30 And how would you meet girls at a dance like this?

Well, I think we all fronted up and sort of got to know one another that way.

Did you ever wear uniform?

No. No not on nights out, no.

Was it ever an advantage being part of the services?

Oh, I don't know I suppose it could've been. Yes.

12:00 And after Tottenham service where did you go?

From Tottenham I went into Victorian Barracks, it was Department of Air at that time. And I went into cataloguing section which kept me busy for - until - well, it was '56 through to '64. So I had 8 years there in catalogue. In '64 I went over to Ubon and Thailand for 9 months.

12:30 Well, tell us about 8 years of your life there, what was that like?

It was really just a job. At that period of time the two girls were growing up - well, the oldest one was growing up, the younger one wasn't born until

13:00 November '63 which was just before I went to Ubon. But the elder girl was growing up so you know it suited me at that time to be settled in Melbourne. And so I wasn't overly pushing to get a posting away from there at that time. But the - I would think really that the attachment to Ubon in Thailand probably changed my life in

13:30 that respect. It got me out into the proper air force and probably stirred up my wanderlust I suppose. And the fact that when I came back from there 18 months later I was posted to petrols unit at Woomera, sort of cemented the fact that I wasn't around to sit in an office in Melbourne.

You would've observed some changes in Melbourne

14:00 **during that period too?**

There were changes that right yeah. Particularly on the South Bank area. Not so much the South Bank area but along St Kilda Road on the bank of the river, where the old YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] used to be. I used to travel that road every day basically to get the train from Bayswater into Flinders Street.

14:30 And then walk from Flinders Street up to Vic Barracks. So there was a lot of change going on through there over time, yeah.

And what about socially changes, rock and roll music?

Yeah well, that came in - I had a little bit of extra curricular activity while I was in Melbourne. Basically because the salary of an equipment

15:00 assistant in those days was pretty low. The wage structure in the air force at that time rated from the very technical down to the not so technical. And the equipment assistant was down the bottom end of the scale. With the result that it was quite obvious that there was a disproportionate

15:30 difference between the wage structure. For example the LAC [Leading Aircraftsman] instrument fitter. The LAC being one step from the aircraftsman was on the same pay bracket as a warrant officer and equipment assistant. The warrant officer being up at the end of the non commission rank so, it was in about 1970...

16:00 '72 or '73 that they then changed the system so that all warrant officers were on the same pay bracket right across the board. And I can tell you at that time my pay doubled, when I came onto the same bracket as these warrant officer, instrument fitter. But then they reasoned that we were being paid as supervisors and not tradesman which is logical when you look at it. But

16:30 that's the - that's another story obviously.

Did you notice changes in Melbourne like, I don't know, clubs or bars or anything like that?

I never used to frequent the pubs so much. We had our own mess at - near Vic Barracks.

17:00 'Cause I didn't frequent them that much, I used to be a good husband and go home at night after work. But one thing I did do - I'll mention that I had a few extra activities and one of those was - started up at St. Kilda Town Hall as a bouncer at the Saturday night dance. And had to buy myself a dinner suit for the occasion.

17:30 And wore it about a dozen times and they transferred me out to Kew Town Hall which was a jazz dance. So the dinner suit went into the cupboard. And I can probably skite a bit and say I still wear it. Still get into it. And it hasn't worn out. But that stemmed from the fact that the pay bracket at that time was pretty low so a little bit of extra money came in from the dance which was very

18:00 handy. And also indulged in a bit of security work and there was a property out of Port Melbourne - the old wool stores. And there were about 5 or 6 of us had a working bracket out there over the weekends. But apart from that it was not a lot of time for socialising

18:30 in actual fact, no.

So what did a bouncer have to do in those days?

Well, it was purely a case of keeping the younger persons in check and it was - we never had any problem that I can recall out at St Kilda Town Hall - it was a pretty staid sort of upper class dance I suppose virtually.

19:00 The fact that we were wearing dinner suits I think points that out. But over at Kew Town Hall it was a different matter and there were the odd occasions when we confiscated knives and studded belts and that sort of thing. It could be a bit noisy, in fact it was very noisy. And there was always a prospect of a punch up somewhere along the line, either inside or outside

19:30 the hall. So, we were kept busy, yeah.

Ever have to hit someone yourself?

No, I never actually got into any fisty cuffs myself but, my mate who was the policeman on one occasion did. He was looking after himself.

Were you trained up to deal with it?

Not completely. I had the basics of self defence but I certainly hadn't been trained to go into that sort of work.

20:00 **Was there any qualifications you had to have?**

Not in those days no, there were no qualifications required. Just as long as you looked big enough and they'd sign you up.

Well, when they signed you up did they check out your muscles?

No, no, as a matter of fact the - there was me mate, the policeman who talked me into it. He said, "Look it's an easy job."

20:30 And yeah, no they said, "Just front up you'll be right."

Was there any - there must've been people getting the alcohol?

There was a certain amount but there was no alcohol itself at the dance. Any alcohol that was there was brought in and if it wasn't brought into the hall, it wasn't allowed into the hall so any alcohol at all

21:00 was outside. And I think that's common for any dance around Australia. There's always alcohol outside, in one way or another.

Was there ever any drugs?

I've got no recollection of drugs at all. I'm quite positive that there certainly wasn't around in those days. Certainly not openly.

And what about the security job. Did you have any

21:30 **troubles with?**

No, that was, that was a - it was probably more a fire watch than anything else. It was in a locked compound, it covered quite a few acres. There were quite a number of buildings and being old wool stores were probably ingrained with lanolin or whatever and probably would have burnt really well, if it'd gone up. But it was just a patrol around

22:00 the bundy clocks and just turned the key every time you went through, just to check and make sure there was nothing untoward happening.

Was it hard on you working a lot of these hours?

Oh, not in those days, I could handle it in those days. Young and silly.

And yeah tell us about - you got your posting to Thailand. Tell us about the reaction of your wife?

22:30 Looking back I would say that she probably wasn't very impressed. And I certainly wanted to go and, so it was an issue for 6 months and it was extended to 9 which didn't worry me because it still got me home for Christmas. that year, '64, so that was the main thought in my mind. But it was, it was a good posting, it was with the 79th Squadron Sabres and

23:00 we had 8 of them on the line. And my job was specifically ran the store and also the air movements section. One on one side'd strip, the other on the other side. But it was a case of - we had one aircraft - one Herc came in per week. I think it was the only C-130 a week and

23:30 we just unloaded and reloaded. Obviously there were troops come in and troops going, so it was a pretty routine sort of a job.

Where were they coming and going to?

Australia. We had the - I think there were somewhere around 100 people at Ubon on the base. Probably half of those were from Australia and the other half were from Butterworth.

24:00 And the 79th Squadron as such was staffed with aircraft and personnel from Butterworth while the base squadron staff of which I was part we came out of Australia. So we had a - generally a 6 month turnaround for the base squad and then the 79th Squadron was every 3 months. But the aircraft C-130

24:30 always stayed through Butterworth. So it'd bring the troops coming in from Australia and overnight in Butterworth and then the blokes from Butterworth that were going over would hop on the next day and fly across to Ubon. And then those going home either to Butterworth or to Australia would go back the next day - the same day. The aircraft would turn around at lunchtime, sort of thing

What was the purpose of this base?

The purpose

25:00 was for the protection of Thai air space. Ubon is a Thai air force Base probably 40 miles or is from the border of Laos. So the Vietnam war was going on just across the other side of Laos. But the Sabres were there purely for the defence of Thai air space.

25:30 Theoretically they didn't go across the border. I wouldn't like to say that none did but officially they didn't.

So what year was this?

1964.

And the Vietnam war was going on?

It was in the infancy - the Australian Army Training Team [AATTV] put advisers into Vietnam in 1962. The air force, Caribous went into Vietnam

26:00 in 1964. About April I think, something like that. And Ubon, air force went into Ubon in 1962. And I was there in 1964.

And what were you told about being close to Laos and Laos itself?

Well, we were always aware that there could be terrorist activity.

26:30 I don't recall that there ever was any. But in a situation like that you can never be certain so you are always prepared. So we had our contingency plans if we had to get out in a hurry. We also had our bunkers and wet pits and that sort of thing. Not that you'd dive into a bunker or

27:00 wet pit without checking it out first for snakes. That was something which was always pushed hard, was the fact that, beware of the snakes. They were pretty deadly.

Well, tell us about the environment at Ubon?

Well, the environment at Ubon - it was - we were on the Northern - I think the air base was on the northern side of the township, which was reasonably a big

27:30 town. There was a big army base south of it. There was an American radar unit on the working side of the airstrip from our domestic area, which was on the town side. The - initially accommodation was tents, but by the time I got up there they had corrugated iron huts which were

28:00 comfortable enough. The messing arrangement was very good - it was a combined kitchen with separate dining rooms for the airmen and officers and senior COs. We did have an open air cinema, picture theatre. And there was a swimming pool of sorts. And there were quite a few places in town that were off limits.

Why?

Venereal disease was pretty rampant.

28:30 It was pretty bad. The doctor used to make his rounds and check things out. The SPs [Service Police] were always on the prowl, service police that is. And so as I say, quite a lot of the town was out of bounds. But the city itself, the city centre was quite accessible. We had no

29:00 restrictions there. They did have a cinema but there was no English language either spoken or subtitled so it was really a waste of time going to the movies cause you couldn't understand it.

And, did there - putting it out of bounds and monitoring by the SPs, did that stop visits?

No, no it didn't

29:30 stop them. It probably might have curbed it a little bit but, it didn't stop it no that's for sure.

How did men get away with this?

Well, obviously they'd been there long enough to know the rounds of the SPs perhaps or they just took the chance. I don't recall there being too

30:00 many caught while I was there so, they got away with it scott free so to speak.

What about avoiding VD [venereal disease]?

Well, that was standard procedures there. And some did some didn't. And those that did took the risk. The statistics show that there were quite a number who didn't bother to worry about it.

What would happen if they...?

Oh, after

- 30:30 the doctor had seen them X number of times they were sent home. That didn't happen very often, there weren't too many disciplinary postings home.
- Would they - what would they do if they did catch a man - would they usually turn a blind eye?**
- I'm not certain what their procedure was there, I didn't get involved in that side of it. It didn't
- 31:00 concern me at that time.
- And did men talk about what these establishments were like?**
- No, not really. We did have a couple of clubs in Ubon which were in bounds and, most of us used to frequent those and I believe that there were other clubs which were also in bounds but I never bothered
- 31:30 to go to them, I was quite happy with the two we had. And of course a lot of the time was spent on base anyway in our own mess.
- What were the clubs like?**
- Pretty basic. Very basic actually. The toilets, being both cases were communal and there was no, no dividers inside. There was just an open area with holes in the ground.
- 32:00 **What was that like?**
- Pretty rugged. But you put up with what the locals put up with I suppose.
- Was it unusual having a communal toilet for men and women?**
- Well, I found it a bit unusual but you get used to these things after a while.
- Was there music or bands?**
- Oh, yeah. Very much so. Elvis Presley was in in those days so
- 32:30 in fact we - I did a visit up to - what's the name of the place? Can't remember the name of the place now, but it was north of Ubon. Went up on a bus trip. And we were taken out this night to this club. And all they played all night was Elvis Presley. Which was fair enough, he was okay.
- 33:00 But, yeah the music was loud there's no worries about that.
- Were there any Thai Elvis Presleys?**
- Yes, I do recall that there was one at this club Ruat, Ruat was the name of the place. And there was a Thai Elvis Presley the night that we were there.
- Did you find this unusual?**
- Probably initially, yes.
- 33:30 But after you've been around those places a little while it sort of glosses over. Transvestites everywhere and god knows what else.
- Were there bar girls in these?**
- Oh, yeah. Yeah.
- What would they say?**
- Well, "Cigarette," or, "Buy me a drink." That sort of stuff.
- Were there any unusual sayings?**
- 34:00 Probably, if you didn't like something it was, "Loi a sip," which was done by 150. And that makes us pretty crook.
- Why?**
- Well, it was a case of if you liked it it was number 1, or if it was not so good or no good at all it was number loi a sip. And that's what I do remember.
- It's kind of**
- 34:30 **unusual to pick 150.**
- Yes, you're right, but it's probably just the sound of loi a sip I suppose. And how you work 150 out of that is I can tell you that sip is 10 so it's probably the zero on the end of it. I'm not - I'm trying to think what one was, I think it was nong. Nong was one so where that fits into loi a sip I'm not sure.
- Yeah, I think they have a different word for**

35:00 **100.**

Obviously, I'd say yeah.

And did you get into the local culture?

I spent a fair bit of time walking around the place and I've taken photos of flora and fauna and so forth and, flora in particular Bougainvillea. I was very impressed with the

35:30 Bougainvillea up there, there was a lot of it. It was very colourful. And so I've coloured slides somewhere around the place which I haven't looked at for years. There's quite a lot of that. I didn't really take to the local food very well. I just couldn't come at some of the Thai stuff, it was too strong for me. But, the local beer was okay.

36:00 And the local rice whisky was dangerous but we used to drink a bit of that occasionally. You had a used by date on it, the rice whisky - Mekong whisky - I think if it was over a month old you didn't drink it.

What effects did it have on you?

Ooh, it was pretty strong alcohol I can tell you. It didn't take too much to send you right off.

36:30 You sleep well but.

What would you do if you?

Well, I would imagine if you had a good session on it and you'd probably find yourself collapsing. It was I think a stupefying drug more than anything else.

And what about did you see any Thai boxing or?

37:00 Oh, we - yes I did on a couple of occasions go to the Thai boxing match. But I never really bothered too much with it. I saw a couple. Reckoned it was okay and left it at that.

Did any of the men hook up with local girls?

There were a couple of instances, yes where I know two in particular, while I was there, they lived off base - had a bungalow.

37:30 **And how was this considered both by the locals first and then by...?**

Well, obviously the fact that they were allowed to do it meant that there was no real problem. Obviously the base commander would've had to approve it I would expect. Unless they turned a blind eye to it which I - may also have happened. I don't know I didn't enquire into that. And I knew it was happening

38:00 but there was no, nothing from my side of it to enquire about.

And what about the locals, did you feel like they were welcoming you there?

Generally speaking yes, yes. We had a reasonably good rapport with the Thai air force people. They had their mess just down, probably half a kilometre

38:30 or a kilometre from where we were. And we used to reciprocate visits and so forth.

Yeah, how was the situation, like was it just an Australian base or...?

No, it was Thai air force base. We were - we had our own area, our own domestic area where we lived. And we had our technical area which was on the other side of the strip near the control tower, where we had our technical store and the

39:00 aircraft were hangared. Or they had a hangar for maintenance work but the aircraft were hard standing. And then behind them there was the American radar unit. And the year after I left in 1965 the Americans moved their Phantom jets into the base, which from what I hear was pretty horrendous the noise. And sleeping at night wasn't

39:30 easy because of the constant noise of Phantoms coming down.

Great we'll stop there because I got the tap so yeah ...

Tape 4

00:35 **So were you still working in the air movements?**

At Ubon I was in the store generally, either the domestic store or the technical store, depending on requirements. But when we had aircraft - Hercules coming in well, I'd then take on the air movements role. And we had X number of people

01:00 within the stores set up who were trained for air movements and we'd go and do our bit - unload, reload and process the passengers and whatever. So it was just a standard routine but only once a week which was on the quiet side.

And in terms of working in the stores what was the main difference between working in Australia to working in Thailand?

Well, the hours for one because of the heat

01:30 in the afternoons - we were finished by 3 o'clock. Started early and worked through, did what had to be done. And we knocked off by 3 o'clock which gave us a good afternoon break. As I said, we had the domestic store on one side which was tied in with the accommodation and the messes. Technical store which had all the aircraft bits and pieces, it was on the other side of the air strip

02:00 where the Sabres were recorded. And so it really was a continual up keep of making sure we had the spares required. And that's just a standard stock system. As an item is issued out you demand another one in from the appropriate stores department in Australia.

02:30 And of course if it was short list we may even be able to get it from Bundaberg. But a lot of the domestic stores were purchased locally from the local traders. And we had a section which looked after that side called local purchase.

And in the situation with the Sabres was there any

03:00 **particular item technically that they always, that was often replaced?**

They had a - not a fault so much but a situation that, every time they fired their guns they'd knock out some of their instruments. So purely from the vibrations, the vibrations from the guns would upset the instruments.

03:30 So every time that one of the Sabres fired its gun the ground crew would be unhappy cause they'd have to change instruments and realign and all sorts of things.

Was this not considered a problem?

Well, I would - I would've thought it should've been better controlled but that was the word that we had, that the ground crew'd come whinging to the mess, so and so fired his guns so we've got all this extra work to do.

04:00 But that's the way it goes.

And what sort of occasion would lead up to a Sabre firing their guns?

Well, I think probably a routine, just routine practise. Just routine check over to make sure they still work. To my knowledge there was never any hostile action concerning the Sabres.

04:30 Although we did lose one there I think through accident. It was while I was there that we had a Iroquois helicopter and a DC3 [transport plane] come across from Butterworth to retrieve the engine of the Sabre which was under somebody's house in the village nearby. They'd eventually located the engine and so sent the two aircraft across to pick it up. The Dakota

05:00 landed at Ubon, the helicopter went out and picked up the engine and brought it back, and then we had the job of loading it into the Dakota, which again wasn't a real easy job because the side door of a Dakota wasn't really to get large objects in.

Why did they use it for transportation then?

Well, that was all they had in those days. The transport flight at Butterworth had DC3s. The

05:30 only Caribous that we had at that stage were in Vietnam. I think it was later on, as more Caribous became available they replaced the DC3s at Butterworth with the Caribou.

And what's the main difference between a Dakota and a Caribou?

Well, the Caribou is a much more modern aircraft, time wise. It's still a propeller driven aircraft, 2 engines same as the Dakota.

06:00 But the Dakota dates back from about 1935 or 6. But the big advantage for the Caribou is it's got the loading ramp at the rear. So you can just wheel stuff straight up the ramp and into the aircraft. Whereas the DC3 with the side loading door, it can be very difficult for larger objects.

And how had this accident happened?

I'm not sure. It obviously happened before I got there.

06:30 It was only while I was there that they found the engine and retrieved it. But I would expect that it may have been engine failure or some such thing.

Had the pilot survived?

I understand so, yes. Yeah, he would've ejected.

So in the store what would a typical day have been like, how much say in the technical store?

Well, in the technical store it's - we had a sergeant and a

07:00 I'm not sure whether it was one or two airmen over in the technical store. Their job was to be available to supply anything that was required for any pilot techs to do whatever they had to repair on the aircraft. But they also had the daily maintenance of stock records and keeping up with the cleanliness of the store. Orderliness and all the rest of it.

07:30 **And what was the relationship like with the ground crew of the people in the store?**

Generally no problem at all. We generally always got on well together. We messed together and there was no distinction in the accommodation or the messing, it was - everybody was in together sort of thing. Within their rank structures. And no there was no problem that I recall of having heard between the two groups.

08:00 **And how about you? Did you make any particular friends amongst the ground crew?**

Oh, I think it's the sort of thing you do in most units - you know some better than others. And I ... probably and it would be from previous acquaintances there were 3 or 4 fellows at Ubon in my time who I had known

08:30 beforehand. In fact that Kevin who I mentioned earlier from my course at Rathmines he was at Ubon when I arrived there. So he was the first to greet me when I landed there. And we - there was another fellow who'd gone up from support command to Ubon just before me who was still there when I arrived. And there was another fellow from support command who arrived after I did so at one point, there were 4 of us there together who

09:00 I had known the other 3 previously.

And was there any healthy rivalries not really the right word. But did you have any particular jokes about say their ground staff and did they have particular jokes about you?

Not that I can recall specifically no. It was, the aircraft ground crew of course they were from Butterworth and they came over on 3

09:30 month rotations whereas we went up from Australia where we were on 6 month rotations. So there was a reasonably frequent turn over of staff because the whole crew weren't replaced in one hit. So there were always people coming and going. And that was probably something against the sort of thing you're talking

10:00 about with rivalries or whatever, just the fact that the constant turnover - I mean every week we had probably ten or a dozen people coming in and another ten or a dozen going out. So that shifts a fair amount.

And were there any nicknames for different divisions?

Well, there's always been air force wide the sharpies and the bluntees.

10:30 The sharpies being the aircrew at the sharp end of the stick so to speak and then the bluntees, they're the ground crews and the support personnel down the back end. That's always been around a long long time.

And is that said in good humour?

Oh yes, yes.

And how about the aircrew - what was your kind of interaction with them?

Well, I'd never had a lot to do with the aircrew

11:00 as such because again they were from Butterworth and they were changing over all the time. I do recall that one of the very young pilots who was there when I was there, he went through to become an air vice marshal and deputy chief of the air staff. That was David Rogers. He was a pilot officer which is, you know just a newly graduated pilot officer at Ubon in '64. And in

11:30 1999, 2000 he retired as an air vice marshal. Deputy chief of air staff there. He had a long career in the air force.

And did you ever get to go to Butterworth?

Oh, on several occasions yes. Yeah - my first visit to Butterworth was on the way to Ubon. We flew by - which way did we go? No, I flew by Qantas

- 12:00 through Perth to Singapore - overnight to Singapore at Raffles - Raffles Hotel. And then got a civil flight from Singapore to Butterworth or Penong the next day. I was met at Penong, taken across to Butterworth air base and probably one or two nights there and got the C-130 across to Ubon.
- 12:30 Then on the way out, coming home from Ubon I didn't go to Butterworth I came down through Bangkok and flew civil from Bangkok back to Melbourne. But since then I've had quite a lot of visits to Butterworth.

What's Butterworth like?

It's a big place. Particularly in those days. We had two squadrons of fighter jets there. The Sabres and then Mirages.

- 13:00 These days Australian wise it's a lot smaller - we've just got a small holding unit there I believe to look after aircraft stationed through on exercise. In those days there was a very big RAAF contingent at Butterworth. I think from the late fifties or sixties the RAF [Royal Air Force] handed the base over to
- 13:30 the Malay air force. While it was always a Malay air force base, in my time over that way. And of course as I say the Australian content there now has gone right down to a small holding.

And at Ubon was there much interaction with the local forces?

Quite a lot.

- 14:00 We had a reasonably good - well, a very good relationship with the Thai air force whose base was just down the road from us and we did on occasions get across to the army military district which was south of the town. I recall going there on one occasion for a big parade that the army were having, for some reason or other which I've forgotten now.
- 14:30 But it's - yeah we had no problems at all with the locals either military or civilian in Malay.

And how about, were there any locals that worked on the base?

Oh, quite a lot, yes.

What sort?

We had - I don't know that we had a local in the store - oh yes we did, we had one local over in the technical store. We had a couple of locals in the transport section.

- 15:00 And there were one or two locals in the barracks store, and several in the mess. And Sammy was our bar steward in the sergeants' mess - he was there for a long long time.

A bar steward?

A bar steward in the sergeants' mess, yes.

Was he good?

He was good, very good yeah. He used to run the bar. Yep.

And how much time, like I'm just trying

- 15:30 **to understand the way the mess works. Is it sort of purely for eating or is there entertainment and what sort of...?**

It covers all of that yes. The mess is the dining room and it's also the bar. And depending on the mess will depend on the level of entertainment. And we found in Singapore while the Brits [British] were there they really went into it in a big way.

- 16:00 Ubon wasn't quite so big in entertainment, probably because of the lack of facilities and the lack of talent I suppose you could call it. But then I think basically Ubon was a place where after working, at the mess they had a few beers and, perhaps watched the movies or went to town or whatever and so entertainment on the base wasn't a thing that we worried

- 16:30 too much about.

What's the hierarchy - that governs who's allowed in messes and things?

Well, there's the officers' mess which is officers. You've got the sergeants' mess which is for senior and COs and warrant officers. Then you've got the airmen's mess for the corporal and below. A bigger unit will also have a corporal's club, which is just for corporals. Because generally speaking the corporals

- 17:00 probably make up as big a group as anybody else on most bases. But at Ubon it was just the airmen's mess. So there were the 3 messes but just the one kitchen which serviced the 3 messes. And then each mess had its own bar.

And how rigorously are they divided?

Oh, in a smaller unit they're really not very much divided.

17:30 On a bigger unit they are. At Toowoomba and 7 SD [Stores Depot] we had a combined mess with the – combined dining room for the officers and senior NCOs. And then airmen had their own dining room. But then we had a separate bars, 3 bars.

Is it important that these...?

Well, it is, it is important for discipline more than anything else.

18:00 Again it depends on the unit itself and generally speaking a smaller unit will be more closely integrated than a bigger unit. And it's even more so in the army and the navy where I think they have lots of messes on a big unit. Whereas the air force still sticks to its three, officers, senior NCOs and... But I have been on occasions, when I've been involved with

18:30 army units, each unit on a base will have its own mess. And so on a big army unit you could have probably 5 or 6 sergeants' messes. Which means that a lot of, disintegration so to speak.

And were there any games or things that would be played in the mess?

19:00 Yeah, I remember one game being played, I'm not sure what mess it was in. Called Moriarty. Which was quite interesting – you blindfold 2 fellows and you tie their left arms together and give them a great rolled up wad of newspaper and they belt hell out of each other if they can find each other. That's one game I remember, Moriarty.

What sort of situation leads up

19:30 **to people playing that one?**

I don't know actually. I think probably later in the night when a lot of beer's been consumed it's probably the time that would come on.

How about general stuff, like any card games and chess?

That was always around. In the bigger messes they've got their reading room where they do that sort of thing. Or in a quiet corner in a mess.

20:00 But yes, chess and crib and cards have always been popular.

What kind of card game?

Oh poker, pontoon. I suppose any card game at all depending on who's there and who's taking part in it.

Are you allowed to put money on it?

Not officially.

But unofficially?

Oh, there's always a box of matches.

20:30 With the price on the matches to suit the occasion.

How about things like when big sporting events were on in Australia and stuff like that, was there anyone who ran a bit of a...?

Well, I think the Melbourne Cup has always been a part of service life in regards to sweeps. And I'd say probably some of the bigger messes would incorporate a race day with the Melbourne Cup.

21:00 I know that at – I think it was Richmond sergeants' mess they had some ungainly looking wooden horses which were extremely difficult to ride. They had jointed legs and a neck and if you went completely up with the way it worked it could throw you very easily. And of course that would

21:30 be run in conjunction with a Melbourne Cup Day.

And how about, would you follow things like sporting events closely and would the scores come through?

Oh, yes I think that's always been the case. Again depending on where you are and what you're doing. These days with TV of course it's very easy right across the board to follow sporting events. But back in the early days before TV it was a case of

22:00 use the radio and, follow your sporting events through radio.

And how about days that have big significance in Australia. For example what sort of celebrations took place on Anzac Day?

Again that's part of service life. Anzac Day is always recognised on any air force base. And I can jump a few years and talk of Anzac Days in

22:30 Singapore at the big war cemetery.

Oh, what was that like?

Oh, very moving, yes. In those days of course we had the British and the Kiwis [New Zealanders] in Singapore with us and the British were very very supportive of the Australians and New Zealanders on Anzac Day. And we would have a big ceremony at Kranchi.

23:00 But at Ubon it would've been a, it would've been Anzac Day just after I arrived so it would've been - I can't recall the actual - what we did on that day, but it would've been a pretty simple service I would think.

Does Anzac Day take on a different significance when you're actually a member of the armed forces?

I think it probably does, yes. It's - well, probably

23:30 no more so perhaps than the ex service person. But I think it's probably different for the civilian who hasn't had any military experience.

And how about things like were you there over a Christmas period?

Not at Ubon no, I was back home for Christmas, '64. But I was over - I had a Christmas in Vietnam. And a couple of Christmases in Singapore.

24:00 **When you came home for Christmas were you heading back to Thailand?**

No, no I'd finished my tour in what was it, April through to December. Yes I came back just before Christmas.

What was it like leaving?

It was probably a double issue there. One I was having a good time up there, and enjoyed it. And then of course the other was getting home to the family.

24:30 **How important were letters and things like that?**

Very important. And that's another issue I can take up later on. But at Ubon the mail was quite reasonable although I did get one letter post marked Cyprus. So it obviously went in the wrong mail bag and went to the Australian police contingent in Cyprus at that time. But then it got back

25:00 to Thailand so. But we - I was able to - not it wasn't at Ubon it was at Vietnam. Where we had the voice tapes. But from Ubon it was letters, cards and that sort of thing.

Was there any - I suppose not really being active war time - but was there things you weren't allowed to talk about in letters, any censoring at all?

No, no censoring. Not in my time at Ubon no.

25:30 **And how did getting letters and stuff like that help?**

Oh, it's something that everybody looks forward to when they're away and it's contact with the family at home. And yeah we always looked forward to mail day and obviously didn't get one every day but when you did you made the most of it, enjoyed it.

How did the mail arrive?

It came in on the Hercules, part of the freight.

26:00 **You got to unload it?**

Well, we got to unload the bags yes. Yeah, and then it went to our orderly room where they sorted it out and distributed it to the section.

Did anyone get any 'Dear John' letters [letter informing a relationship is over]?

Not that I'm aware of. I didn't hear of any of those, no.

Would you talk much to the other people about your family?

Probably within your own close circle. I mean it's like every

26:30 society I think that you have your - one or two closer friends that you might talk more of home with. But generally speaking I've never been really that outgoing and quite happy to stick by myself in the main.

And so what was it like seeing your family again?

Oh, it was terrific yeah. Yes, they - of course the youngest girl she was

27:00 about 5 months when I left so she'd grown a hell of a lot in the 9 months I'd been away.

Did she recognise you?

I've got a feeling that she didn't.

And what - how much time did you have off after you came back?

I would've - I would expect I probably had 2 or 3 weeks perhaps - maybe a bit more than that. And then I went back into

27:30 Victoria Barracks. And I was appointed to a different section. And I didn't go back into catalogues fortunately, I went into identification which was a similar line of work but in a different area.

How does it work?

Identification. It was more into the investigating stock numbers and equipment and

28:00 I think it was - from memory it was the forerunner to catalogues. You got the information that was needed to go into the catalogue.

When you say investigating numbers?

Well, it was researching I'd say researching stock books and catalogues. And finding the - yeah I'm pretty sure that's what it was - it was

28:30 identifying the items from the American catalogues and sorting them across. Taking out the items that we were using and putting them into our own system.

So your knowledge of the bits and pieces of planes must be fairly...?

It was, it was reasonably good at that time yes. Yeah, the - especially in the radio and radar area because there were so many different equipments

29:00 that we were utilising. And they all had their own set ups. All the bits and pieces that were with them, yeah.

And what were you - you say the main differences were I guess even in the first couple of months of having been living on quite a small base in Thailand, to being back at Victoria Barracks?

Yeah well, Victoria Barracks was almost a home situation where the

29:30 mess was a dining room and a bar, but it was 2 streets away. And it was probably easier, in fact a lot of us did that, was to take our lunch from home, sandwiches and we'd play cards at lunchtime. Spend the hour playing cards. Generally pontoon. Or euchr, or 500.

30:00 They were generally the 3 games that we used to work on.

And how about I guess the atmosphere, did you miss the way it had been in Ubon?

I - yeah I would say that from time to time my thoughts would go back to what we would've been doing in Thailand. But generally speaking you sort of adjusted to where you were at the time and got back into the old routine.

Is it easier to

30:30 **I guess, do you feel slightly more dislocated from the work if you're not living on the base?**

No, I think it was - it was always a case of you had your home and you had your job. So there really wasn't I don't think any great difference in that. It was just a matter of if you were on the base you were there, if you were off the base you had to travel.

31:00 Really it was - probably there was more camaraderie on base, living in the mess and that sort of thing but, but then on the other side of it you had your home life which, you liked probably better than the camaraderie in the mess.

Did any people live on the base at Victoria Barracks?

Not at Victoria Barracks. Those who lived

31:30 in as such lived at Tottenham. And commuted from Tottenham into the Vic Barracks.

And you mentioned living in the mess, is that just a turn of phrase?

Yeah, it is. The accommodation wasn't in the mess but it was the, generally termed that. You live in. Well, probably not live in the mess so much

32:00 but just live in. Live in on the base.

So how long did you spend then at Victoria Barracks?

I was there 18 months after I came back from Ubon. And I was then posted over to air trials unit at

Woomera.

Just before we get to Woomera, do you wear your uniform all the time?

At Vic Barracks no we didn't wear uniform, generally speaking. We wore civilian clothes. However at

32:30 - it would've been when I got back from Ubon that the powers that be decided that they would have a uniform parade and everybody in the service at Vic Barracks would wear uniform, for that parade. And because of the number of people and the fact that we didn't have a big parade ground, they split it up into 3 groups. They had the officers

33:00 on one day, they had the warrant officers on another day and on the third day they had the senior NCO's and airmen. And Vic Barracks being the way it was there weren't very many airmen but there were a lot of warrant officers. And on that day that we paraded the count came to about 90. Ninety warrant officers on that parade, unbelievable. But of course

33:30 every day wearing civvies you never know who's who and what's what. So it wasn't until that day that where it came down to just how many warrant officers there were at Vic Barracks.

That's interesting.

It is.

And where you're wearing civilian clothes does that bring that level of - I'm not quite sure like who - if you for example were an airman and you saw an warrant officer is there a level of protocol that you'd exhibit towards them?

34:00 Generally speaking yes, the people who worked in the section knew who was an officer and who was a warrant officer and who was a LAC so to speak. And of course they got the protocol that they deserved, etc. Outside of that well, if - you weren't in uniform so you didn't salute anyone. However if you passed a person who you knew was an officer, you'd say,

34:30 "G'day sir," or whatever. But if you didn't know him and didn't know what he was well, you'd either say g'day or you'd ignore him. That's basically what it boiled down to.

And when you had the parade would you wear your uniform through Melbourne to the barracks?

Oh, yeah yeah.

And was there ever any reaction, a bit of a stir?

I don't - no I don't recall that. When I say that we wore civvies

35:00 at Vic Barracks, generally speaking we did, but if you wanted to wear uniform you could, and some did. But generally speaking most wore civilian clothes. By the same token we also had units at Laverton and Tottenham where they did wear uniform. So uniform wasn't unusual in Melbourne.

When you say civilian clothes, shirt and a tie?

Oh, yeah

35:30 for summer. Winter was a suit or sports clothes.

And do you think the atmosphere changed on base when you were all in uniform?

Well, it would be just a little bit more, bit more decorum I suppose. The fact that you've got no excuse for not knowing the rank of another person that you meet on a base when they're in uniform.

36:00 Whereas at Vic Barracks it just could've been a civilian - you don't know.

Was there a security factor in that?

I don't really know why they did that. Vic Barracks incidentally was a very secure area. We did have civilian guards on the gate and you had to have a pass to get in. A pass or might have just been

36:30 identity card for those service persons. But regardless of that it was a very secure area. So the reason for wearing civilians I'm not really sure. Possibly a hang over from the days of department of air when it was in Melbourne. But I'm not sure about Canberra, whether they wore civilians or uniforms or what. I think it's probably

37:00 much the same.

And at Victoria Barracks there weren't any planes based around...?

No, no there was no airstrip at Vic Barracks.

Did you miss that interaction that you had?

Well, I probably - my reintroduction to aircraft was at Ubon and I only had 18 months back at the

- barracks from there. So I probably really didn't get time to worry too much about it and of course
- 37:30 went to Woomera and was back with the aircraft again.
- And what did you know about Woomera before you went?**
- Very little. Just knew that it was an air trials unit and the fact of the rockets and rocket launching and that sort of stuff.
- What did you know about the rockets?**
- Probably nothing. I found out about it when I was there of course but prior to getting there, no I hadn't really had much
- 38:00 to do with that side...
- In terms I guess of the general public what was general knowledge about Woomera?**
- Again I don't think there was a hell of a lot of knowledge around the place. I mean people knew it was there obviously. I expect they knew what it was supposed to be doing, I mean launching rockets. But come down to the nitty gritty of it I'd say that most people didn't know and
- 38:30 probably didn't care either.
- Was there much talk about this sort of weaponry? I guess post World War II the bomb in Japan?**
- Probably the more talked about aspect of Woomera was the, the British atomic weapons trials which went on west of Woomera in the fifties.
- 39:00 And that in itself caused a lot of controversy and still is causing controversy. Linking the atomic bombs in Japan and their effect on the B Com [Company] troops. With the effects of the British atomic trials at Maralinga and Montebello with the Australian servicemen involved there. So it's continuing there's no problem there.
- Was there any**
- 39:30 **I guess kind of beginning rumours of this kind of controversy when you were heading out near the area?**
- No, no I don't recall hearing anything on that line then.
- Were you aware of what the British were doing?**
- Well, I obviously would've been aware of what had happened. I don't think anybody hasn't heard about Montebello and Maralinga as the two main areas. And also the fact that atomic bombs were tested there.
- 40:00 Probably what wasn't realised at the time was the after effects and that is now of course becoming evident that there are after effects and, so that's something that has come from hindsight.
- I just had a tap on the shoulder, we'll just stop the tape there...**

Tape 5

- 00:36 **What were you told about what you would be doing at Woomera?**
- Basically it was much of what I'd been doing at Ubon with most of my time spent in the store and warehouse and when required at air movements. Air movements were servicing the Bristol Freighter [transport plane]
- 01:00 that used to come up from Edinburgh once a week or twice a week as required. There was a civilian aircraft which came up periodically but they had a civilian airman's officer at Woomera who looked after that side of it. So we were just concerned with the air force, military aircraft.
- Take us through the first few days when you arrived at Woomera?**
- Well, it was a distinct culture shock, there's no worries about that. The, as has been described
- 01:30 by quite a few people it's right out in the middle of nowhere. And the countryside is either gibber which is stone gravel or sand hill, sand dune. And as far as vegetation's concerned very little. Stunted salt bush and small trees but generally speaking there's not much vegetation at all out there. Except at Woomera village itself which is
- 02:00 quite a little attractive area - they've spent a lot of money obviously and time on planting trees and

lawns where they could. General practice for setting up a lawn was a truck load of sand and a drum of fire fighter's fame and spread it out and plant your grass and away she went. Fame being a very good aid to growing.

And your family'd come up with...?

02:30 Yes, yes the family went over with me and we had - we were in a flat initially - which was the first floor upstairs. And that was fine until I broke my leg playing rugby league again and so that put paid to that. Eventually we got into a house which was quite comfortable. And that's why I had the bit of experience planting a law, actually it was at that house.

03:00 **How did your wife feel about moving to Woomera?**

Oh, she wasn't - I don't think she was very happy about that. Up until then she'd been within reach of her family. Melbourne and Ballarat being not very far away. And she came from Ballarat, so the move away to Woomera was I think probably more of a shock to her than it was to me. And it probably expedited our separation.

03:30 **In what way?**

The fact that she was so far away from her mother, I think that was her main problem. But things hadn't been going really well since I came back from Ubon so the split was inevitable I think - but it was just that being at Woomera hastened it along.

And how did you feel about the move?

Well, I again as I said, when I got back from Ubon I was starting to feel

04:00 the itchy foot and particularly to get back to aircraft and at Woomera was the first opportunity to do that. So naturally I took it and enjoyed it. It was a great life.

What differences in the job were there say to working in Thailand?

Very very little really. It was, as I say, 80% stores work which was, routine mundane

04:30 sort of work. But the aircraft unloading, loading side of it, added that little bit of interest in it for me. And so I was quite happy in that situation.

And what exactly were they doing there?

Well, the major work at Woomera were the rocket launches. During my time there from April '66 through to

05:00 I think it was about October '67 it was - they had the British, the American and the Europeans there with different rockets going. The Americans had Blue Streak there and the British and European had the Euro, which I think was a 3 stage rocket and from memory the top end of it was I think Belgium were involved with that one. But it was an interesting

05:30 aspect. We had two Otters, fixed wing, and single engine aircraft. And 3 Alouette helicopters which flew up and down and all around the range which, the rocket range itself extended quite extensively to the west of Woomera and also to the north. So there was a lot of out stations and out posts. In fact, I think our aircraft flew out as far as Giles which was probably one of the main weather stations in Central Australia.

06:00 **What would they fly there for?**

Taking people to and from and also stores and equipment. The road system in Central Australia at that time wasn't very good at all. The road from Adelaide - from Port Augusta to Woomera was still gravel and half an inch of rain and you couldn't travel on it. So it was a problem with road travel.

06:30 The road from Woomera further out - it went west I think to Kingoonya or somewhere and then north to Coober Pedy. It was at times impassable. And I did one trip to Coober Pedy and I was fortunate - I picked the right time. I was able to get permission to drive through the range from Woomera up to Coober Pedy which was not only a lot shorter, cut out the dog leg through Kingoonya but also it was a better road, better maintained.

07:00 **How big was the range?**

The range? Oh, it - I couldn't even have as a guess apart from saying it was probably from Woomera west to the West Australian border, which was quite a long way. In fact it probably even went into Western Australia. And North, I think the northern boundary was just sort of Coober Pedy.

Why was it so large?

Well,

07:30 for control of rockets - they'd shoot a rocket up and in most cases they wanted to come back on the range so they had to have an extensive area to fire it.

Did you see any of the rocket tests?

Yes, yes we were able to see some of them. We were never able to go out to the rocket launch site itself but on some of them they were close enough to Woomera that we could see them from the base.

What did that look like?

Very spectacular. Yes.

08:00 Probably not as big as the shuttle going up from America but quite large, yes.

Describe what you'd see?

Well, you'd see a huge cloud of dust, would be the first thing you'd see. And then the rocket going up with the flames trailing behind it.

And what about the interaction between the different nationalities?

We had the 3 mess structure again at Woomera, although it was controlled by the department of

08:30 supplies so it wasn't strictly a military base as such. Department supply, government department it controlled the situation. And they had the senior mess which the officers went into. And the junior mess. And there was a, there was an intermediate mess where we were, I'm not quite sure what that was called. It might have been - no the senior mess was the officers

09:00 junior mess was the airmen and there was the intermediate mess. But generally speaking for midday meals there was a separate mess out at the base area which was probably quite some - this is another guess - probably several miles from the domestic area, from the township. And that - just the 2 messes out at the work site and

09:30 warrant officers were included with the senior mess there and NCOs went in the junior mess.

Did you interact much with the Americans?

Yes, we got to know some of the British very well actually. In fact there were a couple living in the same block of flats that we were that we got to know quite well. He was an RAF fireman attached to the RAF unit at Woomera at that time.

So what kind of things would you notice

10:00 **about the British?**

Oh, well, they - they had a different accent there's no worries about that, generally speaking. And they were very much the same as us in regards to everyday life, yes.

And would you talk about what you were doing out there, what was happening out there?

Well, generally speaking I think what we were doing was pretty mundane. It was nothing exciting enough to talk about. Obviously an imminent rocket firing or some such

10:30 would be quite interesting to talk about. But after the launch itself there'd be some talk, particularly from the people out on the range itself, as to how they saw it the launch and the recovery. But generally speaking it was much the same as any other little village.

Would you hear about the progress of the - technology or tests?

Not really we didn't

11:00 go into that side of it much at all.

Did you interact with the local population at Woomera?

Well, the local population in the main were government - either military or civilian. There were a few, a few non government people there. I expect the shop keepers perhaps and some of the - well, that's probably about all. Maybe some of the

11:30 well, railway workers. It think it was Pemberton railway station just south of Woomera. But generally speaking, we didn't have a lot to do with the non government people as such.

What about any Aboriginal people?

There were a few, not very many. I know there was one young girl that my youngest daughter got along with, they used to play together.

What did

12:00 **you notice about local Aboriginal people?**

Much the same as anybody else really, yeah.

Tell us about what we were talking about off camera?

Yes, one of the more interesting jobs we had with the air movement side of things at Woomera were the occasion we had to send one of the Jindivik [remote-controlled, pilotless aircraft] down to government aircraft

12:30 for some to be done. And we were stuck with the DC3 to transport it and this of course, policy required the removal of the wings and the tail plane which we quoted separately. And the big job of course was getting the fuselage of the Jindivik aircraft through the side door of the Dakota. And whilst on air movements course we'd been shown the procedure and taught

13:00 the procedures of getting a Woollies jeep into a Dakota, the Jindivik was a little bit different because with the jeep they've got special ramps made which you can drive the jeep up the ramp, get the front of it into the doorway on the angle and then it's a matter of man handling it from there to get it inside the aircraft. But with the Jindivik we couldn't use ramps because we couldn't use the wheel on it. So it was a case of using the forklift. And if

13:30 you've had any experience using a forklift around an aeroplane well, you know it can be quite dangerous at times. Particularly putting a tine through the side of it. But we managed the job and got it tied down and away it went. How they come at getting it out the other end I don't know - I never bothered to enquire on that one.

Were there any other innovations of this sort that you had to...?

Oh, there's always something that comes up that needed to be sorted out. But these days generally speaking

14:00 the air movements and training development unit at Richmond has sorted out all the problems and now you get an unusual load there's always a plan on how to attack it and how to load it.

And how were you finding the life in Woomera?

It was different. The climate there is something that is a little bit unusual particularly - I mean as you know the rainfall is virtually non-existent

14:30 there's not much rain there at all. However the cold in winter is freezing. You can wake up and get out of bed in the morning and it's freezing cold. Put the grey coat on and all the woollies and you get to work and by 9 o'clock it's all off again because the sun's now up high enough and it's starting to scorch again. So we did find that they climate contrast was quite severe and took a little bit of getting used to. But the dryness

15:00 was always a - I suppose a problem in one respect, because the temperatures and lack of humidity. But when of course - as I said, when the rains came the road to Port Augusta was impassable so you were sort of landlocked.

So what did you like about it?

Well, I think it was different. Probably I could say that the - whilst the job was much the same as I'd done elsewhere the

15:30 place itself was sufficiently different. And we did, we were able to take the opportunity to get up the gem fields, periodically and Andamooka was an easy drive - well, question marks on that one - it wasn't easy it was pretty rough but it was a short drive from Woomera - particularly if we used the back gate. Front gate was a long way around but the back gate, we could go straight up the track to Andamooka and fossick around the holes up there and

16:00 you know have a few days out.

Did something change in your manner or personality moving from a city to a place like this?

No, I think service people are pretty adept at fitting in with their location. We had a lot of sport at Woomera. There was as I said earlier, I broke a leg playing rugby league. But then there was cricket

16:30 and there was tennis and all of those sorts of things. Soccer and Australian rules. 3 codes of football were catered for. In fact the year I was there we had an end of season trip from Woomera across to Canberra on one of the VIP [Very Important Person] aircraft - RAAF aircraft, because we'd come out the South Australian premiers at the rugby league. But there's a story behind that too of course. Is the fact that

17:00 the only 3 rugby league teams in South Australia were at Woomera. The air force team, the navy team and the civilian team. So we finished up, we won the comp [competition] that year and they flew us over to Fairbairn for a weekend jaunt.

How you have a comp with 3 teams?

Well, I'm not sure but it appears that that's what happened. It certainly was.

How many games did you play?

- Oh, we played every weekend.
- 17:30 It was obviously pretty regular. There were no teams in Adelaide at that time. I don't know how it stands now.
- And what other kinds of entertainment kept you going at Woomera?**
- Well, there was the movies of course. Always had the cinema. And they had a scout group there which, at that time I didn't get involved in, Scouts at Woomera. Had thought
- 18:00 about it but didn't quite make it. So there was a lot of entertainment for young people and for the older people with the sport and movies and so forth.
- Were you aware of changes just starting to happen in the cities? The swinging sixties?**
- Oh, yes I'm sure we were aware of that yes.
- Did you ever feel that you were missing out on**
- 18:30 **that?**
- I don't think so. No, we had as usual the mess life of course was quite strong.
- And your wife left there to...?**
- Yes, she left Woomera and went back to Ballarat. So I stayed on there, probably for the last 6 months on my own. And the - at that point the air force closed one air trails unit down at Woomera.
- 19:00 And the flight attendant, accountant and myself was the warrant officer of equipment - we closed the unit down and got rid of - well, the stores and all of that like went to department of supply. And Short Brothers at Harlan took over the aircraft and hangar space. So it was just a transition from air force to civilian or back to government.
- Why was it closed down?**
- I'm not really sure why they decided on that but I think
- 19:30 it was because of the slow down in the military side of Woomera. And they decided just leave it back with the department of supply who at that stage, were controlling the place anyway. And the air force was only a lodger unit. So it was obviously easier for the air force to close the unit down and reassign the people and let the department of
- 20:00 supply handle it.
- How'd you personally cope with your wife moving away and having to be there by yourself?**
- Oh, that was, that's wasn't a worry - I was able to get over that one without any problems. So just one of those things you do. As I say, service people do these things, it happens all the time.
- How are they able to do this, service people?**
- I don't know, I think it's the life style probably more than anything else. The life and camaraderie with all your mates around the place and. It's a more
- 20:30 integrated life rather than civilian life where you probably don't even know your neighbours in a lot of respects. Whereas in a service environment you get to know everybody cause you're living in the same area, you're working in the same area. So you get to know them a lot better.
- Do you get to know them too well?**
- I expect there's a possibility of that. I don't think I've ever struck that problem myself but I'm quite sure there are others who have yeah.
- 21:00 **And so from Woomera where did you go from there?**
- I went to Toowoomba which is 7 Stores Depot. And I was sort of out of my position there, as an equipment assistant. I moved into a clerk supply job which was running the stock control at the stores depot. When I say running the stock control I was the, I
- 21:30 was the only service person in the stock control. So I was sort of a bit of a - trouble shooter I think in a lot of respects. They had a civilian stock control officers and they had a civilian purchasing officer. And we had a flight lieutenant air force, what do you call him? Policy and planning I think. And the squadron leader was the overall boss of the stock control set up.
- 22:00 So I spent most of my time liaising with the different departments within the stock control and chasing up outstanding items that needed pushing along and that sort of thing.
- And did you notice the differences between military and civilian stock?**
- Well, I had realised there was a difference years before at in Melbourne

- 22:30 when the civilians worked under a completely different system to what the air force did. And I know in Melbourne it was not uncommon for the temperature in the building to reach 100 degrees Fahrenheit, the old scale. And at that point civvies knocked off and went home but we had to stay on and pretend you're working. And it was those sort of differences which was more often than not noticed very strongly by the service
- 23:00 persons that, the civvies were treated differently.
- How did you feel about that?**
- Well, generally speaking not too impressed, but the hierarchy said it would happen that way so it happened, we had no choice in it.
- Who were you unimpressed at?**
- The civilian system in general. I mean we didn't decry the fact that the civvies got to knock off at - middle of the day when it was 100 degrees but we sort of decried the system that said they could do it that way.
- 23:30 **Were you angry at the military for making you stay and not do the same?**
- No, we were expected to do that. We, as I said before, at Ubon we knocked off at 3 o'clock when the temperature would quite likely have been well above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. But the fact was that was the way it worked, we started early, and we finished early to beat the worst of the heat of the day. But in Melbourne which
- 24:00 can get just as damn hot, I know - and there was this discrimination between the service person and the civilian.
- Is that something a union...?**
- Oh, yeah more than likely yes it would - that decision for the civilians would have been initiated by the Unions no doubt about that. And of course that's something that - whilst I was in the air force we never had, was a union. There was no such thing as a service union in those days. I believe
- 24:30 there is something around these days which, allows the service men a little bit more latitude of what they can and can't do.
- Well, I was going to ask you, should you have had a service union?**
- Well, I don't suppose there's anything wrong in that providing it's used properly. And I think this is probably something which is very
- 25:00 noticeable is that the union movement doesn't always act properly. And that's another story I've got to tell you about too. Later on.
- Later on? No, tell us now.**
- Well, it was whilst I was at Vietnam actually. There were 2 strikes in Australia in my year over there. First one was the wharfies, wouldn't load the ships to bring our beer over.
- 25:30 And the second occasion was the postal workers when they went on strike and we never got any mail. Now those were the two things that really upset a serviceman when he was overseas, no beer and no mail. I mean, okay we didn't go dry - we had American beer but, not the same. That was terrible stuff. But we were stuck with that because the wharfies went on strike in Australia.
- So what was said about that?**
- Well, we had a
- 26:00 well, the wharfie strike sort of, fell over and there was no problem. In fact I think they got the army into load the ships. But with the postal strike the general feeling around Vietnam at that time and it was quite strongly spread around the troops was 'Punch a postie on RTA [Return to Australia]' and the instruction means, 'Punch a postie when you're back to Australia'.
- 26:30 For denying us our mail and that went on for a little while - a few weeks and of course it died a natural death of course because you don't take it out on the postie it wasn't his fault. It was the unions. But that's probably - getting back to the fact that the services didn't have unions and because of what the unions did to the servicemen, there was a little bit of discontent.
- 27:00 **Is there, in your opinion, been a bit of a divide between unionised kind of people, people which believe in unions and service people?**
- Well, it certainly was in those days and I would say that those two instances which happened when I was in Vietnam were not the only ones that happened, there would've been others. And it's that sort of thing which alienates the servicemen against the unions.
- 27:30 **Do you think, in your opinion, this is maybe affecting the politics of service people maybe**

leaning towards less union kind of based parties, i.e leaning away from the Labor Party?

Well, I think that's probably a good point. I know it was generally expected in the services that when the vote came around that the service person would vote for whoever was in power at that time.

28:00 And, during most of those earlier years was conservative. But these days I don't think there's any differentiation there, I mean, vote for who you like.

And how was this expectation manifested?

How do you mean actually?

You said there was a kind of feeling or an expectation you'd vote for those in power?

Oh, for those in power. Yes, it was

28:30 because we were non political or expected to be non political. And whoever was in power at that time was the government that was paying us and so we voted for them. Well, that's my understanding of the indication. Whether everybody else had the same feeling as me I'm not sure as all but that was the feeling that I had.

Out of curiosity, I mean when you're posted overseas how do you vote?

29:00 Well, they have, they have the means of doing that. The electoral offices are well geared up. They have their boxes they have their ballot papers. They know who's overseas, the records are there for that. So they just bundle up the papers, send them over and the administrative officer at the unit would organise a voting day or whatever.

Would you talk about who you're voting for?

Oh, probably no I don't think so.

29:30 I don't recall ever having had to vote overseas myself. But generally speaking it's something I've never really discussed. Probably working on the fact that who I vote for is my own business and that's it. So no I can say over the years that I was in the air force we never openly really discussed politics, kept out of it.

Did

30:00 **anyone ever punch a postie?**

That I doubt it, I doubt that they did. But that was certainly the cry from Vietnam. Because it - as I said earlier, it was a case of we can't blame the poor old bloody postman, it wasn't his fault if his union had said go on strike. But, service people like to come up with catchcries. That was one of them.

Was there a catch cry for the wharfies?

No, I don't recall that one.

30:30 I probably reckon the wharfies were too big.

Did you have much interaction with the wharfies through your work?

No, no never had any meeting with them at all.

Okay, so tell us from Toowoomba?

Toowoomba yes, I went to Vietnam from Toowoomba.

Tell us about the news, like did you apply or were you posted

31:00 **what happened?**

Well, I did apply in a sense. A fellow who I knew at Toowoomba, a sergeant - he knew a bloke in Canberra and he said to me one day, "John," he said, "have you thought about going to Vietnam?" I said, "Suits me, I don't mind. I'm happy to go." And next thing I was on my way. So again I think that had a lot to do, has a lot to do with a service career.

31:30 It's not what you know it's who you know. I know for a fact that my trip to Ubon was organised by a fellow I knew at Support Command. He said to me one day, "They're looking for a flight sergeant to go to Ubon. Are you interested?" I said, "Yes, please." So next thing I was on my way. And I was promoted to warrant officer while I was up there.

Were there many cases of this kind of informal non official kind of...?

32:00 I think, from my understanding yes there's a lot of that goes on. It's a case of the people in power are looking for the right person to go or impeccable person to go and the word spreads around. And I suppose the other aspect that maybe the boss wants to get rid of you so he puts you in for a posting somewhere. But generally speaking we always had our preferential posting

32:30 system in the air force where each year you filled out your bit of paper and ticked off the places you'd like to go to. And that in itself gave those in Canberra who organised the postings, an indication of your preference. And generally speaking if you left your first preference the same for long enough you'd eventually get there.

33:00 But I know when I was due to come back from Vietnam they said, "Where would you like to go?" And I'm not sure where I - I think I nominated Canberra for some unknown reason. And I think my second preference was Sydney. And I finished up at Op Com at Penrith. But I likewise when I left Woomera I was

33:30 asked where would you prefer to go and I said Queensland. And I finished up at Toowoomba, you know in a different job as I said. No, it was, I think it was a system that did work. I believe these days they do it even more so. Each person's got a - what they call - a career prospects supervisor or something.

34:00 It's gone beyond me, too technical.

Well, just back on that why did you choose Queensland after Woomera?

Well, I'd spent a lot of time in Melbourne and I knew the climate was better up north so I wanted to go up and try it out.

So you didn't want to be near your separated wife?

Well, when I left Woomera to come

34:30 to Toowoomba we were separated, well and truly. There was no hope of reconciliation so I was quite happy to go north, yeah.

And tell us why you didn't, why you would kind of want to go to Vietnam at the time?

Well, I think it was - the lot of a serviceman to travel and to go to war if he was required to. And the job that I had

35:00 in air movements was a little bit removed from rifles and bullets. And therefore could be deemed to be reasonably safe. I found out that nowhere in Vietnam was safe. But by the same token where I was was a lot safer than other places. So I had no real problems. At that age I was happy to go anywhere anyway.

35:30 So yeah the year in Vietnam didn't do me any harm at all I don't think.

What news were you hearing from Vietnam before you went?

Well, we were obviously hearing the bad news obviously that people were getting killed up there. And obviously the biggest problem they had was the mine fields, which had been lifted and shifted and used against us. There was also the

36:00 Chinese who were coming down or North Vietnamese who were coming down into Vietnam and bolstering the Viet Cong. So it was obviously going to be there for the long haul that was quite obvious. And so, I think a lot of us who went up at that time thought, oh well, it's still going to be going when we come back again. That's something which obviously did happen.

Was that a bit of a daunting prospect to face?

I don't think so.

36:30 I mean again for me it was a job, which I was doing. And as I said, a relatively safe job so, I was not really concerned one way or the other in that respect. I was more than happy to do go up there and do my year and come home again, which I did. But the job I had of course was air movements, full time. We ran a section at Ton San Nhut air base, which had, there

37:00 was a flight lieutenant and the LAC ran movement control and myself and 3 sergeants in air movement section. And we had a Caribou came through every day, 7 days a week. It came through in the morning and back through in the afternoon. And 5 days a week on its return trip we reloaded it full of fruit and vegetables for the troops at Nui Dat. And so Wednesdays

37:30 was charter day when a 707 came in with 160 air troops and then took out 160 troops. And that was a big job in itself. We've got a team of army loaders from, fellows from Vung Tau would come in for the day and they would do the baggage handling, and unload and reload the aircraft with baggage while the airmen were sent to look after the passengers and we had a

38:00 pretty small area so, the majority of the troops couldn't get into our building but they'd be sitting around the revetment or sneaking across the road to the army - the US Air Force - what do they call it - oh it was the air terminal which had quite a big cafeteria in it, so they'd get over there and have their sandwiches and what have you. But it was our busy day of the week on the

38:30 Wednesday. We had the Caribou through in the morning and then the 707 and then the Caribou back again in the afternoon. But we always had the occasional C-130 came in, generally they operated through Phang Rang and Vung Tau but occasionally they'd send them over to Saigon for specific job or whatever. So it was as I said a 7 day a week job so the flight lieutenant and I took it in turns to have a

Sunday off. So we were working a 13 day fortnight.

39:00 And that of course really kept us out of trouble you might say. But we did manage trips. I did quite a few trips on the Caribous while I was there. And we could do a north trip which'd - we left on the Tuesday, overnight to Phang Rang and then came back the next day. And the southern trip was just a one day trip down to, as far as Antoi

39:30 which was an island off the South of Vietnam and then back up to Saigon.

Tape's going to run out ...

Tape 6

00:38 **So how much time were you given in between being notified that you'd be leaving and...?**

I expect there would have been a month or so lead up. We did get a week's leave prior to departure. And it was then on the aircraft in Sydney.

01:00 And the - you will have heard of course the obvious comments that have been made about the aircraft departing Sydney at midnight to go to Vietnam to sneak the troops out and they'd sneak them back in at midnight, which wasn't the intent at all. The whole idea of leaving at midnight was to be in Singapore for breakfast, across to Saigon at lunch time which meant that the

01:30 troops going out had time to get in from where they were to Saigon for the trip out and we also had time to get the troops that are coming in on a charter out to their units before dark. And of course then those that took off from Saigon'd land back in Sydney at midnight. So the fallacy that the Government was sneaking them out at midnight and back in at midnight is not really a fallacy at all, it's an actual fact that it was done for a purpose. So that the aircraft was into Saigon in the middle of the

02:00 day when it was less likely to be any attacks and also gave the opportunity to the troops to get in from the field to the aircraft and back out again. So that was the way it went and, the first impressions of Vietnam were obviously flying in across the Mekong Delta and the paddy fields, that was something which is quite spectacular to see from the air. And we landed

02:30 flew over Saigon of course and landed at Ton San Nhut. Saigon is a big city, spread out over quite a big area. And with the Mekong River running through - oh it doesn't really run through the city, it runs across the edge of the city. And we landed at Ton San Nhut Airport which itself is a huge base. The Americans had so much infrastructure in on the

03:00 in the airfield area with their accommodation barracks and PXs [American canteen unit] and the huge mortuary, which I'll tell you about. And of course the Vietnam also had their hangar there and their aircraft. And I was amazed at the number of aircrafts that the Americans had. All sorts.

What sort of condition were they in, as in what was...?

The aircraft

03:30 of course were in, they were all flying aircrafts so they were in a good condition. The buildings and - we were housed in the, the Americans were housed in were basic structures, not unlike some of the buildings at Ubon actually, on the base there. Just a timber frame with corrugated iron. Their sleeping accommodation was basically that style.

04:00 And the reason for the accommodation - they had a lot of spare accommodation was for the R&R [Rest and Recreation] flights. They'd bring people in from all around the country. They'd have a night in the accommodation at Ton San Nhut and then board their aircraft to go to wherever they were going on their R&R. And so we got to see a fair bit of this. As I said there was a - right across the taxi way from us was the

04:30 big American air terminal which dwarfed ours - we looked like a pimple against it - it was huge. But then they were shifting a lot more people than we were and a lot more goods.

And how about the feeling in the air? What was the atmosphere like at the airport?

Well, it's - at that point in time in 1968, '69 it was reputed to be the busiest airport in the world. They had two runways - parallel runways and one was used

05:00 for landings, the other was used for take offs. And there were aircraft landing and taking off around the clock. It was - it was quite fascinating to see the aircraft, the numbers and the types lined up. And I did a few flights out of Saigon with - mainly in our Caribous and it wasn't uncommon to be in the taxi line for 15, 20 minutes to take off.

05:30 And conversely on the way in a holding pattern over the top waiting to get clearance to land. So it was, it was an extremely busy airport.

And how about the people rushing around the airport or working at the airport?

Well, of course the American predominated, there were thousands of Americans on the base. As I said to Keirnan [interviewer] there were only half a dozen of us in our Australian section. We did have a

06:00 couple of Australian army people who would come in on charter day to operate their pay section. And they would pay the army blokes going out on the flight. And of course we also had the baggage handlers who came in on that particular day. But generally speaking it was just the 6 of us there and it was a pretty happy sort of section.

And when you stepped off the plane on that first time

06:30 **and saw all of this infrastructure and people, what was running through your head?**

Well, I thought it looks like we're going to be busy for the next 12 months and we certainly were that. But again Saigon reminded me very much of Darwin, purely and simply on stepping out of the aircraft into the heat. And I've noticed that every time I've been through Darwin, it's the same. You step out of the aircraft into that real

07:00 humidity and heat. And it really strikes you.

Is there anything else that struck you like smells or...?

Well, I think - I think that's something that I probably took in my stride, the smells. I think the first - in fact I know the first time that I was ever struck by the smell of a city was when I landed in Singapore in 1964 and at that time

07:30 Singapore was a filthy city and it stank. Obviously when I went back there in later years it was a lot cleaner and it's still a lot cleaner now. But back in '64 it was pretty dirty. And so was Saigon.

Can you describe what it's like to essentially leave Sydney at midnight and by lunchtime be in Vietnam?

Well, it's again

08:00 something which was a standard pattern. As I said we landed at Singapore purely and simply, it was a refuelling stop and I think we had - I'm not sure whether we had breakfast on the aircraft or in the terminal. But an interesting point was that we had to be carrying a civilian shirt with us. So before we stepped off that aeroplane, we were travelling in khaki uniform.

08:30 We had to take our khaki shirt off put the civilian shirt on. And obviously that would've fooled nobody to see 160 blokes step off an aircraft with the uniform trousers and a civilian shirt on. But protocol required we do it that way so we did it that way.

What were the reasons behind it?

Oh, probably Singapore didn't want to be seen as transiting Australian troops going to Vietnam. Very

09:00 similar way in which change overs of aircraft between Butterworth and Ubon were done. The change over of two aircraft - two Sabres'd leave Butterworth with a Canberra bomber, they'd rendezvous with two Sabres from Ubon somewhere over Thailand and then the two from Ubon'd go back to Butterworth and the two from Butterworth'd go to Ubon. To all intents and purposes they were the same aircraft going back to Ubon and the

09:30 same aircraft going back to Butterworth. Purely and simply because the Malay Government at that time was not - or didn't want to be seen as supporting the air force contingent in Thailand. So it was all politics. It was all politics but that's the way it happened. And we went along with it obviously, we couldn't do anything else.

And is there a sense of culture shock

10:00 **going so quickly from Australia to Vietnam?**

It certainly was in Vietnam because - I think it was more pronounced because we were in an active war zone than it had been at Ubon. It was much more friendly and much more easier to take. But the - I did spend a bit of time walking around while I was in Saigon and

10:30 the odd Sunday I was off work and in Saigon I'd go perhaps down to the botanical gardens and zoo, which were in pretty bad state of repair at that time. But the locals were just like locals anywhere else. Just strolling around the gardens and enjoying picnic lunches and so forth. So it was really hard to believe at times in certain places that there was actually a war going on.

What's

11:00 **your - this is kind of a broad question - but you hear so much about Saigon through so many years of war. But what was your overall impression and the first time you were there - I guess the feeling of the city?**

Well, I found that the city was very busy. As I say there were Americans everywhere and where the

Americans are you've got the bar girls and Judo Street was the main

11:30 street basically in Saigon where the bars were. It was also where the post office was and the Basilica Cathedral was in Judo Street. And that's up one end, down the other end on the bank of the Mekong River was the - what was the name of the hotel there? It was

The Continental?

No, the Continental was in the middle of town. This was, probably come back to me. Very

12:00 old French style. And the lifts, inside with the wrought iron. Very very nice, very nice. But it was out of our area really, there was nothing there to attract us apart from - just check out the architecture and that sort of thing. But the Continental was in the middle of town and the - what

12:30 was the other one across the road from it, can't think of the name of that one either. But it had the long verandah on the ground level where the newsos and reporters used to sip their coffee or whatever.

And would you ever interact with them?

No, we didn't - I didn't really take the opportunity to get involved with the reporters and whatever there. I didn't really consider that you know

13:00 I needed to or should do. It was - I had my own job to do and when I wasn't at Ton San Nhut doing the job well, I was out sight seeing and socialising so to speak.

Were you ever about to gather an impression of the city without an American influence on it? Were there areas that were sort of ...?

Probably where we

13:30 the Australians were quartered in a hotel in Cho Lon which I think there were around, give or take around 50 of us there. There was 5, 4, 5 or 6 - probably 6 or 7 air force and one navy fellow and the rest were army. Senior NCOs and warrant officers. And the area where we were was pretty well devoid of Americans.

14:00 Probably only three or four hundred yards down the road was a big hotel where Americans were quartered. The American other ranks. And our LAC was down in that hotel because he was, couldn't stay at ours, not being a senior NCO [non commissioned officer]. But we didn't see any Americans around our particular area. But I'd say the influence was always there because

14:30 they were everywhere else and they had the ability to attract attention obviously.

And how would you describe their behaviour in general?

Americans? The Americans I struck in the city and in Saigon, generally speaking were average sort of people. They - we never saw anything along the lines of

15:00 brawls or untoward behaviour. They generally seemed to be quite okay. The Americans that I met on the base at Ton San Nhut and I met quite a few through work and social contacts - they were all - seemed to be good fellows. But the soldiers out in the sticks they were obviously a different element of - completely from what we've heard.

15:30 **And during the time you were there it was either after, just after the Tet offensive?**

It was after yes.

And so was there any echoes of that?

Not really. No, we were always aware of the fact that terrorism was a possibility. But we never ever really ran across any of it. We also were aware that the Viet Cong from time to time

16:00 would site a mortar on the outskirts and lob a few rounds in. And that was nothing unusual - that did happen. And we also knew that there was friendly artillery around the outskirts which was chucking stuff out. In fact on the top floor of our hotel we had a bit of a rest area up there and we could sit up there at night and watch the artillery incoming and outgoing and wondering

16:30 where it was going to land. The closest to our hotel in the time I was there was a street and a half away. It might have been on a school actually and destroyed a couple of buildings of the school.

Is that a bit strange sitting on top of your hotel watching a war?

Well, I suppose it's a case of - it's not really strange. I think it's of interest more than anything else. You know damn well

17:00 that if you're up there and inside when a bomb hits while you're gone anyway. And there was nothing you could do about it. But the likelihood of a mortar round or rocket hitting our hotel was you know one in a million or whatever. So it was one of those things.

And was there any sort of - you mentioned terrorism before but I suppose what you'd call now

suicide bombing really of - or sort of people

17:30 **within Saigon?**

Yes, that did happen. That also happened while I was up there. The Americans had a language school down near their billet, down the road some distance from us. And somebody, obviously Viet Cong parked a vehicle loaded with explosives outside the front of it and blew it up. I don't know that they killed too many people but they

18:00 made a hell of a lot of damage to that building. The only problem it caused us was we lost our electric power for several hours. But that was the only incident of that nature that I can recall. Booby traps were occasionally found. We had a, an army bus which used to do the run from our hotel to Free World Headquarters which was

18:30 between Cho Lon and the airport. And it would come in and pick up the 40 or 50 army blokes that were going to Free World Headquarters that day and transport them in and bring them back at night. Well, on one occasion a couple of Viet Cong on a motor scooter rode past and hooked a hand grenade onto the wire screen mesh outside the windows of the bus. But fortunately they picked an open window so the army

19:00 bloke sitting there was able to hook his finger over it and drop it back on the road way. But those sort of things did happen and I mean with any - if it had've been against a closed window well, that bus would've suffered a few casualties.

Were you on the bus?

No. No, we had our own vehicle. We had a Volkswagen Kombi van which we parked at the billet [local residents who house military] and we drove out to Ton San Nhut each day.

Did these sort of incidents of terrorism heighten the

19:30 **tension a little bit?**

Well, I expect there was always a feeling in the back of the mind that you know, we might not get home. But I think the general understanding was, that typical, probably Australian fashion it won't happen to me. And I think that's, I think most of our people anyway reacted pretty well much the same way to me.

From your observations who was in control of the city?

20:00 **Was it sort of an American military control or was there much evidence of Vietnamese police control?**

There was - no the Vietnamese police, the white mice as they were called, they were definitely in control, there's no ways about that. Obviously there could have been an American influence behind them. I'm not sure of that I'm not aware of that. But the white mice they were very evident.

20:30 And they had no compunction whatsoever of using their weapons. We had an incident on our way back from Ton San Nhut one afternoon we - the LAC was driving and I was sitting in the back with the others. And a cyclo motorised trishaw pulled out from the curb, banged into the side of our vehicle.

21:00 And I said to the driver just keep driving. And the next thing this shot went over the top of us and the white mice had decided we had to stop so obviously we stopped. And of course then we had the problem, that we couldn't speak Vietnamese and they couldn't speak English so we were at a stand to. And shortly the truck with the - some of the Australian troops from Free World, the other ranks it came through. So

21:30 I gave their driver and yell and said, get the MPs [Military Police] back here and around about that the white mice disappeared so we just continued on. But it was - again there was no danger involved in that it was just the fact that they were quite prepared to loose off a shot in the middle of the bloody city which I thought was a bit ridiculous. The bullet's going to land somewhere and God knows who's it going to hit.

So they didn't - the white mice didn't have a problem exerting control over

22:00 **Australian or American troops either?**

Well, I don't think they had any control over us as such, except in the case of - if obviously we did something wrong well, they could pull the gun on, like they did on that incident. But then without somebody who can speak English amongst their group there wasn't much that could be done. And our MPs

22:30 the army's MPs were pretty strong on the ground. There were quite a few of them around and they were pretty quick to pick up these sort of situations. In fact we had nights out where we'd get an escort because there was a curfew in Saigon of course, ten o'clock. And if we were going to be staying out later than ten o'clock somewhere at a social function or whatever we'd always get an MP escort home.

23:00 **So even along the bar - like the strip where all the bars were and stuff was it 10 o'clock curfew?**

Yes, yeah.

Why's that?

I would assume only because of the threat of Viet Cong.

What was the city like after curfew on the times that you were out?

Pretty quiet. It was very quiet. Yeah, there was very few lights about and there was no traffic to speak of.

23:30 And obviously no pedestrians.

Were there ever times where, you've sort of obviously working at the airport and that sort of thing it was - the war was always there, but was there a feeling in Saigon of almost being, like an enclave away from what was going on in other provinces?

Well, I would say yes that's probably the way it was, that we considered ourselves to be away from the fighting which we were

24:00 generally speaking although there were some pretty fierce fire fights in a very close vicinity to Saigon. And - but again it was a situation where you never knew who the enemy was. And anybody walking around in Vietnam could be a Viet Cong by night and a farmer by day or whatever. And that was

24:30 probably the worst part of the uncertainty with not knowing who was who.

Did this stop you at all sort of getting involved in Vietnamese culture or getting to know the - that sort of uncertainty?

No, no there was a - a very easy going attitude. I took up scouting in Toowoomba while I was there and I made

25:00 friends with some scouters in Vietnam at this particular school which was bombed. They had a scout group there and I got involved with them on a sort of a - visiting nature. And tended a few of their ceremonies and some of their parades. And in the September I was invited down to Vung Tau to a scouter's camperee - there were two other Australians, about four Americans

25:30 and I suppose probably about 30 or 40 Vietnamese scout leaders at that camperee and it was one of those little extras that I consider as being a bonus on the trip because it was a great time.

How would scouting come to Vietnam?

Obviously scouting has always been in Vietnam, oh as long as scouting's been scouting I think. It's something which I believe has gone now under the

26:00 Communist rule I would expect it's gone but at that time it was very strong and we had scouters come down from Nui Da Nang, far north of South Vietnam for the camp - it was a really good gathering.

And what was your impressions of Vung Tau?

Well, I had quite a few visits to Vung Tau. Quite often on my Sydney off I'd get the last flight down on Saturday afternoon and then I'd fly all around Vietnam the next

26:30 day with a Caribou and then back first flight Monday morning. So I had quite a few overnights in Vung Tau. It was a dusty hole and it was a red dust. And whilst we had sheets on the beds they were red. They were no longer white and - but it was

27:00 quite a nice place. They had an open air cinema. There was also a TV which was pretty restricted on what you could watch. I mean there was the forces network and so forth.

What's on the force's network?

Oh, have you ever seen a show Good Morning Vietnam? Yeah, that sort of stuff.

27:30 Yeah, it's ah, something that we did have a TV at the hotel. I never used to watch much of it. I'd rather listen to tapes or radio. But Vung Tau as I said it had, it had the cinema and probably the most horrifying experience I had was in the cinema when all of a sudden the PA [Personal address] system blares out, "Incoming , incoming!"

28:00 and next minute there's a scramble. And of course the rockets were incoming but they landed down the other end of the airfield. And that I thought was probably the most terrifying aspect of my time up there, was the fact that I was told that there was rockets coming in. As I said in Saigon they were coming in periodically but we didn't know about it so you didn't worry about it. But being told they're coming in, oh what could we do?

And what like it wasn't

28:30 **an air base you were familiar with? Did you know where you had - what the procedure was if there was an incoming?**

Yeah, they had their bunkered areas around the place but it all happened so quickly that most of us in the cinema just got down on the concrete floor and stayed there.

What movie were you watching?

Oh, couldn't remember now. Obviously wasn't that good otherwise I would've remembered.

And what sort of movies would they show generally?

29:00 Oh, mostly probably not real current stuff. You know run of the mill movies that go around the circuit. And it's pretty much the same. There'd be a mix of whatever's that had been around the circuit and I'm pretty sure they came through the Australian services - Australian forces overseas fund probably

29:30 would've provided them. Or the canteen's fund, one or the other. And they go out on the C-130s and do the circuit. They go to Vung Tau they go to Phan Rang and maybe the officers' mess in Saigon might have had movies. We had them occasionally at our place, at our pub but again, I didn't always go down and see them.

And what was the beach like at Vung Tau?

30:00 It was a very nice beach. They had you know, plenty of white sand a fair length of it, it was very nice. Phan Rang also had a good beach but it was off the base and because of the activity around Phan Rang the base was more often closed than open, so getting from the Phan Rang base to the beach was generally not real easy.

30:30 **And say if you were heading to Vung Tau was it sort of protocol that you'd only go and stay at an air force base? You couldn't go to an army base or something like that?**

Generally speaking I always stayed at the air force base at Vung Tau, that was where I knew the people and they knew me and they knew when I was arriving they had a bed ready for me somewhere. So I had no worries there. I did spend a few overnights at Nui Dat which was the army base.

31:00 I got involved with a few of the fellows from the Intelligence Division there and used to go down and stay with them on occasion just for an overnight. But that was another one of the little jollies I used to take.

I'll come back and ask about that. But just a few more questions about scouting. Tell me about some of the things that went on at the camp that you went to?

It was very

31:30 well organised. They had series of games and a series of training exercises. There was a campfire overnight, that night. And the meals were Vietnamese and I managed to survive that without any problem. And generally speaking it was fun weekend and it was - we were very

32:00 pleased I did go to it because it was a great opportunity.

Were there any differences in between American, Australian and Vietnamese scouting law?

No, I don't think so. I think the Americans were probably a little bit more ... probably what would say, a bit more gaudy in their dress. Heaps of badges. Oh, very striking badges

32:30 they wear. That of course is something which I didn't take any scouting apparel with me at all. Whereas the other two Australians and the Americans all had their scout uniforms with them which sort of surprised me a little bit but they were obviously better prepared than I was.

I guess I've always associated scouts with like my younger brothers did. Is there much of

33:00 **the scouting tradition amongst older people. I guess I've always just - I'm interested in what age groups there were in this scout camp?**

Well, they were all scout leaders, scout master as such. So they ranged probably from late teens through to fifties. There was a broad mix and there were ladies as well, women as well. In Vietnam

33:30 they have lady scout leaders as well as lady cub leaders. Which was a little bit different to what it was here. Although I think that's changed also now - they have lady scout leaders here.

And did this - sort of being able to bound through scouts help you to get to know anything more I guess about the Vietnamese culture or people?

It certainly did - I had several invitations while I was

34:00 over there to attend functions and dinners and other similar things with the scout leaders. And it was very very interesting and it made a - what I might say - a big change to a lifestyle, you might say, to see how the others actioned.

And in what kind of ways

34:30 **what sort of things did you observe?**

Well, they had - you wouldn't call them rituals I suppose - but they had different ways of conducting their social functions and it was - of course one of my biggest problems was not understanding the language. I was reliant on the chap that I had first met who spoke English to be able to

35:00 tell me what was going on in lot of cases.

And would you ever - obviously the language barrier was a problem but discuss the situation of the war, what their point of view was?

Not greatly. The fellow that spoke English I spoke to him about it more or less - he was working for the Americans as a - I think he was in

35:30 the psychological area and probably liaising between Vietnamese forces and the American forces. So he was not only an English speaker but he was working for the Americans and with the Americans so was more up into that area of speech.

And he didn't really get into any politically motivated discussions?

No, not really no. We didn't really discuss the

36:00 war at any great length. Our interest was scouting and that's what we stuck to, basically.

It's so interesting to go on a scout camp?

Oh, well, I thought it was a great opportunity and in meeting the other Australians there was also a bonus. I have met one of them since, he's living down in Albury and the third one he died 3 years ago I suppose. Yeah, it'd be 3 years now.

36:30 Which I found surprising as he was quite a bit younger than me. But anyway.

Just another question. You're - the kombi van that your team had. Was it painted army colours or was it...?

No, no it was a faded old red and white one actually, initially. We did get a replacement probably about half way through my tour we got a

37:00 proper air force colour, you know dark blue kombi wagon. The one that we had when we got there was an old faded red and white one. Red on top and white - oh grey I suppose around the bottom of it. And of course it was a right hand drive like our vehicles here and of course you drive left hand over there. So we were always driving in the gutter, which made it a bit different.

How was the traffic?

Chaotic.

37:30 The motor scooters and the motorised siklau's they were, clogged the road up and the smoke fumes. It was probably - that did my health more damage in Vietnam than anything else did. Smoke fumes in Saigon.

And so you enjoyed I suppose

38:00 **a relative amount of freedom around Saigon?**

Yes, yes we did. On quite a few occasions on the way back to the billet from Ton San Nhut I'd get out of the vehicle 2 or 3 miles from the billet and walk from there with a camera and take different streets. And take photos of whatever caught my fancy. So it was an opportunity - there were no restrictions on our travel during

38:30 curfew hours, out of curfew hours. And so - but by the same token I was a bit more careful at night time in the dark. So generally speaking, daylight hours go for walks all around the place but stay at home at night.

And would you ever visit the bars?

Not really, no. We had a very good bar at our hotel and - in fact we had Johnny O'Keefe there

39:00 on one occasion. He came up with a concert party and entertained us in the downstairs area, which was quite interesting. And we also had the opportunity mid year to entertain Keith Pane and Simmo, the two VC [Victoria Cross] winners. They won their VCs and were pulled out of the bush and they stayed a couple of nights with us before returning home to Australia.

What sort

39:30 **of things did you talk to them about?**

Oh, they were pretty quiet, they weren't real talkative at that point in time. They obviously had a few mates army mates who would've been at the hotel billeted there so they pretty well stuck with them. I did get to meet them but that was about the extent of it.

So there was up there about 50 Australians in the the hotel?

Well, more or less, yeah.

40:00 The figures changed from time to time as people went and people came but there would've been around about 50 yeah.

Did this provide a good interaction between the different forces?

Well, it certainly did between navy and the air force because we were that far outnumbered. We sort of adopted a navy bloke and that make 7 out of 50 or whatever it was. But we had our duties which we had to perform at the hotel. We had

40:30 a guard duty as such. We did have a Vietnamese soldier on duty at the front of the laneway which guarded our entrance into the hotel. But they - we also had a duty officer at the hotel itself. We had a radio set up and we had to check in periodically with Free World Headquarters and so that was a bit of a bind but with the 40 or 50 whatever

41:00 there was of us it didn't come around too often so it was easy enough to put up with.

We'll just stop there...

Tape 7

00:38 **Okay I'll start at just the day to day aspects of your role at the airport, what exactly you were doing?**

The - oh an important aspect of our job was the Caribous in effect. We had the Caribou would come through from Vung Tau of a morning, call into Nui Dat, then into Saigon.

01:00 And from there it would have a different day a different task. And generally those tasks were set by the American system. Then I think it was Tuesdays I think they went north around various airfields to Phan Rang and overnight at there and then came back the next day through other airfields. And I think it was probably Thursdays that they went

01:30 down to Can Tho in the south and back again. I'll mention the charters on Wednesday. Weekends, we still had the Caribou coming through but it did the - what were they doing? I'm not quite sure exactly what the Caribous did at the weekends. They certainly came through Saigon

02:00 cause we were there 7 days a week. But on my days off I'd go down to Vung Tau on the last flight on Saturday, fly around on Sundays and then come back on the first flight Monday. Which made for an interesting day out actually.

What's a Caribou like?

A Caribou is a twin engine propeller driven, high wing.

02:30 It has a very open fuselage with a ramp at the back and it seat all up about 34 troops, people. It could probably carry up to, I'd say from memory about 3 tonne. It's good for short haul - it gets into small strips, specialises in grass strips actually, it's very

03:00 good for that. And we did a lot of that on the Sundays - we'd fly - on the boring days you'd fly to a bigger airfield where Hercules would have unloaded 44-gallon petrol drums. We'd load 13 or 14, just roll them up the middle of the Caribou, and tie them in. Fly probably 30 or 40 miles or whatever, drop into a little grass strip and unload the fuel drums.

03:30 And then back - probably do 6 or 7 trips in a day so it was a pretty boring routine. But other trips we'd head off from Vung Tau and it would be virtually on call to the Americans. There'd be a load to go somewhere and we'd get there unload it, and they'd say well, pick up something or go somewhere and pick something else up. And you never knew where you were going to be all day which made it more interesting.

Was there any hair-raising experiences of landing in certain places or being

04:00 **shot at?**

Not in my case, no I didn't experience any of that. But a few of the aircraft did. There were a few cases of being fired upon and damaged aircraft. I don't think there were any really bad ones that I had but I did have the opportunity on a couple of occasions to make use of the movie camera and film the fuel drum situation.

04:30 And the way of discharging the fuel drums was quite intriguing. I used to travel as assistant labour master and the labour master would be in charge of unloading. Normal procedure was we'd land on this little strip, reverse into the fuel dump at the appropriate time the pilot'd give the order we'd release the straps and he would move

05:00 the aircraft forward and the drums'd just fly out the back one after the other. Which was quite exciting. So on a couple of occasions on a quiet day where they knew the strip was safe they'd let me out and I'd go back and film the whole episode. But apart from that not much excitement at all for me and apart from that a damn good day's flying around.

05:30 **What did you enjoy about the flying?**

Oh, just the opportunity to see different places. I generally always had a chance to get behind the controls and do a bit of flying myself which I enjoyed doing. So I did have a pilot's license at that time, civilian pilot's license so most of the pilots knew me and so they'd say, "Have a go." Away we'd

06:00 go, it was good.

Would you land?

I did once, only the once at Saigon. And it was very simple. I imagine the skipper was keeping a very close eye and probably helping perhaps, I'm not sure about that. But it seemed to work out very easily.

You're landing in Saigon, one of the busiest airports?

Oh, yeah but we were cleared, we had our space and so there was no problem there it was

06:30 a good long strip and plenty of room. They obviously weren't going to let me have a go on one of these grass strips that's for sure.

So tell us about your role in air movement, what exact task would you do as a plane starts flying in?

Well, obviously we would know what was coming into us and we would know what was going out. So whatever was going out be it freight or troops we would

07:00 have them ready or the freight ready. The aircraft would land and generally they had a schedule. We'd move any troops or passengers on board out and over to the terminal and we'd remove whatever freight had to come off. We'd then load whatever freight had to go on and probably one of our - apart from the last aircraft of the day which took out the two or three tonne of vegetables the

07:30 main thing we shifted was mail and that was Vietnamese mail, going around to the different spots. So we'd have all of that ready and we'd change it over and as I said there was only myself and three sergeants. So we had to do all the work ourselves which meant humping crates of whatever, bags of whatever and shifting people and so it was a physical job which

08:00 was of no problem I think in those days. We were all fit enough to handle it so it went over quite well. And the reasoning for the rank structure at the air movement section I've never gathered why it was that way but it was so we did it, got on with it.

What was the rank structure again?

One warrant officer and three sergeant. Normally an air load team has a corporal and three or four LACs.

08:30 So it would've - probably it may have had something to do with the accommodation aspects. The fact that the accommodation for the LAC was a problem. There was only the two choices, there was the American billet down the road from where we were which meant he was handy enough for us to transport or the army the other ranks billet in Cho Lon which

09:00 I don't know how one lone air force bloke'd go with them. But that - I'm not sure why they did it that way but that's how it was.

How would you interact with the army?

Oh, we got on okay with them. We had, as I say we had the army people used to come out on charter days and we'd work with them, no problem at all, it was quite okay. And of course we had our periodic Friday

09:30 afternoons was a good opportunity. We used to drive into - finish at Ton San Nhut and drive into Free World Headquarters and meet with the rest of the Australian contingent in there for a few drinks and whatever tit bits they had on for chewing on.

Was there ever any talk of a growing kind of opposition to the war?

Well, we were aware that there were problems at home.

10:00 But again we sort of looked at that as something that didn't affect us so much. We were there doing our job and what the do gooders at home did was their business. And it really wasn't until they started to actively demonstrate against the troops that we started to feel a little bit annoyed about that aspect.

Well, tell us about that?

10:30 Well, I think the incident that really brought it out into the open was the occasion where the battalion was marching through Sydney and some protestor came out and threw red paint over the officer, in commanding which again, is something which should never have happened. I mean the troops are doing what they're told to do. Any demonstration and any protest should have been against the government not the troops.

11:00 And this was brought out very vividly recently with the position in Iraq when I was asked in my position at the RSL [Returned and Services League], what our attitude was to the sending of our troops to Iraq. And I said quite clearly that the servicemen were doing what they were told to do and that the RSL was sticking by the policy,

11:30 which at that time was that the Australians shouldn't go without United Nations sanction and that if there was any protest at all it should be against the government and not against the troops. And fortunately at this time there was no protest against the troops.

Do you think there was a great confusion at the time on this?

I think there was I think confusion yes, and I think that was probably mainly due to

12:00 perhaps misinformation, misinformation where by some certain members of the government or the opposition, took it upon themselves to champion a cause which was or was not right, I'm not going to get into the politics of it but there were a couple of politicians who led protests and I think that

12:30 again that the protest should have been against the government not the individual troops.

What kind of things would they say which would lead to that confusion do you think?

Well, I'm not really sure in what way that could have been done but all I understand is that the politicians were there leading the protestors and I think that's again

13:00 the protest should not have been against the troops, I mean they were only doing their job.

And how would this make the troops feel?

Well, it was again a repeat of the wharfies strike and the posties strike. The troops weren't very impressed with the way that the protestors were behaving and being in a position where they were unable to do anything about it

13:30 just made things more frustrating. And the anger rose naturally and we were in a situation where we don't like it but we can't do anything about it.

Did any of the troops ever question the government's stance?

Not that I'm aware of. I think the - I'm pretty sure that with the

14:00 regular forces that's army navy - air force, navy and half the army they were there doing the job that they were in the force to do. The National Servicemen I understand did volunteer to go to Vietnam, they weren't sent against their will. So generally speaking that the majority of the National Servicemen were there doing the job

14:30 that their country had asked them to do. I do believe there was who rebelled and that's about all I can say on that. I know there was one that rebelled and he suffered the consequences for that. But generally speaking I think all of the - all servicemen regular and national service did the job that they were asked to do willingly.

What did you think of

15:00 **the involvement yourself of Australia?**

Well, I think again the initial reason for us becoming involved was the same reason that we were in Ubon, was the countering the domino effect in South East Asia. It was seen at the time that if the North Vietnamese had've overrun South Vietnam they would've then invaded

15:30 Laos and Cambodia and then obviously pursued their course into Thailand and Burma and Malaya. That was the theory at the time and that's the reason why the air force were at Ubon to protect Thai air space and that's the reason why we became involved with the Vietnam war. Purely and simply to get communism out of the rest of South East Asia.

And did you believe this was true?

In hindsight

16:00 I'd say that it probably wasn't however I'm no expert in that sort of thing. So all I could say is that you know, in hindsight it's probably the fact that we could not have or we may not have been involved. Or if we had not got ourselves involved then it may not have happened anyway but we don't know.

Were there decisions made which maybe could've

16:30 **stopped this opposition or not had this opposition grow in the first place?**

In Australia?

No, with the conduct of the Vietnam War was there something, were there decisions made that perhaps maybe led to some of the protest in your view?

Well, I - looking at it from a military point of view I think the major problem in Vietnam itself was the fact that the Americans weren't given a free hand.

17:00 They would use their intelligence, they would sort out what they needed to do to defeat the enemy and by the time they got it cleared through the South Vietnamese network it was too late. My understanding is if the Americans had've had a free hand that they would've cleaned up a lot earlier and got out of it with a win instead of a loss.

Did you see aspects of this at the time yourself?

17:30 Not at the time no. No, this is, this is all stuff that's come out in recent years really.

Did you see aspects of it do you think, aspects of the way the war was being fought, that at the time you thought was unusual or felt was restrictive perhaps?

Not really. In our role we were strictly air force air movements at Ton San Nhut. We - some of us - well, I in particular took the opportunity

18:00 to go around and see things and look at things. But even so even though I attended a briefing at Nui Dat with the commanders there, even then it was only local and they were just talking about the particular area around Nui Data which Phouc Tuy Province which the Australians were responsible for. And the Australians had Phouc Tuy

18:30 under control basically speaking as well as they could. Whereas it was other areas in Vietnam where the Americans were having problems. That the factor of not having a free hand sort of dealt them a blow there. So really we were I think to a certain extent shielded from what was actually going on in those other areas which we weren't involved

19:00 in.

Was there also some approaches of the Americans that you noticed which maybe weren't winning over the population or anything of this nature?

Yes, there were certainly those aspects were coming to light and I'm not sure when it happened, whether it was before during or after I was there the My Lai incident where they wiped out a village of civilians.

19:30 That really did upset the apple cart in no mean order. On my understanding, there were villages in Vietnam who hated the Americans and wished they were gone and probably defected to the Viet Cong to give them a bit of a push. But that was one of those

20:00 aspects which obviously we had no control of anyway.

Did you hear anything of this sort at the time?

I don't recall having heard it at the time. Probably a lot of what I'm saying is coming from hindsight rather than what we actually knew at the time.

Did you see anything of the - this is later in the war - any of that kind of

20:30 **breaking up of the US forces, drug culture coming in?**

Well, that was very prominently spread around the media, the drug problem in Vietnam. And whilst I never actually saw any of it myself or even heard of it while I was there, it's quite obvious from magazines and books that I've read since that it was pretty rife and there's no way in the world that an army can fight

21:00 with that problem cause I mean the smell of the drug or the cigarettes or whatever the Americans were smoking whilst on patrol would penetrate around the jungle and would warn any enemy that they were there. And would certainly set them up for ambush or whatever.

Is it strange on reflection that a lot of this stuff that we read about and hear about you -

21:30 **when you were there at the time you don't necessarily know about?**

Yes, I can be fully aware of that. I mean most of our news from home came in a photocopied booklet of

newspaper clippings from the Australian papers. And that was circulated - I know we certainly saw it at Ton San Nhut - it would have been through Free World Headquarters and

22:00 it always gave us an update of what was being printed in Australian papers. We also received copies of the American newspapers that filtered around through the region, I think it was probably the Pacific Stars and Stripes or something. So that way we were kept up to date with what was happening around us but then we were not necessarily being told

22:30 some of the other things that were happening around particularly like the drug situation. I don't know that that would have been in the papers or whatever so, but we were certainly getting news items for sure. Whether they were pertinent to ourselves or not is - you only read what you want to read.

Would you hear anything of the sort of agent orange?

That didn't come out until later I'm quite sure.

23:00 I know that was happening while I was there and there was no thought at the time that there was going to be any danger from it and that started to come out in later years I'm sure.

So tell us about the scene, you did briefly, of the airport. Like being the busiest airport in the world. I mean that aspect of troops. Like how many people

23:30 **were there, were they everywhere?**

They were - on a charter day as I said we had 160 come in and 160 going out. That's just on our one aircraft. In support of that we had to get those 160 troops into the airport and out again after the charter and that was done utilising our own Caribous who flew depending on the loads to Nui Dat

24:00 Vung Tau and Phan Rang. I probably didn't mention, you may or may not know, but we had a squadron of Canberra bombs at Phan Rang and we had our two squadrons at Vung Tau, the helicopters and the Caribous. Plus the major army detachment at - or not detachment the task force at Nui Dat. So depending on the work load to each place we'd either use our own Caribous or

24:30 we'd get in American C-123s or C-130s and we would load those troops onto those aircraft and unload them in the morning coming in and load them going out in the afternoon. So that was all organised by the movement control set up in conjunction with the army to ascertain numbers and aircraft requirements. So that was charter day. Ordinary

25:00 days there were always R&R flights going so there'd be Americans everywhere and the Australian forces were always allocated X number of seats on every R&R flight so we always had people coming in to go on R&R or people coming back from R&R so they filtered in through the system. And invariably in those cases would travel on our Caribous, they were regular Caribou. And

25:30 generally speaking the majority I suppose of the other aircraft which were flying most of the sorties in and out of Saigon would have been the Phantoms, specialist transport aircraft. They had I think, on their VIP ramp about five or six Lear jets which are a very nice little aeroplane which they used for VIP transport and or admin transport

26:00 that sort of thing. To cart a general off to see somebody. And then there was - I mentioned earlier Air Vietnam - they had their complex across the - further down the strip from us and they were flying DC4s, DC3s and I can't recall what else at the present time but they were their main ones, the 3s and 4s. And helicopters of course.

26:30 Iroquois were all over the place. Chinooks they had Chinooks flying in and out. So it was a busy airfield.

What kind of people used the Lear jets?

Oh, senior officers generally speaking. I think they'd be utilised for flights around Vietnam perhaps or through Thailand, Hawaii and

27:00 wherever they needed to go. They were a very nice little aircraft.

Anyone of note came in, anyone famous?

Well, not that I'm aware of. We had no control over those - they were parked on the next strip. In fact, we had the American C-130s parked between us and the Lear jets and at any one time there'd be ten or a dozen

27:30 C-130s parked there. There were Star Lifters and C-133s, they were - what'd they call them? Can't remember what they called them now but they were big aircraft quite often used for aerial refuelling or cargo or whatever. So it was a busy airport and we had our little half acre of ground and

28:00 oh in fact it was even less than that - probably a quarter acre. And that's where we spent most of our time.

Do you notice something about the demeanour and look of the troops coming in as opposed to the troops leaving. Can you describe that for us?

Well, I would say that generally speaking you could say that the troops coming in were rather apprehensive and wondering what the hell they were getting themselves into. And the troops going out

28:30 had big smiles on their faces, they were damn well glad to be out of there. Almost certain.

Did they look different?

Oh yes, yes you could certainly tell the greenhorn coming in and the old trooper going out. Yes, they were very different.

How?

Well, I think in their attitude and their reaction to the situation and as I say one coming in wondering what was going to happen and the other going out knowing,

29:00 "I've been there, I've done that, now I'm going home."

Was there a physical looking difference?

Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say there was a physical look. I think probably the fellow who'd been in Vietnam was probably a little bit more sun tanned than the bloke who was coming in, depending on where the bloke coming in had come from of course. But generally speaking the fellow going out obviously had the look of

29:30 12 months of Vietnam about him.

Do you reckon they looked older than by more than a year?

Oh, I don't know about that. I expect that some probably would have aged a bit in the time depending on their job and their situation and what they'd actually been through I suppose. Obviously anybody who's in a combat situation being shot at and shooting at people is going to react differently

30:00 to somebody like myself spent the year on Ton San Nhut.

There was a morgue at the airport wasn't there?

Oh, huge, yes it was.

Describe that for us?

Well, I can do that because one of the first jobs that I got when I was there was in my handover, I had a week's handover, takeover with the previous warrant officer. And he said what will happen is that when we have Australian bodies

30:30 to go back to Australia he said they'll be at the morgue. He said your job will be to go over to check out, identify make sure everything's in order and arrange for the casket to be brought across to our air force terminal on the morning of the flight out. The casket or caskets are then loaded onto the Caribou and go down to Vung Tau where they'd loaded onto the Hercules for Australia.

31:00 So I said okay I'll go along with that. So we went over to the morgue and he introduced me to the Yanks over there and who I'd be dealing with. And he said come on I'll show you what it's all about. And so we went out into the morgue area itself and I've never seen so many marble slabs in my life in one place. There would've had to be hundreds of them and of course some of them had an occupant, and I don't really have a weak stomach but I felt sick over that one.

31:30 And I only did it, I think on two or three occasions after that and I said to the boss, look this is ridiculous I don't need to do this. I can go over to the morgue, I can talk to the blokes, and I can get the paperwork. Check and make sure it's the same paperwork for the bloke that we're looking for. I said I don't need that, I don't need to go and identify that body because I've never seen the bloke before. So what am I identifying. And so for the rest of my time I didn't

32:00 go into the morgue itself. But it was a horrendous place as far as I was concerned.

Does the kind of sight really bring home what a war is?

Oh, it does, it does. And probably one of the worst aspects of the Vietnam war was the fact that most, probably I could say most of the deaths were caused by mines. And I mean a clean bullet hole is a clean bullet hole but when half a head's blown away or legs are blown away and that sort of thing

32:30 it's a mess. It doesn't look at all nice so, and that's - it was brought about by the Australian's own actions in laying a mine field which the Viet Cong had picked up and carted elsewhere and set up traps for the Australians. And that was one of our biggest blunders in the Vietnam war I'd say.

What exactly would happen?

Well, they decided that the -

33:00 to lay this mine field from Point A to Point B - it was from the coast in towards Nui Dat to form a barrier to stop the Viet Cong coming through. But the Viet Cong were smart enough to be able to sneak in and

lift up those mines and cart them off and reuse them against their own troops. But it was probably thought out in the right

33:30 sense but it just wasn't practical. They didn't work.

Do those images stay with you at all?

I haven't lost them, no I haven't lost them. And I think that's probably would have to be the worse thing that I saw over there. And I've got no intention whatsoever getting into that position again.

Were there, how many bodies were there in this place?

Well, I'd say at

34:00 any one time there was probably 20 or 30 or more even. It would depend on the situation. We had our worst, our worst lost while I was there was 7, 7 in one hit. And we had 7 caskets in the Caribou to go out, which took up one side and we had troops on the other side who were travelling with them. And it wasn't a nice feeling at all.

34:30 It was something that had to be done of course. They had every right to come back to Australia and be buried out here rather than be left at Terendak where we have other deceased. And the condition of the Terin Gap, no Terendak War Cemetery in Malaya is reputed to be not well kept. It's kept well enough I suppose but

35:00 being on a military base it's not really assessable to relatives and makes a bit of a bind. But I think we have the first few from Vietnam conflict are buried at Terendak but the rest have come home to Australia where they should be.

It must be quite a weird scenario travelling with caskets?

Well, this is right yes. It was just unfortunate that those troops happened to be on the same aircraft

35:30 but they were there for the trip. They were probably going to Nui Dat where the caskets would've gone on to Vung Tau.

Did they say anything about it?

No, they were pretty blasé. I think that's probably a normal reaction to something like that, you say to yourself, well, that's not me.

And those memories they've stayed with you.

36:00 **Have they haunted you at all?**

I don't say that they've haunted me, not really. I haven't had flashbacks as such. But it's just occasionally something pops up and I think of it but of course I try and dismiss it again as quickly as it arrives. But that's the best part of history now I suppose, hopefully.

How did the way the Australians

36:30 **operated the Australian air force operate compared to what you saw the Americans operating at the airport?**

From all accounts much more efficiently. I can vouch for the Caribous and the work they did, I know what they did. I'm not really certain how they stake up against the American Caribous but I think they would've been more efficiently handled there's no problem there.

37:00 History tells us that Canberra bombers in Phan Rang have the best bombing record of any American unit. And the Iroquois from Vung Tau they've also got an excellent record in both medical evacuation which they did a lot of and also once they converted a few of their Iroquois to gunships they've got a very good record as well. So I think really the

37:30 Australian air force is in a situation where it has limited aircraft and therefore must operate more efficiently than the Americans who have heaps of aircraft and don't need really to work that efficiently because they've got plenty of aircraft to operate with.

How does that effect the way they operate, exactly what do they do?

Well, they're - from what I've seen and I

38:00 have travelled with the Americans a couple of times while I was up there - they were - I wouldn't call them slack but they're not as efficient as our aircrew that's for sure.

How does this manifest itself like in the way they handle equipment or unload, does it effect any of that?

I don't know that there's a great deal of difference there. Generally speaking the

38:30 unloading and loading of aircraft is a laid down procedure but generally put out by the aircraft

manufacturer himself and adapted to suit loads that may be different and, as I mentioned earlier, our airmen training and development at Richmond is reasonably well, expert in the packing of transport and unloading of military equipment in air force aircraft.

39:00 **Did this effect like their supplies like just in general things like living supplies or...?**

No, again most of our supplies coming in were either technical for the aircraft or in some cases domestic for the barracks or whatever. But again a lot of local purchase was utilised and

39:30 local materials and - most of the food I think we came in - we got from the Americans - came in from Taiwan or America itself. Eggs were a problem, they were preserved eggs. Milk was dehydrated and we'd get it in 20 litre bags. Fruit, we'd get fruit from America, vegetables from Taiwan. So a lot of that didn't come in from Australia.

40:00 But there were other things. We'd get a consignment of Four and Twenty Pies from Australia which was great news. And of course curries and whatever we'd get from Butterworth. We'd do a little bit of our cooking. So we had all of those avenues open to us.

We have to change the tape...

Tape 8

00:36 **You were just making a few comparisons between Australian and American aircrews. Do you have any impressions or comparisons about the South Vietnamese air force?**

As far as I'm aware the only air force - Vietnamese air force

01:00 people that I saw in - flying in actual fact were in smaller aircraft was the Sky Raider and the Cessna ... Mosquitos I think they were called - not Mosquitos - Dragonflies. They were a small jet aircraft, very low, they didn't carry a huge amount of

01:30 rocketry and bombs and stuff. So in effect the only South Korean air force people that I'm aware of were flying fighter aircraft so to speak. The Sky Raider was an old propeller driven single engine aircraft but it was very effective in the ground strafing role and was used quite extensively by the Vietnamese air force yeah.

And you mentioned at the airport at Saigon you were based near a

02:00 **South Vietnamese...?**

Oh, Air Vietnam that was the civilian airline, Vietnam civilian airline.

How much was that operating?

They were flying regular, regular routes around, through South East Asia. In fact, when I left Vietnam it was on an Air Vietnam flight to Phnom Penh actually. That's another story that one.

Okay, we'll get there. And you mentioned

02:30 **before the Free World Headquarters. Can you explain to me what this was like?**

It was a - quite a large building in it's own grounds and it housed the administrative offices of the Free World Countries who were assisting America in the war against the communists. So in effect there was Australians, New Zealanders,

03:00 Koreans, Thais, they would've been the main ones. There would've been probably other nations involved but I can't recall off the top of my head what they were. But that was the headquarters for all of the allies who were with America in Vietnam. The Americans of course had their own headquarters at Ton San Nhut Airport. They had a huge complex

03:30 there.

And what was the atmosphere like in the Free World Headquarters?

I think it was - what you'd find in any headquarters building. Obviously there was separate sections for each of the different countries. We very rarely went in there except on the occasional Friday night that we went in for the drinking session. And then it was only with mainly our own people. Mainly just the air force contingent.

04:00 Sometimes we mixed with the army, Australian Army but generally speaking, it was just the air force contingent.

And was it a military establishment or a political one?

Oh, no definitely a military, yep.

So in terms of the forces who was kind of in charge there?

Well, each of the countries had their own officer commanding of their particular contingent. And I'm not sure

04:30 just what went on in the building itself because I was never involved in that side of it, but I do know that our boss was an air commander who had a big palatial house in Saigon and he was in charge of our air force contingent at Free World Headquarters. Now obviously there would've been a navy contingent and an army contingent as well. I'm not sure who was in charge of

05:00 them, they would've had their own commanders.

And you mentioned that you had to check in there, once a week or so?

Oh, no not at Free Word - no we'd go there if we needed something or we had a requirement to but generally speaking on I suppose, I think it was once a month they had a Friday drink session where we'd all go in and have a few drinks, and social meeting more than anything else.

Was it a good sort of occasion?

Oh, yeah

05:30 always very friendly with the officers down to the troops, yeah.

How about did this incorporate all of the free world troops or just Australians?

No, just the Australian air force in particular, in this particular instance yes.

Did you have much interaction with say New Zealand troops?

Not a great deal. I did know a couple of the Kiwi air force people who were at Ton San Nhut. They had their own little

06:00 section out there. I'm not really sure just exactly what they had now. It would've been an air movement section similar to us to look after their aircraft that came through. They had, I know the Bristol Freighter from Singapore would come across to do it's embassy run and when it lobbed into Saigon it would be looked after by the New Zealand air movements. But we met a couple of their people on social occasions at

06:30 Ton San Nhut generally, either at their place or ours.

And we were talking a bit earlier about the PX, the American PX. So tell me that story of what you bought there?

Well, you could buy anything at all. I would - I'm not quite certain but I'm sure that the little refrigerator that I had in my hotel room would've been bought from PX and so it didn't really matter what you wanted you could buy it

07:00 generally speaking at a PX. They were a huge supermarket.

And you'd buy some alcohol and send it home?

Oh, yes yes every month I sent my 2 litre bottles of - 40 ounce bottles of spirits back to Australia. And I'd buy a couple of cartons of cigarettes, send them home and step father would have those. But they were duty free and a very cheap price so it was everybody who

07:30 thought about it took the opportunity and did so.

And where was it located, the PX?

The main PX was in Saigon itself. It would've been on the outskirts between Saigon and Cho Lon I think from memory. We were living as I said at Cho Lon, so it was walking distance from our pub I know that yeah.

Was there anything

08:00 **particular that the Americans had that the Australians wanted?**

I don't know. I know there were things the Australians had the Americans wanted. They were always after our slouch hat. They'd - the slouch hat was worth a carton of beer generally. And - not that I really liked the American beer to any great extent - it was definitely not as good as ours. But I think

08:30 the major thing that the Australians bought at the PX were the spirits and the cigarettes and commodity items. I bought a small or two small reel to reel recorders. Sent one home so that I was able to get voice tapes from my daughters. And I sent them a tape down and they sent me one back so it worked quite well for the remainder of my time there yeah.

09:00 **And you mentioned that the Americans wanted slouch hats?**

Yes, they reckoned they were the greatest.

Do you know why?

No, I don't know really, it's just a fact that the Americans have always liked the Australian slouch hat and that went back to Ubon days. When the Americans were always interested in the slouch hat. So where we could we traded and - but we were sort of restricted on the number of

09:30 hats we could buy naturally.

We were talking a bit earlier of when you went to Nui Dat and you worked with some intelligence guys?

I didn't work with them, I visited them. Yeah. I met up with them through - they were going through Saigon through the airport and they said if you ever want to come down to Nui Dat for - overnight give us a bell and we'll find a bed for you. So I took them up on that

10:00 invitation on a couple of occasions, and went down on the Saturday night and on, the second occasion I was invited to the commander's briefing on the Sunday morning which I attended and sort of got lost with their army talk which related mainly to their previous week's actions and what they were intending to do the following week. So

10:30 I sort of didn't really have a great chance of understanding what they were on about but it was great to be given the opportunity to go and meet them. So then it was first aircraft Monday morning back to Ton San Nhut to work.

And what was Nui Dat like?

It was a rather large and sprawling base. The centre piece so to speak was SAS Hill which is where the

11:00 Special Air Service [SAS] squadron was quartered. For some other reason or other they claimed the hill - that was there's. And Lusken Strip was the airfield and then the other units. 6 RAR [Royal Australia Regiment] was there when I was there - I'm not sure what the other battalion was but there were two battalions. There was the armed regiment, cavalry, they had obviously other

11:30 support units. There was the 161 Recce [Reconnaissance] I think was the spotter aircraft. And they were all spread around the base area with a perimeter of course which they guarded against intrusion from guerrillas or whatever. But the army was different to the air force in respect to the messing situation - I mentioned

12:00 earlier where each unit of the army at Nui Dat had its own mess, its own eating and drinking arrangements. So they were much smaller messes and obviously much more intimate. Whereas in the air force we just had the one mess and all units were part of that.

And what was the atmosphere like at Nui Dat compared to other places that you'd visited?

Well, I don't

12:30 really think it was very different. I didn't have a lot to do with the infantry battalions while I was there socially. The intelligence blokes that invited me down so I generally stayed with them. So on the Sunday which was generally the free day I'd go for a drive around the countryside with them on one of their village tours or as I said on the other occasion we had the

13:00 brigade conference. So it was more a relaxing day for me than a work day so I generally made the most of it. Toured around and saw what I could of what was around.

What was the general area around there like?

Well, there were rubber plantations - I know they were quite obvious, very obvious. Little villages. The intelligence blokes of course

13:30 were - their job was to interact with the villages and gather intelligence. And so our trip around would be in the land rover and we'd go with an interpreter to whatever villages they were visiting that day and see what was going. And while he was - the intelligence bloke was doing his little bit others of us - the driver or myself or whatever would just have a look around and take in the sights.

14:00 What sort of stories would the intelligence guys tell you about what they...?

Oh, they were a closed mouth lot, they didn't say much. Kept it to themselves. Mainly I think they were looking for VC [Viet Cong] activities and any information they could gain on what the VC were doing or likely to be doing, I think generally would have been the information they were after.

And did you ever have anything to do with the Australian Army Training

14:30 Team who was in Vietnam?

Yes, I did have. I visited them on the end of my tour actually. I had met a few of them from time to time

coming through Saigon and they said if you get the opportunity come and visit. So I took the opportunity and halfway through my week's handover takeover, I'd known Bernie Desmond who was taking over from me for many years, and I said to him, "How long will a handover take,

15:00 Bernie?" He said, "Oh, a couple of days." I said, "Great." So I think we took 3 days and I booked a flight on an American C-130 up to Da Nang where the training team met me and they looked after me for a couple of days. And we trooped around and they took me up to from Da Nang up to Gia, which is the old citadel area. That was on their pay run and

15:30 then looked after me really well and then it was back to Saigon. And through my contacts in the army pay office I'd organised an extra R&R trip across to Taiwan, so I had that at American expense. And then back to Saigon and caught that Air Vietnam plane across to Cambodia.

Just before we get to Cambodia what were the

16:00 **Australian Army Training team doing up there?**

Well, they were - their headquarters was at Da Nang. They had Australia House there which was set up as their headquarters. They had sleeping accommodation there of course. But generally speaking their - the team members themselves were spread right around Vietnam working with the Vietnamese and the mod in ards up in the hills. As instructors and

16:30 training the Vietnamese in Australian ways of fighting and ambushing and so forth. So the - really the only training team members who would've been in Da Nang when I was there were those who were out of the field having a break. Because most of them were out in the field. But on that run up to Gia we went in an American - Air American Pilatus Porter and flew into

17:00 Gia where we picked up a vehicle - the warrant officer I was with he had his pay run all checked out. We went to Camp Eagle which is the one of the first air borne battalions the Americans. We checked up with the training team blokes that were there. Then we went onto other places and caught up with other training teams fellows. And sorted all that out and then back to the Pilatus and back to Da Nang so it was a very interesting trip.

What was it

17:30 **like seeing these smaller American bases?**

I wouldn't call Camp Eagle small American base - it was damn near as big as Saigon I think, Ton San Nhut. When they do something they do it big the Americans, there's no worries about that. I had occasion to go to ... Binh Wah on one occasion - it was a huge logistic base just north of

18:00 Saigon, American base and it was huge. There was stuff everywhere. That's the way they operate.

And did the training team guys talk about the sort of concept of Vietnamisation or was it a bit early?

I think it was probably too early at that point. '69 we were still, still in the middle of it.

18:30 I think it was '70, the following year before they started to look at pulling out and leaving it with the Vietnamese. The training team they had a special job of course and they were doing it well and that was training. And they were all seasoned campaigners. In fact Simpson himself was a

19:00 Second World War veteran. And here he is 20-odd years later in Vietnam training Vietnamese.

Did you ever get to meet him?

Yes, yes I met he and Keith Payne when they came down through Saigon on their way home. I mentioned that earlier.

So that was your contact?

Yeah. Yeah I didn't met Sim Owen until Saigon. But he was around the traps.

19:30 Yeah, he and Keith were both stationed in two province I think. 2 Corps. 1 Corps was the north end. 2 was the central north, 3 was the Saigon-Vung Tau, and 4 was the Mekong Delta. That's how they had the country split up into the 4 corps. And then each corps itself was split up into provinces. And Phouc Tuy

20:00 was the province that the Australians were responsible for.

And so how did you end up going to Cambodia?

Yeah, I took extra leave on my way home - prearranged with those that needed to know - and whilst my service record shows that I arrived back in Sydney on the 13th November, my passport shows that it was

20:30 well into December before I got back. I went through - into Phnom Penh and met up with the army warrant officer from the Embassy who had invited me across for a visit. And then I went from - flew

from Phnom Penh to Bangkok - had a few days there and then caught the train down from Bangkok down to Penong, Butterworth and got the Hercules back from Butterworth to Richmond.

And what was Phnom Penh

21:00 **like?**

It was extremely interesting actually. I had the opportunity while I was there to visit the ruins of Angkor Wat and that's enormous. The outside perimeter which is a stone wall around Angkor Wat itself is a kilometre square, it's huge. And the inside, the building itself is quite large. And I've had opportunities since to visit

21:30 San Rep in Indonesia and see the - not San Rep - Jon, Jakarta I think it is, in Indonesia and visit the ruins there. And there are similarities but there are differences. And it's interesting to look at these different methods of ancient architecture so to speak.

And what I guess was

22:00 **the atmosphere at the time?**

In Phnom Penh it was very quiet really compared to Saigon. There was no, no real evidence of conflict at that time. Phnom Penh was still Phnom Penh and just going about its normal business of not doing very much I think. It was only later when they had the strife there that it really got

22:30 that bad.

And in terms of I guess its interaction or awareness of the war was there any in Vietnam?

I don't think it penetrated into Phnom Penh. There was certainly reaction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail which went through into Cambodia and through Laos but that was outside the city. So probably for the city people it

23:00 was best ignored I think. I think that's the attitude they were taking.

And then you mentioned that you flew to Bangkok then to Butterworth?

Yeah, got the train to Butterworth and then flew home at 7.30. Yeah, I had been to Bangkok prior to - so I didn't need contacts there, I knew my way around so I was quite happy to go there on my own. And the reason I got the train from Bangkok to Butterworth was the funds were running a bit short so

23:30 I couldn't afford to fly to be quite honest. And then it was just a case of contacting the RAF base and organising a flight back to Australia.

And what were your feelings on leaving Vietnam when you were doing the hand over with Bernie?

With Bernie. Oh, it was really a case of, well the time's up and I've got to go so, I've got to go so I'll make the most of it on the way. And pretty well that's what I did.

Were you I guess had you enjoyed your time there?

24:00 In the main yes. Yes. I made a lot of use of the opportunity to get around. I spent a lot of time flying around on the Sundays off with the Caribous and saw a lot of central and southern Vietnam. And met a lot of interesting people in the aircrews that flew the Caribous. But I suppose on the other aspect you, you look at the fact that it wasn't

24:30 wasn't really - a nice place to be in at that time with the fighting going on but it was generally the case of make the best of what you've got I suppose.

And as you left the country what were your feelings about what might happen there?

Well, it was really a case at that point of not knowing enough about what was happening to be able to has at a guess on what might happen. It wasn't until

25:00 months later back in Australia that you know, the penny really dropped as to, just how bad things were in Vietnam. Because it wasn't at all obvious to us at the time while we were there.

As you were leaving what did you think would be the best outcome for the country?

Well, I don't really think I had considered that to be quite honest. It was something which I, when I left there was no end

25:30 in sight. And as a little badge that I've got that I wear occasionally says, "When we left we were winning," but obviously we didn't win in the finish.

And was there any of that reverse culture shock arriving back in Sydney?

No, well, again it was - the arrival back was quite quiet. I would've arrived back in daylight obviously because

26:00 the C-130 would've overnight to Darwin on the way through. So we would've got back to Sydney, probably got back to Richmond mid afternoon. I was still on leave at that point so it was a case of getting transport into Sydney and catching a flight down to Melbourne.

And then from there?

Well, from there I finished my holidays with the daughters and my mother. And

26:30 then onto a new posting at Penrith in Headquarters Operational Command, which again was a, was a different aspect again being back into a headquarters, office work, which I must admit I was never really ever happy as an office worker. But on those occasions when I was stuck with it well, I accepted it and stuck with it.

27:00 But it was a change for sure. But then I suppose that's another story isn't it?

Did you keep up with the news of Vietnam while you were...?

Yes, yes I did, while I was back in Australia because having been there having seen what I'd seen I was always keen to know what was happening and what the final outcome would be so, it was disappointing I suppose in a way to see that it was

27:30 going the way it was and the fact that it finished up so, ignominiously I suppose. Not much short of a disaster really.

What was - for example your daughters' reactions to you having been in Vietnam when you came back?

Well, they were probably I think too young to really have a real grasp on the situation. Because

28:00 when I got back, Vilene would've been 11 and Melissa would've been probably 6 so you know, they were really a bit too young at that stage to have a great understanding of what was going on.

Did you bring them things back?

I'm sure there would've been something, yes. Yes, almost sure.

How about your mother, what was her...?

Oh,

28:30 she was, I think - with that point in time, I think Norm was probably still in the army and, Dave had probably joined the navy at that stage so, Mum was well and truly, had accepted the fact that we were in the service and we were going to be here there and wherever. So she was obviously pleased to see me back and, the fact that I'd be able to

29:00 visit more often, which was still not regularly. I've never been a regular visitor anywhere but, it's a case of we see her when we can and she accepts that fact.

And I guess with your mum or anyone in the general public, or even within the air force who hadn't gone - was there a lot of interest exhibited in Vietnam, in wanting to know what it was like?

Generally speaking yes, yes. I

29:30 have had or did get requests from different people to go to meetings and functions and whatever and talk about my experience in Vietnam which I did, I think with some reluctance. I was never a very good public speaker in those days and, I found it very difficult to talk in public so to speak.

30:00 **What sort of things would they want to hear?**

I would expect, generally speaking, every day goings on, just what it was like. Climate, people, what you see, what you hear, what you smell. I think really was the main crux of people's interest.

And at what stage did you in a sense begin to get

30:30 **itchy feet again and head to Singapore?**

Oh, that was something that came out of the blue actually. I had for many years had Butterworth on my posting preference sheet. But not being aware of how the system worked I occasionally changed my first preference which means that when I changed it back to Butterworth I was back down the bottom of the list again. So I was destined never to get a posting to Butterworth. But

31:00 when I was posted into Op Com I was posted into a section where Leonie worked. She was a sergeant at Op Com. And we found that we had a few things in common and we eventually married in '73 and at that time, she was able to stay in the air force, even though she was married. And so she stayed in and

31:30 12 months later I was posted to Singapore. Which as I said came out of the blue, I wasn't expecting it. And I'm not certain but I've got a sneaking suspicion the group captain who was our boss at Op Com

may have had something to do with that. But just after we were married I was posted to Richmond into the warehouse and Leonie stayed at Op Com of course. We maintained

32:00 our flat at Penrith and I commuted across to Richmond each day. And around about the time that I was notified of the posting to Singapore the group captain put his head around the door of the office and said to Leonie, "What do you think about John going to Singapore?" And obviously she was caught with the complex of what shall I do? Shall I stay in the air force in Australia or get out and go to Singapore? Because at that time there was

32:30 no way that she could go to Singapore in the air force. So she opted to get out after 12 years and we went to Singapore.

And what did she do while you were working in Singapore?

She acted like a housewife in Singapore. And got about playing badminton and drinking tea with the ladies and going shopping and all that sort of stuff.

Must have been a change of lifestyle for her?

It certainly was, yes.

33:00 **And just tell me a bit about Op Com?**

Yeah, Op Com, it was a strange sort of a job. Sitting in an office all day was never my best forte but I was also obviously in a position of once again being a sort of trouble shooter. And I can't recall exactly what the first trip was but Tindal would've had to be near the

33:30 top. And Tindal is near Katherine south of Darwin. The airfield construction squadron had just completed the new air strip. They had in bulk moved across to Learmonth in Western Australia. And there was a requirement for the unit to be cleaned up and prepared for caretaking. So I was given that job with a sergeant

34:00 and I think we had about 6 or 7 airmen. And we spent a month or two up there cleaning up securing the married quarters, cleaning out the kitchens. And whatever. And just generally making it easier for the mowing contractor to come around and just keep the grass cut. A lot of the people up there had used star pickets to make fences

34:30 between the houses. And they'd use enough force to get a six foot star picket three feet into the ground. So they had left one plant operator behind at Tindal and he assisted us with his crane to get these star pickets out of the ground so the mower contractor had a clean run. So that was that job. And I think probably

35:00 the next one was the trip across to the Learmonth which was a stores problem there. They had shifted everything from Tindal across to Learmonth, they had a flight sergeant and a couple of troops in the warehouse who had no hope in hell of catching up with the back log of sorting out what they had. So the same sergeant went with me and I think we had an LAC from Op Com went with me.

35:30 It was probably just the three of us. And we went through and assisted the local people to get their warehouse back into order and sort that out. So that was across from Richmond to Learmonth on the Star Lifter, American Star Lifter. And I'm not sure how long we were there, probably about a month. And there was another trip to Papua New Guinea, 38th squadron Caribous had a detachment in

36:00 Port Moresby. They had a stores problem. One corporal looking after the store ran the air movements. Usual situation, as soon as he was out of the store the technical people'd wander in and help themselves and, so it was a bit of a mess and so the LAC who normally went with me on these trips was on his honeymoon at that point so the group captain stuck his head around and said

36:30 "How do you think Leonie'd go?" And I said, "Well, WAAAF [Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force] office's going to have to authorise that." So they had to get the WAAAF office's approval so she could go and we had a sergeant, another fellow from Richmond who went with us and the three of us went up there and cleaned it up in two and a half weeks.

And was she all right with...?

Oh, she had no problem with it, yeah. Yeah, because Leonie was with us we weren't

37:00 quartered at the barracks where we would've been, they put us into the Broker Hotel which was quite comfortable, no problem. But of course in Port Moresby it was a dusk curfew. Not allowed out after dusk. And the boys bar down the end of the hotel which was all concrete and welded in steel was quite rowdy.

37:30 At night times. But yeah no we had a good trip there too. And I had another trip over to Williamstown at one stage. Their warrant officer was posted onto an air movements course so their equipment officer screamed black and blue he needed a warrant officer so they sent me up from Op Com. And that was just a routine warehousing job nothing

38:00 flash about that.

And yet you felt like you would enjoy a change from this sort of work?

Oh, I've always enjoyed the change. Warehousing and office work were pretty well on the same level with me because, as a warrant officer the - most of the warehousing work was in the office anyway. Supervision mainly. I much preferred to be a hands on type person.

And so at Butterworth you were to be going back to more

38:30 **air movements?**

Singapore?

Sorry, Singapore?

Singapore was air movements yes. Yeah, so that was good. But I was working through - I said from Op Com I went across to Richmond 2AD [Aircraft Depot], which was again into the warehouse and - but it had the extra that my trouble shooting days caught up with me again

39:00 and they said, Canberra wants you to go to Indonesia to sort out a problem. It was a warehousing problem. But I had a boss with me on that occasion. A squadron leader went with me and I think we had a couple of corporals from Butterworth and a couple of corporals from Australia. But it was a major task. The Australian government had made a grant of X number of

39:30 Sabre jets to the Indonesian air force and they had shipped up a heap of spares. They'd just cleared their books, written it off and of course what the paperwork said when it got to Indonesia and what the Indonesians received could be quite different. And so the party went up to sort out their stock control and their warehousing problems. Which we did in- I think it took us five weeks to do that. But

40:00 it was an interesting experience. The hygienic conditions in Indonesia are not very good so the - whilst ... what was the name of the airfield? Doesn't matter it was in the middle of Java anyway. It was

40:30 reasonably primitive conditions. We had chemical toilets, rations came down from our billets which were half way up a four thousand mountain, on the edge of a crater lake. Very scenic spot. And the RAAF blokes were quartered in a hotel which had been taken over for that reason. They didn't have accommodation for us

41:00 so they put us into another hotel, just down the hill a little bit in the same area. And so we bussed up and down each day down to the air base and then back up again in the afternoon. That was quite exciting and then it was back to Richmond and then the posting in Singapore.

We've just reached the end of that tape there...

Tape 9

00:37 The air base was quite large, the air strip was large, and the Indonesian side of the air base was small in comparison to a lot of other units. Interesting view coming into land was the line of Badger Bombers lined up on the side of the strip. Russian aircraft which had been

01:00 gifted by the Russians to the Indonesians. But then when the Indonesians and the Russians fell out the Russians took their technical staff and their spare parts back to Russia so the Badger Bombers are there, no use at all to the Indonesians. And incidentally they've got a hangar for the Mink Jets too, Mink fighters and one of them was - they'd pull out of the hangar once a week and run the engine and

01:30 push it back in again. So they didn't have a flying air force of Russian aircraft but they had our Sabres and they also had American Shooting Stars, that the Americans on the other side of the airfield were trained in them. So it was a bit of a motley air force.

And what was the relationship like between the Australian and Indonesian air force?

Well, we really had no contact at all at my level. Obviously

02:00 we had one or two Australian pilots who were doing instructing or the training. And the Indonesian pilots of course were learning to fly the Sabres. So at my level there was no contact basically whatsoever apart from the occasional driver or the gate guard that we'd come across.

And what year was this?

Ah that would've

02:30 been '73, just after we got married, yeah.

And you went to Singapore?

Singapore in '74 the following year. And obviously working at air movements in Singapore at Tanga air

base. We took the opportunity to do a few trips from there and one of those trips was with the New Zealand Bristol Freighter across to Saigon, where we had an

03:00 overnight. And that was in late '74 which was before the communist takeover in '75.

What were your impressions of how Saigon had changed?

It had changed immensely. It had been cleaned up considerably and it was a lot quieter. There was nowhere near as much traffic or obviously the

03:30 Americans were gone as well as the Australians, in the main of course. And so it was relatively quiet in comparison to what it had been in '69.

And what was it like seeing the airport?

Well, it was - we didn't get the opportunity to tour around the airport and have a look at where we had been. It was just a case of land, taxi to the hard stand and then out and off to the hotel. So

04:00 but that was fair enough. We did take the opportunity from the hotel to take a taxi ride out and check out a few of the places where I had been previously.

And also aside from where you were working at the airport was there a difference in the size of the industry around the airport?

No, it all looked much the same as it had been. Not a great deal of change that I

04:30 noticed put it that way.

So there was still a big contingency of American air force there?

Not not they weren't obvious. I would say that there were still Americans around but at that late stage in '74 they would've been basically on Ton San Nhut and the embassy area of course which is - which was stormed in '75.

And this was a happy experience seeing the difference?

Oh, for me it was. I enjoyed the opportunity

05:00 of course to take Leonie over there and show her the place where I'd been. And it was disappointing not to be able to show her all of the places where I had been but at least she got to see some of it. And in fact I think it's one of those paintings over there that we brought back from Saigon. And those elephants came from Saigon.

And how bad in terms of what was the feeling about - was there a feeling in Saigon that it

05:30 **was almost over?**

I think that was the indication that we got from the people that - not that we actually spoke to but the feeling we gathered was that they were resigned to their fate and just waiting for it to happen.

Was this a - did you feel that this was a good thing or that I guess what was it like

06:00 **to see it almost before it, having seen what it was like the first time?**

Well, I don't really know that I had much thought on that at that time. We were there on a quick trip which had been an opportunity and I think that's really the main aspect of it. We were obviously aware that most of

06:30 the fighting had finished at that point and that the future of the country was in some doubt. But we really didn't or weren't in a position to you know make any decisions on what might or might not happen. But that was one aspect - we did also make use of the New Zealand Bristol Freighter on other occasion when we flew down to Jakarta and

07:00 bussed and trained our way down to Surabaya and across to Bali for a week. And on our way back made contact with the Australian navy fellows at Surabaya who knew we were coming. I'd prearranged that. In fact a naval warrant officer who was in charge at that time who I made the arrangements with, I now see on a regular basis down in Brisbane.

07:30 He's a state councillor for Gold Coast district and as a state councillor for White Bay Burnett district, I see him at our regular two monthly meetings. So it's old times again and of course I had the opportunity to introduce him to Leonie at that point. And we overnighted with them and then the next day they were going through to East Wihuti was the name of the airfield, East Wihuti

08:00 to pick up their rations off our Dakota which was going through and which we were meeting up with to go back to Singapore on our Dakota.

Handy?

Yes, it was but well, we generally had the opportunity and managed to organise these trips.

And do you remember hearing the news that Saigon had fallen?

Yes. Yes we heard that. We were obviously in Singapore when that happened.

What was your reaction?

Well, I think it was probably a

08:30 reaction of well, it's finally happened. I think it was expected, I know they were waiting for something to happen when we went over in '74 because the indications were that we may not be able to land at that time because of some possible friction on the ground. Obviously internal in South Vietnam. But there had always been that thought

09:00 that at a point in time something was going to happen. So when it eventually did I think we just accepted the fact that it had finally arrived.

And in terms of your time in Singapore was it sort of good to get back to the air movements?

Oh, I enjoyed the opportunity. We had - initially it was a large section. It was the RAF air movement squadron as such.

09:30 Came under the Australian New Zealand United Kingdom Anzuk as it was at that time. And came under the British air transport management agency. And the Australian element was a very small element in a big squadron. We were operating two shift probably 16 hours a day. The majority of the traffic was British RAF stuff.

10:00 We had VC10s doing a regular shuttle from Singapore, Cyprus, London and from Hong Kong, Singapore, Cyprus - on, actually they went through Guam first before they went to Cyprus. So they were regulars. There was at least one from each a week and the return flight.

What were they?

They were transporting British passengers and freight between

10:30 Hong Kong, Singapore and the UK. And the travel was Hong Kong, Singapore, Guam which is out in the middle of the Indian Ocean then to Cyprus and then to UK. And as well, as that we had our Dakota's from Butterworth doing the regular shuttles down to Singapore. We had a flight of Mirages, at this time we were operating Mirages out of Butterworth.

11:00 They were - we had a half flight in or it might have been a full flight in Singapore operating from Singapore. The New Zealanders had their B170s, the old Bristol Freighters and also Iroquois helicopters so it was a cosmopolitan air movement section again. And we worked in well, together. We had a small Australian

11:30 involvement. We had a flight sergeant in the cargo depot, we had myself as a warrant officer in the passenger section and we had a corporal in the clerical area doing the trip sheets and so forth. So it was pretty well a busy arrangement with lots to do

12:00 but still the opportunity to continue travel and we made the most of that opportunity.

And so you both enjoyed the lifestyle?

Oh, yes yeah and we both got involved with the scouting movement again in Singapore. Leonie had done a cub's leaders course while we were at Penrith and I continued my scouting and then we both got involved in Singapore and continued on until the British

12:30 withdrawal - end of '76 it would've been, no end of '75, early '76 when the two scouter groups we had been involved with were at Nee Soon and Chik Pi they were both folded up.

Why was that?

Because - they were British scout groups and the British had gone back to the UK. We maintained the scout group at Tanga air base for probably six months

13:00 with the Australians and New Zealanders. But that finished up winding up. There was just not enough people involved to make it viable and keep it going. So that was the end of our involvement in scouts in Singapore.

Was there a noticeable change in Singapore after the British left?

Considerably for us it was. The British involvement in mess life in particular

13:30 was full on. They always had somebody who could do something as far as the entertainment was concerned so there was - we were never short of entertainment in the mess. And of course there was not only the air force mess at Tanga but there was the navy mess at Terra Barracks and the army mess at Nee Soon. And so we were always reciprocating visits with those other messes. Entertainment

14:00 as I said was always full on and it was a great life, those couple of years we had there.

And you came back to Australia in?

January '77 we were posted back to Amberley and back into air movements which I was grateful for. And after 3 years there they said you can have a B grade posting to Melbourne which meant I either signed on again for another 5 years or I went down unaccompanied. So we

14:30 discussed that aspect and decided that after 28 years it was probably time to pull the pin and move back to Bundaberg where Leonie's parents were living and so that's what we did.

And I guess looking back at those 28 years what were your feelings towards the air force?

Well, I had always enjoyed the air force life. I must say that in one sense or another

15:00 I enjoyed all of my postings. There were obviously some I enjoyed more than others, and that probably related more to the type of work I was doing rather than the place or the people. And generally speaking the odd trips that I was able to go on just added a further highlight to the years.

And what sort of lessons do you think the air force taught you?

15:30 Well, it certainly eventually got me out of my horror of public speaking. I can now stand up and talk a bit. Which I couldn't in my early years - I was hopeless. But it's also broadened my outlook on life in general I'm sure and certainly heightened my desire to travel. And we were able to do that.

16:00 We made the big trip in '98 and went over the UK for a couple of months which was a good opportunity to catch up with relatives that I'd never seen and to visit places that Leonie's family came from that she'd only ever heard about. So it was an excellent opportunity to look at another part of the world that we hadn't seen.

And I'm interested in your involvement with the

16:30 **RSL. Did you join after you'd returned from Vietnam?**

Yes, I joined the RSL initially at Lapstone just west of Penrith just where the Op Com is. And of course that lapsed when I went to Singapore but I rejoined at Ipswich when I came back from Singapore.

Was there any sort of I guess rivalry from some of the older World War II members

17:00 **in regards to Vietnam service?**

Not that I'm aware of. Certainly not at Lapstone, it was a very small sub branch. It did not have a club attached. I must admit I didn't frequent the Penrith RSL club to any great extent. The League's Club was just across the road from where we were living so that's where we socialised if we socialised, apart from the mess.

17:30 But I do believe that there have been instances. I'm not aware of any RSL as such that has not welcomed Vietnam veterans but I'm well aware that there are the older veterans around the bar who have not welcomed them and that of course is one of the problems that we're trying to counter now, is the return of the Timor troops and the Iraqi troops and so forth

18:00 to make sure that they don't receive the same reception that the Vietnam veterans did.

And I guess what is it that makes the RSL important in your mind?

Well, it was formed a long time ago purely to look after the returning veterans and of course flowed onto their dependants and that's something which is still one of its major planks. Another major plank that it has

18:30 today is conditions for our troops and not only at home - not only those overseas but those at home as well, conditions for veterans, conditions for widows, conditions for serving personnel and that is what the RSL is all about and that is why we're so involved for a desire to make sure that we can - we do the best we can for those areas

19:00 of the community.

And I guess I'm kind of relating to that. Do you feel a part of the Anzac tradition or is Anzac Day important to you?

Well, Anzac Day is very important to - excuse me. Yes, Anzac Day is important because - oh I've got a problem ...

19:30 Yes, Anzac Day is important because it is remembrance of that fatal day in Gallipoli when our forces landed and followed through with the New Zealanders in that campaign on Gallipoli. Anzac Day is our reminder of that. Remembrance Day is another major remembrance in our year because of

20:00 the significance of the end of World War I, which was the great war to end all wars. And unfortunately that didn't come true. We've had far too many wars and conflicts since. And I think it's reasonable to say that since 1939 we have had troops in the field overseas in one form or another, going through the Second World War through Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam

20:30 and through into the peace keeping area. Which incidentally the peace keeping started in 1949 in Indonesia and it's still going on today as you're well aware. So our involvement with the RSL is to keep up those traditions and to continue the welfare work and the help that we can to veterans and widows and of course the serving person.

And when did you first march on Anzac Day?

It would

21:00 probably have been at Penrith I think. I don't - no, I think it would've been earlier than that - I think from memory I marched at Toowoomba, when I was at 7SD. But to be quite honest I came back from Ubon in 1964 and was denied membership of the RSL

21:30 and of the RAAF association because I wasn't a returned serviceman. So I sort of didn't really think too much of either of those two organisations until I was able to join in 1970 when I came back from Vietnam. And that of course, I changed my attitude then of course then being a member. So that's one of the problem areas that we still do face is the fact that a lot of our - a lot

22:00 of ex air force and ex service persons who haven't been overseas still don't realise that they can join the RSL, cause it's now opened up to any ex service person.

And I guess finally is there anything that you'd like to add to this that we haven't covered?

No, I don't - I don't think so at this point. I imagine there's quite a lot that could

22:30 be said but I don't know, I think you've got more than enough there to look after.

Are there any final words about your service, about your time in Vietnam or about any time in the forces?

Well, I think I can only reiterate that it was 28 years of a good life and I think I'm probably reaping the rewards of it now in retirement.

Excellent, that's good to hear.